

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0200

SYMPOSIUM G7 | Denbigh 2

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'It's not always about how well you teach, but who you are': Can student evaluations ever deliver a fair assessment of academic labour in higher education?

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract:

This paper will provide a timely and focussed examination of the gendered, raced and classed implications of different kinds of student evaluations on the TEF. These include, not only the National Student Survey (NSS) which is one of the matrixes used to calculate each HEI's benchmark rating, but also the vast array of in-house formal and informal student evaluations which ask students questions about the teaching they have received on individual modules and programmes as well as broader issues such as cross-university resources and facilities. This increasingly influential student feedback currently informs the 'additional contextual information' document that universities produce for the TEF and will in the future be a key component of the Subject TEFs currently being piloted across the sector. The presentation will conclude by suggesting how HEI's can challenge and change the propensity of student evaluations to reinforce extant structural inequalities and competitive hierarchies in the sector.

Paper:

The popularity of 'student feedback' is arguably a corollary of the rising importance of the concepts of 'student voice' and 'student experience' in global higher education. These are all highly contested concepts despite their ubiquity as indicators of teaching effectiveness and value for money in current UK government policy and rhetoric and other countries such as America, where all students complete the 'National Survey of Student Engagement' and Australia where the 'Course Experience Questionnaire' is used. The NSS and other student evaluations focus on students' experiences of feedback and assessment which for various reasons is often a very challenging area for many institutions. Clearly there have always, rightly, been concerns about maintaining the parity and transparency of assessment processes. However, more recently, tuition fees which position students as 'consumers' or 'customers' mean that universities are much more 'customer-driven'. This, it has

been argued, often results in an institutional nervousness about managing student complaints around assessment outcomes, especially when they are couched in terms of the students asserting that they did not get the grade they 'wanted' or 'expected'. Despite the complexity of teaching and learning interactions and outcomes there, for this reason, a tendency for poor grades to be simplistically blamed on poor teaching.

In the UK universities in addition to the National Student Survey (NSS), which is one of the matrices used in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), students in higher education are also required to complete mid-module post-module and course/programme evaluations, which can be used to evaluate and inform, not only internal processes but contribute to the 'additional contextual information' provided by HEIs as part of their institutional TEF submission. (They will also be an important component of the soon to be introduced subject TEFs). This constant use of student-generated evaluative data reflects the fact that, as Walker (2001) notes, student feedback is now being used as an established 'common sense' authority on teaching quality (along with other university functions).

However, this paper argues that students' conceptions about teaching are essentially experiential, highly subjective and based on limited experience of higher education pedagogies (after all, most of them pass only once through university undergraduate programmes). For this reason, it advocates that the scientific veneer and institutional credence so often attributed to student evaluations should be treated with scepticism, not least because they are so frequently mobilised by senior HEI management to shape internal strategies and processes in order to respond to top-down governmental edicts like the TEF. Used in this way, student evaluations help universities and governments to appear to deliver evidence-based, comparative analyses of student experiences, especially with regard to teaching and learning across disciplines, departments, faculties, institutions and even countries.

The weight, in the TEF and elsewhere, given to student evaluations assumes, with very little empirical evidence, that students possess a critical understanding of the teaching they have experienced. However, these assumptions, if accepted unproblematically (as in, 'why would they lie?'), have allowed student evaluations to contribute to ratings-based metrics like the TEF, where it is used to measure not only individual instances of teaching effectiveness/excellence but, through the focus of subject based-TEFs, the 'value' of whole degree programmes and ultimately, disciplines within particular HEIs.

This elevation into empirical data of what is, after all, arguably student opinion and perception, has in part has been a predictable response to the marketisation of higher education which encourages the illusion of a kind of democratisation of accountability (perhaps best encapsulated by the vacuous sloganeering of, 'you said, we did'). The current primacy of student feedback, in this way, relies on a simplistic assumption of its authenticity, validity and reliability (Benton and Cashin 2014) which this paper seeks to critique. Moreover, perhaps not surprisingly the fragility of this kind of superficial correlation, despite its ubiquity, can be seen in the extent to which much contemporary research on student evaluation focusses on the need to improve student survey design methods, rather investigate its rather shaky epistemic claims to be an empirical methodology (Richardson 2005).

In practice, neatly delineated conceptualisations of student-based educational effectiveness evaluations like the NSS, more often than not bear little resemblance to, nor cast much light on, the actual complexity involved in teaching and learning interactions (O’Leary and Wood, 2017). Nor do they acknowledge how wider social and cultural factors such as racism, sexism and homophobia might influence students’ perceptions around the effectiveness of individual teachers. Acknowledging this necessitates an examination of how students’ racialised, sexualised, gendered and disablist prejudices and assumptions can and do produce unfair teaching evaluations. For example, there is little evidence to show that HEIs are working to help students engage in critical interrogation prior to being asked to judge their lecturer. In the Athena SWAN Charter/ Stonewall Diversity Index for example, there is the expectation/ recommendation that senior staff involved in recruitments /conferment engage in unconscious bias training. No such requirement attends student engagement in NSS and other in-house student evaluations

This paper argues that is crucial to examine how student evaluations of teaching quality often reveal more about the prejudices of students, rather than any ability to fairly and reliably evaluate the quality of the teaching they receive. There is evidence to suggest that students can actually end up using teaching evaluations to express their dislike, hostility, and disapproval of teaching staff and teaching styles rather than providing an informed and thoughtful assessment of their experience of being taught effectively in higher education. If this is the case then student evaluations have the potential to create dangerous or unpredictable consequences, especially for those higher education staff, engaged in teaching who do not embody the white, male middle-class, able-bodied stereotyped image that many students have of higher education lecturers.

To conclude, any meaningful evaluation of the quality of an individual’s experience of teaching, like any meaningful correlation between that experience of teaching and any subsequent assessment outcomes, are actually constituted through the complex and shifting relationships between the lecturer and the student(s) involved in any given teaching instance. The idea that all such instances and relationships are equally constituted in the same way and can be evaluated/understood using the same instrument of measurement, is therefore problematic.

References

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