

Submission to 2010 SRHE Annual Conference.

December 2010.

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Conference Streams: This paper fits into two conferences streams:

1. Learning: *Changing Student Experiences of Higher Education and Evolving Identities.*
2. Policy: *Policy Developments & Assumptions Regarding Employment, Skills, Economic Develop and Social Engagement.*

Balancing High Expectations with Academic Quality: Achieving Equilibrium in Education to Promote Student Employability.

Introduction

This paper comprises a critical analysis of the issues around the need to balance student expectations with their actual *lived* experiences of university. Drawing upon the findings of an exploratory study comparing the expectations, motivations, experiences and perceptions of business management and engineering undergraduates, the paper provides a conceptual approach to curriculum development which is suitable across disciplines. It proposes an empirically grounded model of curriculum development in which the factors impacting young people at pre-university level are considered (for further discussion see DIUS, 2008; Gallup, 2008) along with the students' actual lived experiences.

Background

The institutional setting and environment has long been acknowledged as being pivotal to how students perceive and experience university (Dewey, 1938). Indeed, the importance of the institution in shaping students' perceptions and experiences of higher education is widely discussed in the literature (see for example, Moore, 2004; Lauder et al, 2006; Biggs & Tang, 2007). Whilst it may be argued that universities provide the wider social context in which students' cultural capital is developed (Bourdieu, 1986; Halsey, 2006), in many respects, the somewhat **introspective** nature university culture may be conceptualised as being analogous to that of a Total Institution (Goffman, 1961; Mann, 2008). Beginning with the bureaucratic processes associated with enrolment and registration, students quickly become embedded into the culture of the institution and in doing so form a symbiotic relationship with their university. This relationship is manifested in general adherence to cultural learning and social norms including: compliance with regulations pertaining to bureaucracy; behaving in a socially acceptable manner during lectures; attendance [or not] at lectures; and adherence to assessment procedures.

In addition to institutional culture, another important factor influencing students' expectations and experiences of university is public policy. Seemingly diametrically opposed policy drivers (Tight, 2003) reflect a social expectation that a university level education should promote social justice by widening 'participation' and 'access' whilst conversely forcing institutions to focus on efficiency (Mann, 2008) thereby increasing the financial burden placed upon individual students. The outcome of such a contradictory and complex policy environment is

that the past decade has seen increasing numbers of students accessing Higher Education, whilst a tightening of resources has resulted in increased levels of student poverty (Smith & Webster, 1997). Furthermore, many universities find themselves battling against high levels of student attrition, with levels of first year retention varying greatly between institutions and programmes within those institutions (HCPAC, 2008; NAO, 2007; Yorke & Longden, 2007). It is against this background that the need to critically examine how institutions are meeting students' expectations is particularly important.

The *Balancing Expectations* Project

Starting with the research question; '*How do engineering and business management programmes manage students' expectations whilst providing a high quality learning experience?*', the Balancing Expectations project set out to investigate commonalities and differences in the expectations and experiences of students on two very different programmes of study at a research-driven UK Higher Education Institution. The first stage of the research involved the administration of a survey to all engineering and business management undergraduate students. The survey aimed to measure students' expectations of university in terms of: learning and teaching; employability and skills development; and personal interest in the subject. Building on the survey findings, focus groups were conducted in which students were interviewed about their experiences of university and the degree to which their prior expectations had been met. Following this, in order to gain an institutional perspective of the issues raised by the students, academic staff responsible for programme delivery in both disciplines were interviewed.

