

E-Learning and the development of 'voice' in business studies education

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Abstract

Higher education has been expanded rapidly in the UK now enrolling 43% of the 18+ age-cohort. From September, 2006, universities will charge up to £3,000 (\$5,100) p.a. in tuition fees, a 255% increase. There is evidence that such fee increases amongst other factors will lead to an increasingly instrumental orientation in the experience of higher education with students defining their role as 'consumers' with expectations of customer care and an increasingly critical attitude towards the quality of tuition provided. The semantic distinctions between the terms 'customer' and 'consumer' will be subject to a detailed discussion.

One of the classic formulations in which consumers may react to the provision of services is provided by Hirschman's (1970) formulation of responses to the provision of services. Put simply, consumers may 'vote with their feet' by choosing an alternative supplier of services that fits their need (*exit*). Another response is to articulate concerns vociferously in order to obtain redress or amelioration (*voice*). These traditional marketing concepts are then applied to the case of higher education.

The authors are engaged together with five partner institutions in an examination of 'Quality in Business Education' (the QUBE project) with a specific brief to examine student involvement in the quality process. Deriving from this work, the authors examine the role of e-learning in facilitating and encouraging student engagement in course delivery and evaluation. The paper will suggest an explanation why the student voice does not achieve more prominence given the possibilities given by recent advances in ICT and detail some of the experiences of course delivery and evaluation in their own institution.

Keywords: business studies education, voice, QUBE, student involvement, customers

Introduction

The number of young people entering higher education in the UK is known as the *Higher Education Initial Participation Rate* (HEIPR). In percentage terms, this is now an estimated 43% in 2003/04 but shows a pronounced gender imbalance with 38% for males and 47% for females (DfES, 2005a). In absolute terms, the numbers have risen from about 0.5 million in the 1960's to more than 2.2 million today (HERO, 2006). Of these 1.7 million are undergraduates and 0.5 million postgraduates. (HESA, 2006). It is the government intention that the participation rate should be raised to 50% by 2010, mainly through the preferred vehicle of the two-year Foundation Degree (DfES, 2005b)

Officially, the government position is that such expansion has not had a deleterious effect upon quality:

Our universities and colleges have been through a dramatic transformation over the last quarter-century as participation in higher education has tripled, and generally have maintained high quality and good value despite a halving of the unit of funding.

(Source, DfES, 2003, Ch. 1 Para 1.4)

However, other academics have intimated that recent developments in quality initiatives in higher education are derived directly from a concern that expansion may impact adversely upon standards.

Concern over Academic Standards: The expansion of the UK HE market (in terms of numbers of students and diversity of HE provision) has resulted in some concern over academic standards. The report of the National Committee of Inquiry in HE recommended that HE develop benchmarking methodologies as part of a new policy framework for assuring academic standards. This has led directly to Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmarking initiatives, and the resulting quality assurance regime has become a significant driver towards the development and implementation of approaches to benchmarking.

(Source: Wilcox, P. and Petch, J, 2005)

At the very least, one can argue that with the increasing participation rate and halving of the unit of funding, there have been commensurate increases in the attention being paid to a variety of quality assurance procedures.

The rise of consumerism in higher education

After a protracted debate and a near-defeat in Parliament over the issue, the Government decided that the tuition fee should be allowed to rise from £1,175 pa to a maximum of £3,000 pa from September 2006 (and in practice, most institutions intend to charge at or near the maximum rate). This figure may well rise to £5,000 pa. after 2010 when the present 'cap' on fees is due to expire (Taylor, 2006). Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that students (and their parents) may come to view higher education as a commodity to be purchased rather than a social good to be enjoyed. As Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) hypothesise, a consumerist framework may promote passive and instrumental attitudes to learning and, in the long run, pose a threat to academic standards themselves. However, the official DfES position is that increasing competition should help to maintain the quality of teaching standards and that 'student choice will increasingly work to drive up quality, supported by much better information.' (DfES,2003, Ch. 4) It is this philosophy that has driven the concept of the UK National Student Survey in which final year students across the university sector are asked to indicate their 'consumer satisfaction' of their courses on a range of indicators. The results are then made available on a website so that intending applicants can make more informed choices concerning the teaching quality provided by their preferred institution (TQI, 2006)

