

Engagement versus Satisfaction: Approaches to Measuring the Student Experience

Abstract

This paper makes a comparison between satisfaction and engagement surveys, leading to a critical review of how such data can then be used for policy decisions, institutional development and departmental improvement. This draws on findings from a study that compared student engagement in two countries, Canada and the US, to explore engagement and satisfaction metrics in the UK context. The data is from the National Survey of Student Engagement, using responses from over 300,000 students in one year of survey administration. Results are used as a vehicle to discuss the application of engagement-based surveys in the UK. This is compared to satisfaction-based surveys, and the benefits and challenges of both approaches. The paper discusses the relevance of the engagement concept in the UK, the usefulness of institutionally-based nationally-standardised learning experience surveys, and the different outcome goals of engagement and satisfaction, such as responsibility for learning and change, audience and results.

Outline

Measuring the student experience has become a key policy initiative (Browne, 2010). Student involvement, or engagement, provides an instructive focus for researching the student experience. Researchers have developed two key components of the concept of student engagement (Kuh, 2003). The first is the amount of time and effort students put into academic pursuits and other activities that decades of research shows are associated with high levels of learning and personal development (see Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Ewell & Jones, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The second is how institutions allocate their resources and organise their curriculum, other learning opportunities and support services (Kuh, 2003). Together, these areas measure how institutions provide the environment for students that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success, broadly defined as persistence, learning and degree attainment (Kuh, 2001).

Engagement: The National Survey of Student Engagement

Chickering and Gamson (1987) outline a variety of educational practices that are associated with high levels of student engagement: student-staff contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, and high expectations. These practices and metrics form the basis of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), used widely in the US, Canada, Australia and other countries to provide data on students' university experiences. Whilst retaining a focus on aspects that are likely to lead to effective student learning, NSSE reflects a move away from student satisfaction. NSSE asks about student behaviours; institutional actions and requirements; reactions to the institution; and student background information, providing a system of student evaluation and feedback that allows for local customisation, in keeping with the particular mission of the institution. NSSE focuses on the time and effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities and on students' perceptions of the quality of other aspects of

their university experience and the data allow institutions to identify areas of the student experience, inside and outside of the classroom that can be improved.

Engagement provides a useful measure of what students do inside and outside of the classroom and what gains in skills and competencies they have acquired. Institutions with highly engaged students can be used as benchmarks of effective educational practice. Ideally, information can be used by prospective students to choose where they attend university, and by employers to seek out the best prepared graduates.

Using data from over 300,000 responses to the National Survey of Student Engagement, a series of regression models were developed to comparatively analyse differences in the US and Canada (Kandiko, 2008). Overall, students in the US were more engaged, particularly in areas of active and collaborative learning and student-staff interaction. Between-country differences also were found in student engagement patterns by field of study.

Satisfaction: The National Student Survey

The National Student Survey (NSS) originated in work undertaken in Australia (Ramsden 1991), and was launched in the UK in 2005 as part of the quality assurance framework, and is now a very influential driver for universities. Universities' performance in most league tables is very heavily influenced by NSS results. The NSS covers particular aspects of support for teaching and learning and focuses on student satisfaction. It necessarily contains implicit assumptions about what good teaching provision looks like. There are inevitably disadvantages in any methodology, and there is now an extensive literature critiquing NSS and other similar approaches (Hanbury 2007; Harvey 2008; Wiers-Jenssen et al. 2002; Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield 2007); and moreover the NSS has faced strong opposition by several Russell Group Student Unions. Some have argued that the consumer theory basis of satisfaction surveys places the student in the role of customer and that the responsibilities and contribution of the student-as-learner are not represented. It has also been argued that it does not help institutions improve teaching provision (Harvey 2003). The unit of analysis as 'the course' silences arguments about institutional responsibility and policy context (Sabri, 2011). Furthermore, whilst the breadth of NSS allows for comparisons across institutions, it provides little detail for institutions to improve internally. The NSS does not touch on active student engagement; it collects student perception data based on satisfaction measures. Within the survey, only two questions relate broadly to learning. This highlights an implicit measure of students as consumers of education, with an inherent in focus on 'satisfaction' as opposed to 'engagement' (Kuh 2009).

Discussion

The UK government has funded several studies exploring engagement work abroad and its role and relevance in the UK (Hardy & Bryson, 2010; Little, Locke, Scesa & Williams, 2009). However, in practice the NSS continues to drive the decisions of many senior management teams and the institutional development of engagement surveys has been sporadic. Several key themes are addressed in the comparison of engagement and satisfaction surveys in the UK context. These include: the relevance, and definition, of the engagement concept; notions of enhancing, replacing, or developing an engagement survey alongside the NSS; the usefulness of

institutionally-based nationally-standardised learning experience surveys; the role of engagement in module and course-based evaluation; and the different outcome goals of engagement and satisfaction. The latter include who the precise audiences are (i.e. government, quality assurance, current students, prospective students, university managers and academic staff), who controls and disseminates data and results (both officially and unofficially through league tables), and who has responsibility for using the data to enhance learning and direct change. Survey data from the NSSE and the NSS will be presented to provide a platform for discussion about the current and future use of satisfaction and engagement surveys in the UK.

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