

Browne's Review and prospective students' access to IAG: Five years on (0226)

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The Browne's Review (2010) indicated that if there is an increase in fees for UK Higher Education, students would need better access to information, advice and guidance (IAG) to make informed judgements regarding their choice of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In absence of appropriate IAG, students may be ill-equipped to interpret the cost effectiveness of their investment in HEIs. Hence, economic rather than academic drivers may inform choices particularly for those from non-privileged backgrounds (Sutton Trust, 2010). The 'information capital' (Bourdieu, 1967) needed for making appropriate HEI choices is therefore particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who often have limited access to such information due to absence of role models within their family (Slack, Mangan, Hughes and Davies, 2014).

According to Gibbs (2010) of the three interacting variables – presage, process and product- of Bigg's (1993) 3P model, it is the process variables such as class size, class contact hours and amount of feedback which are of greatest significance for individual students to make judgements of the appropriateness of the HEI for them. While the main drivers informing student choices are unknown, one can speculate that the key ingredients of the learning and teaching process, e.g. class size, response of feedback, and quality of teaching are of value when students make a 'purchase in the higher education market'. Possibly reflecting on these measures, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2013a-d) produced four documents on how HEIs can provide more transparent and helpful information on the learning and teaching (L&T) opportunities in HE programmes to both current and prospective students. These four documents focussed on providing information on staff teaching qualifications, class size, student workload and university's response to students' feedback. As the emphasis on providing accessible IAG to students increases both from pressure groups and the government, this has created a need to audit the ease of access and availability of information for prospective students.

Methodology

This paper presents findings of the first phase of a QAA funded study, which evaluates the ease of access to L&T information for prospective students, in relation to teaching qualifications, class size, student workload and response to feedback from students, with the view to evaluate the extent to which HEIs have adopted the recommendations of the four QAA guidance documents (2013). HEIs were expected to use these to discern the types of information desired by their students via their websites, prospectuses, definitive programme documents and/or open days. The L&T information was also expected to be distinct from the Key Information Set (KIS) that is a requirement of Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for prospective students. This study uses the QAA 'Part C of the UK Quality Code for

Higher Education' as a guide on where this information should feature. The key research question was:

To what extent can prospective students find programme/ course level L&T information recommended by the guidance documents in various outlets including websites and prospectuses?

Further, consistency of this L&T information within the HEI and variation between HEIs depending on their commitment to L&T and their size was evaluated. It is hypothesised that larger universities may be less likely to ensure consistency across programmes due to the number of programmes they have. Similarly, those universities with a higher commitment to L&T will be more likely to provide relevant information to their students.

The study involved a documentary survey of 36 HEIs' websites and prospectuses. Two degree programmes, Sociology and Biological Sciences, common to most HEIs and representative of the Social Science/Humanities and the Sciences and Engineering were selected to determine consistency of L&T information within the HEI. Commitment to L&T was approximated using the National Student Survey (NSS) satisfaction scores. HEIs were then ranked based on their NSS scores and divided into three categories to represent Good, Mediocre and Poor satisfaction. Twelve HEIs were selected from each of these categories with four being a small (<15000 students), medium (15000 to <25000 students) and large (\geq 25000 students) HEI. To reflect the searching practices of a prospective student, an undergraduate student was employed to find the relevant information for each programme. The analytical framework used criteria from the guidance documents to determine their presence on the HEIs websites and online prospectuses. In addition, a measure of difficulty (time) in finding the L&T information was used. The presence and time data were analysed for each guidance document based on the size and L&T commitment of the HEIs and the type of degree programmes.

Findings and Discussion

Since the recommendations of the four QAA documents mirror some of the recommendations of Browne's review, evaluating the adoption of the recommendations of these documents may indicate how far in the five years since Browne's review have the recommendations which accompanied the fee rise have been adopted by HEIs. Initial findings indicate that information on class size was easiest to find. Further, the extent of information on class size and student workload was independent of the size of the HEIs. HEIs with higher satisfaction levels had easily accessible information on class size, learning experiences of the pedagogical approach and support of learning. Information on methods of teaching, learning and assessment was easily accessible. There were some differences in the information available between the two subjects for example; the Biological Sciences provided more details on the resources available. None made available information on staff teaching qualifications.

The findings of this study identified the gaps in progress made by HEIs in responding to needs of students in relation to access to L&T information. Filling these information gaps does not automatically allow students to have all the information capital needed for selecting an HEI but it provides a good starting point. The findings would be of value to senior managers of HEIs, Quality Assurance officials and marketing heads to consider efficacy of their practices of L&T information dissemination to prospective students.

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