

The student as confused customer?: Competing models of the Higher Education 'student experience' (0231)

Richter Paul¹, Sarah Walsh¹, Rob Wilson¹, ¹Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

Research Domain: Student Experience

Universities are facing considerable uncertainty, the greatest source of which surrounds the size and mix of revenue streams. In an increasingly diverse and massified¹ sector (Smith and Webster, 1997; Marginson 2002), students are meeting a greater portion of HEIs' costs and senior management are deploying strategies to help their institutions augment its share of the lucrative student market. The 'student experience' offers management a platform to differentiate their offering from that of their competitors, partly in response to an explosion of student feedback initiatives (most prominently the NSS) and HEI ranking exercises. In other words, HEIs are coming to terms with what it means to be an 'entrepreneurial' (Clark, 1998) or 'enterprise' (Marginson and Considine, 2000) university. This paper seeks to identify the voice(s) of the undergraduate located at the heart of these institutional efforts and argues for much greater clarity about the kind of 'experience' HEIs are actually offering vis-à-vis what their students desire.

This paper draws on the findings of two focus group research exercises undertaken over the past two years at a large, civic university in England ('Big City University'). Participants (second year undergraduates) were recruited from programmes spanning the natural, human and medical sciences. Both projects explored undergraduates' perspectives on their university experience; one focused on attitudes towards institutional learning structures, the other more broadly on issues of satisfaction.

Concurrent with the period of research, Big City University has invested in a series of initiatives designed to support its relationship with the student body. These include implementing a set of CRM (Customer Relationship Management) tools to manage interaction with applicants and portal technologies that present students with personalised information and facilitate key learning choices. Estate investment has included one-stop-shop provision for student services and several hi-tech social learning spaces. The university has also launched a *You said, We did* website responding to student opinion and corporate functions such as the Library have been awarded the *Charter Mark* for "excellent customer service".

¹ HESA data shows a sustained increase in UK students over recent years, up 4% between 2004/05 and 2008/09 (http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1197&Itemid=266)

This paper focuses on those findings offering an insight into how undergraduates at Big City University perceive their relationship with the institution. We identify two main models to represent the subject positions occupied by students. The first – the ‘student-as-customer’ model – posits the university as a provider of an educational service and the student as a self-interested, demanding recipient of that service. Students’ identified with this model in different ways. Many evaluated their student experience in terms of whether they felt they were receiving “value for money”. Students expressed a sense of entitlement about the availability and quality of learning resources and academic staff support. Relatedly, there appears to be an increasing tendency for students to compare their experience with peers (at Big City University and other HEIs), thereby shaping their sense of entitlement and satisfaction.

At the same time, students identified with what we term a ‘student-as-community member’ model. Here, the participants’ idea of being a student extended beyond the self-interested, passive character described above to imply one that is embedded within a deeper set of relationships. Students want to feel, and appreciate it when they do feel, valued by academic staff (e.g lecturers knowing their first name) though few felt they were. Some expressed resentment at staff who they perceive care more about their own research than supporting students. Those from a school with a strong identity or with structures that facilitate informal interaction with peers/academic staff valued this highly; many who lacked these things desired stronger connections with staff/peers.

Our findings inform a series of observations regarding the attempts of this University to support its relationship with students. First, students exhibit a range of desires while corporate initiatives (such as those set out earlier) tend to operate within just one – the ‘student-as-customer’ – paradigm. Second, although appreciated, university investment in resources and services appears rarely to satisfy student demand. Third, the main (and most highly valued from a student perspective) locus of interaction between the student and the institution is with academic faculty. Hence, while some parts of the institution are enacting a customer service discourse, academic community members are often not. This may well give rise to a sense of dissatisfaction, and confusion, among students. Further, it appears that many academic staff, apart from eschewing the notion of ‘student-as-customer’, are disinclined to facilitate the ‘student-as-community member’ model either. Rather, they are more likely to favour what might be called a ‘student-as-independent scholar’ model². In summary, we have identified a disjuncture between the relationship model underpinning, first, Big City University’s corporate endeavours to better serve their demanding students, second, the expectations of many of the university’s faculty, and, third, those of students.

Our paper seeks to make a number of contributions. Empirically, it offers a rich account of the contemporary HE student’s perspective, thereby providing a balance to grounded studies in other national HE contexts (e.g. see Hardy, 2010; McInnis and Anderson, 2005; Scott, 1999 in an Australian context) concerned to articulate the academic practitioner’s view, and adding to the work of others (e.g. Higgins et al, 2002) who are also keen to understand how

² See, for example Higgins et al (2002); Harrington and Booth (2003)

students are negotiating their role as consumers of education. From a certain theoretical perspective, rather than merely responding to an already existing reality (wherein students 'naturally' operate according to a customer logic), HEIs like Big City University, by deploying techniques and technologies of customer-focus, can be seen in fact to be legitimating and reinforcing that relationship model. As such, this work builds on earlier theoretical contributions (Richter and Cornford, 2007 and Cornford and Richter, 2007) made by one of the authors. Given McCulloch's (2009) rehearsal of the profound limitations of the 'student-as-consumer' model, and his conclusion that nobody wins (not the student, the teacher, the business community, nor broader society) if HE proceeds along this logic, our arguments take on added significance. Finally, from a practice perspective, we argue that HEIs would do well to invest greater effort in ensuring all parts of the institution (both at the level of staff and mediating technologies and practices) coalesce around one relationship model (whatever that model is) at the same time as opening up dialogue spaces with and between students, faculty, and other staff where 'relationship' issues can be more meaningfully discussed. As such, the student experience agenda presents university managers with both opportunities and challenges.

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