The terms *consumer* and *customer* have often been used interchangeably and this has resulted in some considerable confusion. As Hart (1997) has pointed out, even Deming (often regarded as the 'father' of the Total Quality Management movement), uses these terms interchangeably in his seminal work (Deming, 1986). More recently, Grisoni and Wilkinson (2005) also conflate the terms implying they are synonyms arguing that 'there are therefore tensions surrounding the view of students as *consumers* or *customers*' (emphasis added). The semantic confusion may be clarified if it is acknowledged that the term *consumer* relates to the individual who actually receives a service whilst the term *customer* tends to connote a relationship in which payments are made. Although in the commercial world, customers and consumers may well be one and the same person, this does not necessarily hold true in the public sector. Whilst an individual patient *qua* consumer may receive treatment, the customer could be the individual, the individual's family or relations, a concerned charity, the GP in a Primary Care Trust and so on. In the case of the rationing of scarce resources between equally deserving customers, whom should the health care provider attempt to satisfy? The same dilemma is manifest in many other areas of the public sector in which the service provider is attempting to satisfy multiple stakeholders simultaneously and indicates that concepts with their origin in the operations of the private sector do not always translate easily into their public sector counterparts.

When applied to higher education, it is significant to reflect whether the notion of customer is an extended metaphor or the new reality of students in massified higher education systems. A thoughtful article by a group of American academics (Cheney, McMillan and Schwartzman, 1997) counsels against the danger of accepting the metaphor of 'students-as-consumers' too literally. They argue powerfully that:

- 'specifically, the metaphor has a distancing effect on students, reducing their status to non-participants in the process of education
- the metaphor confuses the momentary satisfaction of wants with long-term educational outcomes
- it offers a form of pseudo-democracy in place of authentic engagement
- it treats educational outcomes in a reductionistic way
- it distorts the meaning of the very educational processes it seeks to describe'

(Source: Cheney, McMillan and Schwartzman, 1997)

A theme running through the recent UK literature is an increasing instrumental orientation towards higher education, a characteristic likely to be exacerbated by the sharp increase in fees. For example, Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997) argue that it is a 2:1 degree classification that is being consumed rather than an educational service *per se*. Grisoni and Wilkinson (2005) discuss the results of a survey of a large intake of business and management students and conclude that the application of consumerist mechanisms within higher education lead to a student (consumer) driven desire for a 'banking model' of education where information is deposited, memorised and regurgitated in exchange for a good grade.

It is recognised, however, that it is necessary before we apply the concept of *customer* to the student body, some refinements are in order. For example, the providers of education do something *to* their students (by extending their intellectual and critical skills) as well as providing a service *for* them as Harvey and Green (2003) recognise. As Sharrock (2000) argues, students may be categorised not just as customers requiring a good or service but also as clients in need of guidance or citizens who have certain rights (and obligations) within a system. An extensive review of the evolving interpretation of *customer* in higher education by Redding (2005) reminds us that that a model of fee-paying customer as customer may well fit the educational systems of some societies (such as the USA). But this does not necessarily translate well into the UK context where the taxpayer has historically picked up much of the cost and will continue to do so. Being responsive to customers implies that academic staff and managements respond most to funding agencies and to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

Customer responses: Exit, Voice and Loyalty

In what has now become a classic formulation of consumer response, Hirschman (1970) has provided a typology of the ways in which consumers could respond to their service provider. When dissatisfaction with goods or services are experienced, the consumer has the option either to *exit* (i.e. obtain goods from an alternative supplier) or to give *voice* (which is to continue to buy but complain). In the case of publicly provided services, one option is for citizens to choose to opt out of public provision and select an alternative (such as private education for their children). It is likely, however, that less articulate consumers are left with inferior services. Their option is to exercise their voice either collectively (through voting and group activity) or as individuals in the form of complaints or comments.

The possibilities for 'exit' in higher education

At first sight, it might appear that once having embarked upon a course of higher education, the possibility of exit is a drastic option with far-reaching consequences for future life-chances. However, there are still possibilities for exit within the system that fall short of actually removing oneself from the institution.

