Williams James

Birmingham City University, UK

A Time of Transition: the student experience of higher education, 1989–2010 (0052)

Outline

Introduction

Student feedback has been collected assiduously by many higher education institutions for a long time. Some institutions have been collecting it for more than twenty years. However, feedback is largely used to provide a snapshot of student experience or pick out current concerns of students. Commentators seldom reflect upon what all this data tells us over a longer period of time. This paper explores some of the issues that emerge when historical student feedback data is analysed.

The period under study has been one of fundamental change in the higher education landscape. Scott (1995), amongst others, has argued that HE has experienced massification on an unprecedented scale; Newton (2002) has argued that the period has witnessed a 'quality revolution'; the period has also seen a 'paradigm shift' from a public funded to a fee paying student body. The research is particularly relevant because of the emergence of the National Student Survey as a key factor in current HE policy.

Methodology

The research uses as its principal source a unique set of data from surveys using the Student Satisfaction Approach. This is augmented by a range of other historical data, including institutional, and sector policy documentation, material from the Office of National Statistics and so on.

This research explores the 'Total Student Experience' (Harvey, 1992). This includes a wide range of issues as well as 'core' aspects such as course issues and learning resources. Hence, the student Satisfaction Approach explores student support, the induction experience, personal and career development, campus environment and social life.

The main questions to be addressed during this type of research are the following: What are the main changes in what students regard as important? What has remained the same? What satisfies students? Why? What are the implications for students? What are the implications for institutions? The research also explores differences between different groups of students, as well as focusing in on specific issues that have emerged as being of concern to policy makers and stakeholders.

Key findings

The research highlights issues relating to what students regard as important and these are fairly consistent over time:

- Issues relating to teaching and learning are consistently regarded as very important;
- Students Development of knowledge in chosen subject
- Library and learning resources
- Student Union issues are routinely least important;
- Computing resources now less of an issue than they were;
- Catering is considered important but students expect more diversity in provision;
- Financial concerns seem less of an issue now than they were in the mid-1990s, despite the debate over fees;
- Issues are different for final years than they are for first years, perhaps owing to pressure on resources.

Satisfaction with issues has largely improved over time. However, the research highlights issues which tend to score well and those that score less well:

- Students have long been satisfied with issues relating to teaching and learning. However, there has been a gentle rise since 1996;

- Students are generally much more satisfied with library facilities than anecdotal evidence would suggest, and there has been substantial improvement since 1996 at one institution, which is a result of significant improvements made to the infrastructure of the facilities;

- Students are generally very satisfied with the interactive, learning elements of the University experience;

Aspects which tend to score less well over time are the following:

- Social life such as the Students' Union and refreshment facilities. However, improvements have been made to provision and satisfaction has increased markedly;

- Social networks and the social experience of university;

- Cost of refreshments. This is an issue which is hard to address;

- Learning resources during 'crunch-times';

- Part-time students are increasingly less satisfied than full-time counterparts.

Some areas are difficult to improve ad this is reflected in the data. It is helpful here to look briefly at the specific case of assessment and feedback which became a serious area of concern because it scored least well of the 'core learning issues' in the NSS, 2005-08 (Williams and Kane, 2009). In reality, however, the 'poor scores' referred to by some commentators needs to be placed in context. Institutions included in this study have in fact risen from much lower satisfaction ratings over a long period of time as a result of concerted action on the part of the institutions.

Conclusions

There is huge value in researching the student experience as a cultural historical phenomenon. First, history, as Perkin reminded us long ago (1983) helps us to understand how we have got to where we are today: arguably crucial at this time of crisis in the sector. Second, identifying what has concerned students over a long period of change helps us to identify areas for quality enhancement. Third, exploring the student experience is fundamentally interesting culturally: students are a unique group of people, yet extremely heterogeneous.

Student feedback surveys, viewed historically provide a valuable perspective on institutions from the key stakeholders, the students themselves. It shows not only what they found satisfactory but it also highlights what is important to them. Contrary to much anecdotal evidence, students, as a group, are quite clear about what is important to them and will rate their satisfaction appropriately.

For institutions, this data shows where satisfaction results in action taken over time. The survey data, collected over time allows benchmarking of change within an institution. This can show where improvements have been successful in raising stakeholder satisfaction. This process also indicates that satisfaction surveys can be a dynamic process. When universities take clear action on issues raised by students, the students respond. Institutional surveys are valuable in dealing with the specifics of the institution whereas the NSS requires much further digging.

Benchmarking in this way also indicates which are the difficult issues to improve. Institutional data indicates that these issues cannot be solved by quick-fixes. Something the old universities can learn from the former Polytechnics? The problem seems to be that institutions suffer from amnesia about their own achievements over time.

References

Harvey, L., Burrows, A. and Green, D., 1992, *Total Student Experience: A First Report of the QHE National Survey of Staff and Students' Views of the Important Criteria for Assessing the Quality of Higher Education* (Birmingham, QHE.)

Perkin, H., 'The historical perspective', in Clark, B., ed., *Perspectives on higher education* (Berkeley, University of California Press), pp. 17-55.

Scott, P. (1995), *The meanings of mass higher education*. Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Newton J. (2002), 'Views from Below: academics coping with quality', *Quality in Higher Education*, 8 (1), pp. 39-61

Williams, J. and Kane, D., 2009, 'Assessment and Feedback: Institutional Experiences of Student Feedback, 1996 to 2007', *Higher Education Quarterly* 63 (3), pp**.** 264–286.