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Student Experience and Leadership Trends (0200)

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Outline

Government policies in the UK have aimed towards introducing market principles into the Higher Education sector. The 2003 Government White Paper, *The future of higher education* (DFES 2003), suggested reforms to help deliver teaching and learning excellence and drive up quality. The 2011 White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011) set out a demand for focus on student charters and student feedback that would lead to competition between institutions to provide increased quality for less cost. Aligned to this is the concept of students as customers. This has been the focus of much debate, with natural resonance for some HE professionals (RICHTER, WALSH and WILSON 2010), but has often been a source of significant concern to the academic community (MCCULLOCH 2009) (LOMAS 2007). Despite the debate there is interest across the board to improve interactions, measure value and impact more effectively (DOUGLASS and MCCLELLAND 2008), (AMOSSHE 2010), sometimes drawing on experience from the professional customer services sector.

“Student experience” is now a dominant term in the contemporary language of Higher Education and the development of leadership roles, implicitly or explicitly in line with this agenda is something that needs to be better understood. The study outlined here focused on trends in leadership in UK Higher Education that relate directly to the student experience agenda.

Following a literature survey two initial data collection activities were undertaken to gain insight into the trends in advertised roles over the past 6 years and externally observable information on the web sites of UK Higher Education institutions related explicitly to the student experience agenda.

A questionnaire was developed to collect data on institutional strategies, leadership roles and language relating to the student experience agenda. This was sent out to the LFHE student experience network (which comprises three groups: PVC Student Experience; Student Services and Student Experience Directors/Heads). The responses received covered a broad range of institutions and a cross-section of mission groups.

Thirteen case-study interviews were also carried out with individuals holding student experience related leadership roles. Participants included a Vice-Chancellor, Deputy- and Pro- Vice Chancellors, Deans, Directors and Heads/Managers. Again, a range of institutional types and mission groups were included. Transcriptions of the interviews were coded and analysed.

Given the extensive and growing use of the term “student experience” we asked questionnaire respondents and interviewees to define it. This yielded a variety of

definitions. Although a minority focussed solely on either academic or professional services aspects there was a strong general focus on the holistic and individualistic nature of student experience. For some the scope was also much broader than anything that could be considered directly within the responsibility locus of the institution alone. General discomfort with any sense of a developing transactional relationship with students was apparent, from both an academic culture and legal perspective (KAYE 2006), however there was significant resonance with the concept and principles of a customer service ethos.

The majority of institutions surveyed had a strategy encompassing or specifically related to the student experience, however around half indicated that this was less than 3 years old. For some the strategies were implicit, but not necessarily written down, further emphasising a current high pace of change.

The majority of questionnaire respondents indicated that a Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice Chancellor or equivalent was the senior institutional lead for the student experience. Surprisingly no respondents cited the Vice-Chancellor or equivalent. However our interviews included one Vice-Chancellor who was clearly taking a personal and very high profile lead on the student experience within his institution.

Although some role titles such as “Dean of Students” have been used for many years, on the whole the number of roles explicitly related to the student experience has been rising over the past 6 years. A conceptual mapping of student experience leadership roles that considers role family (Academic - Professional) in one dimension and seniority in the other has been developed. Through analysis of the questionnaires and the interviews, considering the backgrounds, previous experiences and current responsibilities of the role holders, some interesting observations can be made. We found much synergy with leadership roles in this area and the concept of the third space professional as suggested by Celia Whitchurch (WHITCHURCH 2008, WHITCHURCH 2013), particularly in terms of the hybrid nature of the roles and the importance of project working. The ability to engage with both quantitative and qualitative data enabling a sophisticated and evidence-based understanding of the factors impacting on aspects of the student experience was also seen as important.

Having an explicitly written strategy with “student experience” in the title is not necessarily an indicator of the level of institutional focus on the student experience. Indeed there is some indication of a set of stages that an institution goes through in terms of maturity in this respect, with an embedded and implicit institutional focus on the student experience suggesting a higher level of maturity than simply having named documents or role titles that use the terminology. Further investigation of this concept is the subject of further work.

The policy drivers in the UK are leading to an increasing focus on the student experience and developing institutional strategies are reflecting this. Further analysis is needed, as well as further tracking of the trends over a longer period, but this study suggests emergence of a new leadership profession with potential new career trajectories anticipated.

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