In the case of full-time students, there are always possibilities for changing courses within a higher education institution. It is not uncommon that a chosen course fails to fulfil the needs and aspirations of a first year student who then attempts to keep within the system by changing course at some stage within or at the end of the first year. Higher education authorities are likely to be sympathetic realising that an initial choice of course can be fraught with difficulties. Changes of course can be conceptualised as 'exit' from the point of the view of the course managers but not the HEI in which it is located.

The concept of 'flexibility' is often stressed and has become part of the lexicon of higher education provision. Students can choose between courses (in the case of joint honours and/or modular

systems), within courses (by choosing some options and avoiding others) and sometimes even within a module (when students may work on a chosen project, either individually or in groups). Flexibility of provision may thus be seen as a refinement of the concept of *exit* specifically attuned to the needs of students.

In the case of part-time students, exit may follow the more conventional pattern. As one mature student on a professional course interviewed in a survey conducted by the authors opined:

'if there had been serious problems, I would have changed colleges...'

The student 'voice' in higher education

There are a variety of mechanisms deployed in all HEIs to incorporate student response. Some of these are at the collective level (via the Students Union, representation on important committees, staff-student course committees and the like) There are much greater possibilities than hitherto for students to collect opinions from each and to mouth a 'collective' voice given the opportunities afforded by the new technologies, principally email and forums. Yet the literature is comparatively silent on this point, suggesting that students might prefer a more individualised response to their concerns. Students are not immune from wider social trends and it remains a strong possibility that whilst their tutors might in their own university careers have expressed strong collective actions (sit-ins, teach-ins, strikes over overseas student fees), present generations of students are less likely to seek collective redress of grievances. Whilst student opinions are channelled through student representatives, questions will always remain whether articulated concerns are the views of the silent majority or the private grumbles of a few.

Opportunities for the individual student voice may be provided through both formal and informal channels. Formal channels will include the near-universal end-of-module evaluation which may include items susceptible of data aggregation and statistical analysis (if numbers are sufficiently large) as well as more open-ended questions. In recent years, there may well be a growing appreciation that evaluation methods which call for a tick-box approach may not engage the student commitment fully and more qualitative techniques are likely to produce richer yet more complex information. Students may well have the opportunities also to comment on annual monitoring reports of their programmes or to engage in end-of-course questionnaires in which the whole of their course and student learning experiences may be evaluated.

Reference has already been made to the UK National Student Survey which would appear to fulfil many of the criteria desirable for a survey in that the format of the survey has been well piloted and two iterations have now taken place (in February, 2005 and 2006) with one major set of results made available via the web in September, 2005. More than 60% of the 300,000 final-year students from 141 higher education institutions surveyed in the spring of 2005 responded to the survey. Some elite universities (Oxford, Cambridge and Warwick) refused to participate in the exercise: the results when published were a surprise to many by turning traditional academic hierarchies on their head. Some smaller and less 'fashionable' universities achieved very high student satisfaction scores, well ahead of some major research universities such as Imperial College London and Leeds University.

In their reactions to adverse findings, some university spokesmen such as the director of policy and planning at Imperial College explained that 'since our students are a questioning and demanding bunch, we would not expect uncritical feedback'. But the reaction from other parts of the higher education system indicate that already elements of gaming behaviour were discernible. For example, Manchester University (amongst many others) has instituted a group seeking to identify areas for improvement. One over-enthusiastic head of a Department of Law in a northern UK university advised his students in a newsletter "Before you tick the neutral, disagree or strongly disagree boxes, just think about the message that it will send to the world outside about the quality of your education at xxxx" (Sanders, 2006)

The reporting of the findings of the national Student Survey has also been strongly criticised on methodological grounds. As Baty (2005) reports, an eminent statistician, Professor Goldstein of Bristol University, has indicated that the Higher Education Funding Council for England has reneged on an agreement to include statistical "uncertainty intervals" or "confidence intervals" that would be used where response rates were low. They would prevent the publication of a precise figure where

low responses meant precision was unobtainable and thus ensure that valid statistical comparisons could be made. Goldstein adds:

'It was generally agreed that a condition for the survey's validity was the provision of statistical uncertainty intervals for the scores... Since these intervals now seem to have been dropped, it is not possible to make scientifically valid comparisons between institutions.' He further commented that 'It looks like HEFCE [Higher Education Funding Council for England] was under pressure to put out the quick and dirty survey results without the safeguards agreed.'

