

# 142 Revisiting national and institutional policy texts to enhance and revise understandings of the rise of the 'student experience' discourse in English higher education

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## Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

## Abstract

Situated within the period that saw the growth of a higher education market in England, this research uncovers new and revised understandings of when and how the 'student experience' discourse emerged as an entity. As part of a wider study on tensions in undergraduate education, an interdiscursive documentary analysis of national and institutional policies reveals a broader homogenised student-related discourse appearing prior to the 'student experience' but mirroring its increases over time. This sheds light on previous researchers' findings, also offering insights into the way in which policies intertwine and 'cannibalize' at local and national level, with some evidence that universities, under pressure to create distinctive market offers to students, may themselves have driven the rise of the 'student experience' discourse. Enhanced understanding of these shifts is key to gaining deeper insights on the impacts of changing discourses on curricula, pedagogies, academic-student relationships, and student and academic identities in universities.

## Full paper

### Introduction and research approach

The rise of marketization and the student experience in higher education (HE) may be critiqued through an interdiscursive analysis of policy texts (Taylor, 2004). As context-setting for qualitative research exploring academics' perceptions of tensions in undergraduate education at one English university, an analysis of national and institutional learning and teaching policy documents was undertaken.

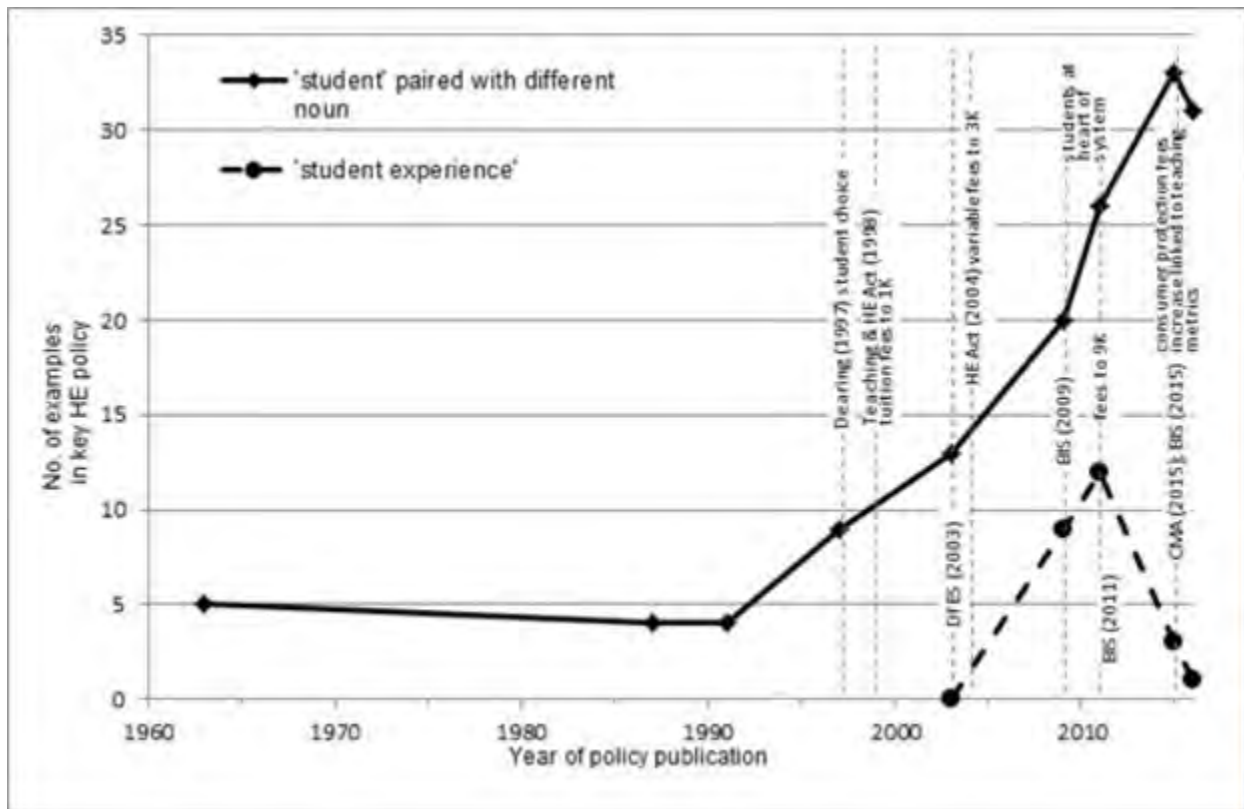
This paper focuses on the growth of the 'student experience' discourse within these documents. Discourses are important as they reflect institutional values and priorities (Burgess et al., 2006) with implications for changing curricula and pedagogies (Meth, 2022; Williams, 2013; Filippakou, 2011). Sabri (2011) ascribes the emergence of a 'student experience' to BIS (2009), that, foreshadowing BIS (2011) 'Students at the Heart of the System', overtly introduces this construct. Docherty (2011) proposes it emerged in 1998 together with the introduction of fees, with institutional attempts to homogenise offers, and learning and teaching 'among the now wide-ranging 'suite' of facilities' (p.60). Research addresses this discrepancy, enhancing previous findings. This is enabled through a wider analysis of the student-related discourse in English HE policy documents since Robbins (1963).

### Research findings

Analysis of national policies (Figure 1 references full list) endorses research on the growing HE market and accompanying student as consumer discourse, seen through changing policy authorship, text arrangement, and dominant words and themes. Occurrences of the words 'student experience' are observed as increasing across successive policies from 2003 to 2011. There is a notable change from discussing different experiences of different students in education, to a singular entity, 'the student experience', where 'student' is used as an adjectival noun to describe a particular type of 'experience' (a noun) (Sabri, 2011, p.660).

