

Programme number: F9

Research Domain: Student Experience

Exploring the impacts of policy changes on student approaches and attitudes to learning in contemporary higher education: implications for student learning engagement

The expansion and diversification of the UK higher education system and its move towards a more market-driven agenda has presented considerable challenges for students and teachers alike. This paper presents findings of a study that has investigated the how the shifting policy landscape, particularly in relation to fee increases, has affected students' approaches to higher education. The project's research aim was to broaden our understanding of how contemporary students approach their learning, including their attitudes, motivations and orientations towards formal learning in HE. It explored the extent to which students' goals and expectations are framed by the changing policy context and how this shapes their approaches to learning in higher education. To what extent do students see themselves as 'consumers' of an educational service and product within a market-driven system, or do they develop potentially alternative approaches to the learner experience in higher education?

Contemporary higher education students face discernible challenges, including from choosing an appropriate programme and institution, engaging effectively with their learning, balancing study and part-time employment, and enhancing their future employability. Such challenges have intensified with the increase in tuition fees: students clearly expect and demand more from their HE experience, particularly in relation to teaching and learning and the wider university experience (NUS, 2012). There has been an increasing depiction of higher education students as 'consumers', provoking concerns that their higher education experience has become reducible to a commodity purchase or crude market transaction (Molesworth et al, 2009; Williams, 2012; Brown, 2013). This also entails significant resource pressures for HEIs, both in terms of marketing programmes and delivering them in ways that match students' shifting expectations and demands (Foskett & Maringe, 2010).

The contemporary student experience is also diverse and influenced by institutional context and subject discipline, as well as specific learning cultures and policy agendas of individual HEIs (Brennan et al, 2010). There has also been shown to be significant socio-economic differences in the ways students experience HE and the choices they make during and after it (Crozier et al, 2008). The NUS's (2012) study on student experience has identified a genuine desire amongst students to become fully integrated in their learning environments and participate in broader aspects of university life. This indicates that students' values in relation to their higher education are multi-faceted and that the 'student-consumer' orientation may represent just one particular identity and value dimension. In the context of a shifting HE teaching and learning landscape, which is increasingly framed around maximising future employment outcomes and fulfilling explicit benchmarks and learning outcomes, it is important to get a broader insight into range of goals, values and motivations students have towards learning in HE.

This study provides a current gap in understanding in relation to how contemporary HE students approach their learning, as well as the wider impacts and benefits they ascribe to learning in higher education. It draws on in-depth qualitative data through focus groups

and individual interviews with 60 year 1 and 2 students conducted over the spring and summer of 2013 from across 6 HEIs across all four countries in the UK. The selected institutions represent the range and diversity of UK HEIs and the profile and background of students within this, and included two research-intensive universities, a 1994 group university, a post-1992 university, a Guild HE and a non-aligned university.

The findings from this project indicate the co-existence of multiple values and goals towards learning in HE. While the initial findings reveal evidence of students' desire for greater vocational preparation and maximising returns on their investment in HE, there are also other facets of HE learning experience that students look towards for enriching their future personal and economic development. It shows the complex and ambivalent nature of *student as consumer* perspective: whilst the students in this study identified with related aspects of a more consumer-driven approach - for instance, consumer sovereignty, service delivery expectation, and demands for greater responsiveness - this co-existed alongside other conceptions of HE, including engaging in a meaningful higher learning process and becoming part of an active learning community.

The majority of the respondents viewed their higher education as an investment that would have longer-term benefits, and not simply within the economic sphere. Similarly, respondents ascribed significant value to personal and social developmental aspects of participating in HE and the enrichment of and personal agency. At the same time, the current HE conditions of marketization and massification had made many students reflect about their position as students, their overall approach and strategies to their formal studies, as well as the need to enrich their learning profiles and distinguish themselves between other graduates with similar educational experiences and backgrounds.

The data points to the construction of student identities and values during higher education and the extent to which they perceive their HE experience to inform wider aspects of their personal development and identity formation – be that as lifelong learners, prospective employees, subject specialists and future citizens. While for many contemporary HE learners being a HE student forms just one component of increasingly pluralised and multifarious identities, higher education is seen to add potentially significant value to future lives as many reported tangible areas of cognitive and personal development. At the same time, students' identities and values are also mediated by other significant dimensions including where and what they study, the interplay between formal study and other facets of their lives, including paid-employment, extra-curricular activities and other external responsibilities.

The paper will discuss the implications of the study for teaching and learning in terms of the development of new forms of co-operation and engagement between learners and institutions at a time of unprecedented change in the HE sector, and how we might think about generating learning environments that enhance the value and experience of HE learning.