(Source: Baty, 2005)

The reporting of means without a corresponding confidence interval is actually, all too common in league table construction giving an apparently spurious accuracy to published results. Whilst deploring the methodological deficiencies that lay behind such tables, academics are only too aware of the political realities that lie behind a league table statistic. Some vociferous academics are even more scathing. For example, Furedi (2006) has trenchantly observed that:

Student satisfaction surveys represent the logical outcome of auditing culture. It has never been the objective of academic life to produce satisfied students. That is the mission of finishing schools and health farms. The idea that student satisfaction is even remotely connected to the quality of academic life is based on the model of a business. The contribution of an academic institution is demonstrated through the quality of its graduates, their achievements and contributions to society. A real university is focused on educating, challenging and stimulating - not on satisfying.

(Source: Furedi, 2006)

As is common with other performance indicators the results can become 'perverse' Taken to its logical conclusions and in the absence of any indicators of quality, one could hypothesise that formerly high- quality institutions are deemed to be lacking in quality because their students have been encouraged to be demanding and critical. The obverse is also the case that other institutions (often smaller and newer) gain satisfaction scores that are out of kilter with more conventional attributes of quality and prestige. It is important to recognise that an exercise like the National Student Survey, completed on-line and with results made available for any interested observer to access, would have been unthinkable before the universal adoption of information technology. The full implications of huge on-line surveys of this nature designed to act as a source of information to potential applicants (consumers) of higher education has not yet been fully appreciated. As Bill Rammell, Minister for UK Higher Education, is reported as saying:

'First hand feedback from graduates has proved invaluable in helping prospective students and their advisers make informed choices. Higher education should be an investment for students, so it is vital they know that the decisions they make offer them the best value for their money as well as bringing about further improvements in the quality of colleges and universities. This survey is a powerful tool for bringing about change and performance improvement.'

(Source: HEFCE, 2006)

As well as formal methods for the incorporation of the student voice into the quality assurance process, it is important to recognise that informal methods are also of importance. The importance of this was brought to the attention of the authors whilst they were conducting a series of interviews in a sample of business schools in central Southern England. These interviews were a part of a larger investigation (the *Quality in Business Education* – QUBE project) conducted by a consortium of six universities lead by the Cass Business School (QUBE,2006). During the course of the interviews, it became apparent in some instances that the existence of strong informal culture and network was likely to vitiate the need for more formal mechanisms which were comparatively under-utilised. As one manager of postgraduate courses in a large business school told us 'If we have to rely upon formally tabled agenda items in a scheduled meeting with students, then this is an admission of failure'. There are now possibilities for electronic tools to aid in sustaining the growth and developments of such informal cultures through the use of the forum and the blog. Forums evidently cater for more collective discussions but they require some resource in the form of moderation. Blogs have their origins as a more individualised on-line diary but many of these now allow contributions to

be made so they may resemble a forum although they are associated primarily with an individual. Some universities such as Warwick have now signed up more than 2,500 staff and students in their new blog believing in the long run advantages for staff and students (Dale, 2005)

Opportunities offered by E-learning to the student voice

The search for those elements that might identify such a culture and particularly a 'culture of excellence' are outside the immediate scope of this paper. Nonetheless, an interesting paradox can be discerned which requires further systematic investigation. Whilst the modes and availability of electronic communication available to the student body have expanded rapidly over the past decade, is there any evidence that this is utilised to allow students a greater sense of commitment and psychological ownership over the courses which they study, particularly when compared with previous generations of students some of whom are now their tutors?