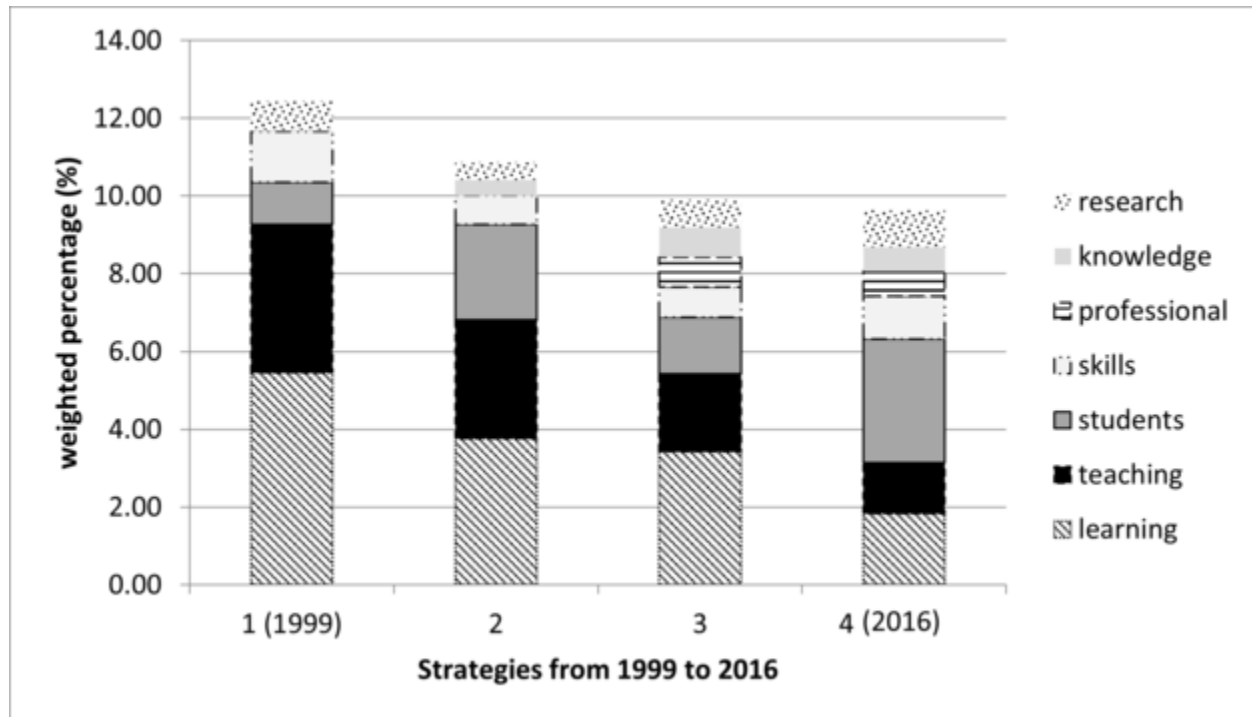
Policies before this period however, evidence a related, but previously undocumented trend mirroring the growth of the 'student experience', emerging in Dearing (1997) with national recommendations for increasing student choice and introducing fees (Figure 1). A steady increase in the use of other nouns paired with 'student' is observed over a

20-year period. In a similar way that a range of students' experiences are now portrayed as a singular 'student experience', DES (1987) refers to students' (varied) achievements many times over, whereas by 2003, 'student achievement' is a singular entity. Instances from the 33 examples within BIS (2015) include 'student choice', 'student complaints' and 'student protection'.



**Figure 1:** Graph charting instances of the 'student experience' and 'student' paired with another noun in English HE policies (Robbins, 1963; DES, 1987; DES, 1991; Dearing, 1997; DfES, 2003; BIS, 2009; BIS, 2011; BIS, 2015; BIS, 2016).

Institutional learning and teaching strategies (anonymised) reflect a similar change across time (Figure 2) and make overt links to shifting national policy. A substantial decrease in references to teaching and learning sits alongside an increase in references to students. The decreasing total weighted percentage over time indicates the increase in elements other than learning and teaching within an institutional 'offer', including awards, student satisfaction, extra-curricular activities, facilities and support services. Institutional annual reports reflect this shift, with the 2004-05 report referring to the 'student experience' as an entity, pre-dating Sabri's (2011) observations.



**Figure 2:** Weighted percentages of key word frequencies in four institutional learning and teaching strategies from 1999 to 2016 (gained through NVivo™ analysis).

## Discussion

The 'student experience' as an entity appears sooner in institutional than in national discourses. Might the university, responding to pressures arising from Dearing (1997), the resulting 1998 HE Act, and DfES (2003), have exacerbated growth of a new student experience and consumer discourse from within? This argument is consistent with Docherty's (2011) point made regarding attempts by universities to make themselves a 'more attractive consumption item' (p.280-284).

In contrast to Sabri (2011), the analysis provides new evidence of changing discourses related to students well before BIS (2009). It offers evidence from within the policy texts to support and align more closely to Docherty (2011). Williams (2013) argued against a direct link between fees and student consumer status, however the correlation between new discourses related to students and increased fees is hard to ignore. That the discourse was already shifting in the late 1990s, with homogenised offers and the homogenising of undergraduates (Kelly, 2015 in Jones et al., 2020) is important if we are to understand fully the impacts on curricula and pedagogies, including student-teacher relationships and related academic identities, since this time. More broadly, the analysis also offers insights into policy-borrowing and policy drivers that fit well with Ball's (1994, p.15) points about how discourses intertwine and 'cannibalize' at different levels.

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