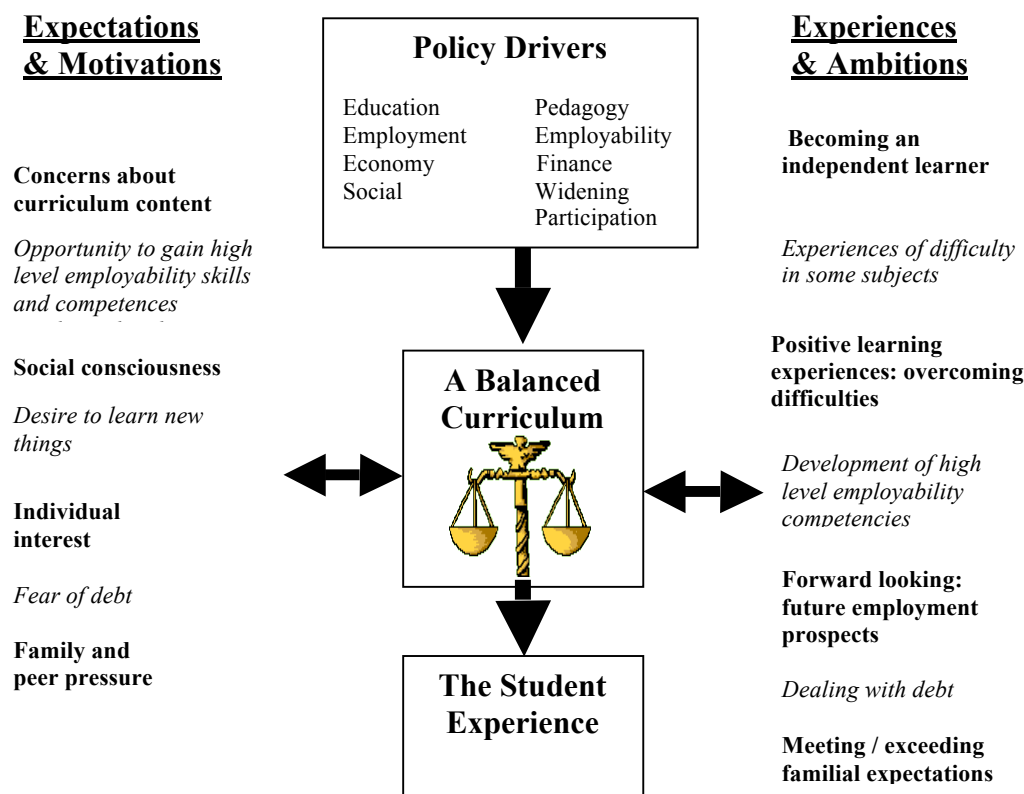
Results and Discussion

The research found that students in both disciplines have similar motivations and expectations upon entering higher education, particularly in terms of individual interest in their given subjects and a desire to gain a qualification that would enhance their employability. Furthermore, prior to attending university, students in both disciplines had some concerns about their own ability to meet the required academic standards.

The student focus groups found that, on the whole, the students' expectations of their programme are being met – particularly in the area of providing employability skills and competencies. Whilst the staff interviews highlighted concerns about quality, and the need for the curriculum to balance academic quality with student and employer expectations and requirements.

Figure 1, below, provides a diagrammatic representation of the emergent study findings. It draws attention to the role of institution in balancing students' expectations and motivations with their actual experiences and ambitions.

Figure 1: Equilibrium & Quality in Higher Education: A Conceptual Approach to Balancing Expectations & Experiences [working model]



The expectations and motivations, and experiences and ambitions, identified in the above model may be further conceptualised into four distinctive categories: pedagogy; employability; finance; and societal. Bringing together pedagogy and employability, the notion of experiential learning plays an important part in the curriculum experienced by both sets of students (Kolb, 1984). Moreover, the socio-economic need for universities to supply graduates able to meet the changing needs of the work environment is one of the key drivers impacting how society both views and funds higher education. In many respects, it would appear that Higher Education Institutions increasingly find themselves balancing seemingly impossible demands and expectations. For example, the need to widen participation seems to directly contradict restraints placed on the recruitment of students in terms of numbers. Yet at a time of economic decline, it may be argued that higher education is pivotal to the

future prosperity of our society. In order to meet this need it is vital that students' expectations are met, their motivations taken account of, and their ambition achieved.

In conclusion, the study revealed that, from educational management and policy perspective, the main challenge is to offer a high quality, relevant and sustainable curriculum that will equip students with the necessary skills and competencies for a life-long career in their chosen subject.

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