Part of this dilemma can be unravelled by understanding more fully that students in business are even more likely than their contemporaries to be engaged in part-time work during term time. A report submitted to Universities UK by Claire Callender reveals that:

- 53% students worked during term-time in 2000-01 and 2001-02.
- They worked an average of 14.2 hours a week in 2000-01 and 12.7 hours in 2001-02, their final year of study.
- Some 43 per cent worked more than 15 hours a week in 2000-01.
- At three of the seven universities studied, two thirds of students worked more than 15 hours a week.

- For a student who works more than 16 hours a week in term time, the odds of getting a good degree are about 60 per cent those of one who does not work

(Source: Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI),2005)

Curtis and Williams (2002) showed that practically half of the business students in their survey (45%) had taken jobs to gain work experience and surmised that employment might be more relevant as it 'helps relate theory to practice'. The experience of the current generation of business students does not reflect the more leisured conceptions implicit in the phrase 'reading for a degree' and may help to explain the increasing instrumentalism reported by Grisoni and Wilkinson (2005) amongst others. Under the pressing financial circumstances resulting in part from the massification of the higher education experience it can be argued that the psychological commitment to the operation of a course is lessened. Provided that reasonable grades are being achieved, the typical business student may not have the inclination to engage more fully in procedures designed to allow more student voice. The extensive use made of e-learning materials may well facilitate the possibilities for students to combine work and university study in almost equal proportions so that now every student may be considered to be a part-time student. It has been argued by one of the authors that the innovative use of e-learning philosophies and materials have enabled mature students to gain qualifications in a much shorter time period than would otherwise have been possible (Hart, Burgess and Betts, 2005).

Although a certain amount of cynicism concerning the national UK Student Survey may be justifiable, one particular finding gives pause for thought. Of the six categories into which responses were grouped, the category which receives the lowest rating is *Assessment and Feedback*. Respondents are asked to rate questions on a five point scale from 1-5 and the results are then averaged. These averaged results across the six categories range from 3.5 – 4.0 with the *Assessment and Feedback* group having the lowest average of 3.5. The question which contributes the most negative weighting in this category is *Q7 Feedback on my work has been prompt*. This finding is quite explicable to those working in the sector, reflecting massification of student intakes, student timescales that may be unrealistically short and a lack of knowledge of the marking, recording and moderation procedures to which assignments are subject. Even with these caveats, though, there is a remarkable opportunity to respond to a collective voice with policies designed to address this perceived shortcoming. Some institutions may be tempted to adopt more energetically varieties of computer marked assessments which offer the possibilities of more immediate feedback. Others may perceive dangers in this

approach and argue that the source of the problem may lie in educating students out of their unrealistic expectations. A danger of course, as with other performance indicators, is that policies might be adopted which appear to be palliative in the short term but in the long term have deleterious effects upon the quality of the feedback given.

Within the authors' own institution (a small university in central southern England) a degree of experimentation is under way to allow students to give their modular assessments (both interim and final) electronically. Initial findings suggest that whilst the response rate of those participating in module assessment tends to fall, the actual quality and utility of the information increases. Other innovations such as detailed typed rather than handwritten comments on student assignments followed by short 'quality time' feedback sessions are favourably received by students.

Conclusions

The paper has argued that the landscape of the higher educational experience has changed dramatically in the last decade, encouraging some students to think of themselves not only as *consumers* but also as *customers*. Whether the term *customer* is a metaphor or a recognition of a new reality is discussed at some length. Caveats are drawn that the uncritical use of the term customer may well have long term (and unintended) consequences for the overall quality of the student experience. The typology developed by Hirschman (1970) of *voice v. exit* is applied to the experience of current generations of undergraduates.

The paradox that the adoption of technologies for increased course participation has not necessarily led to an increased (or even louder) student voice is explained in terms of the increasing demands upon student time as participation in the part-time economy becomes a necessity for the majority. Some lessons are drawn, however, from some attempts to hear the voice of students collectively through the UK National Student Survey and from the deployment of some local initiatives.

It is argued that whilst the subject of formal mechanisms for the incorporation of the student voice has received systematic attention in the literature, more recognition needs to be given to the ways in which organisational cultures (and in particular *cultures of excellence*) can facilitate the student voice.

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