Title: The potential consequences for successful transition of the messages contained in university websites about the nature and purpose of undergraduate education.

Part 1 Abstract:

This session will report the findings of a content analysis investigation into the explicit and implicit messages about the learning and teaching environment conveyed by a sample of university websites. It will consider the link between expectations of new students about the higher education academic environment and successful transition to university. The paper will address the consequences of the new requirement for universities to publish Key Information Sets which include data about contact hours and methods of assessment. The paper will also consider the extent to which the websites appear to be complying with Section C of the new QAA Quality Code, which requires public information for prospective students to provide an understanding of the academic environment which they are considering joining. It will suggest that there is an imperative from the perspectives of both successful marketing and successful transition to articulate clearly the nature and purpose of undergraduate education.

Part 2 Outline:

This paper provides an opportunity to give a work in progress account of the first stage of a research project investigating student expectations as they enter higher education and, in particular, whether the new Key Information Sets (KIS) and other related public information assist prospective young undergraduates in forming expectations that learning and teaching at university will differ from that at school level.

The transition of young students into the academic environment of higher education is recognised as critically important for their successful retention and progression. Transition research (eg Yorke and Longden (2008)) identifies a number of obstacles to successful transition but suggests (Pancer et al (2000), Clark and Lovric (2009) that the greater the cognitive conflict on encountering the learning and teaching environment in higher education, the less successful the transition is likely to be. Thomas (2011) identifies the need for potential students to have appropriate expectations of studying at university and to be able to make a "fit" between their university choices and their intentions for the future.

This research is prompted by current changes to HE public information requirements which, whilst largely driven by the marketisation of higher education and the quest to provide the "consumer" with perfect information on which they can make choices, were also partly

prompted by the concern expressed in the 2009 report of the HEFCE Teaching, Quality and Student Experience Sub-Committee (at paragraph 128) that:

> *Students, especially those without experience of higher education in their families, need help to make the transition from school to higher level learning; they may not appreciate that there is a difference between teaching and learning at school level and that at higher level. Some of those advising prospective students may not appreciate that teaching and learning styles have changed significantly in both schools and the HE sector in the last two decades. Prospective students need to be very clear that they can and should expect a different style of learning, teaching and assessment from that found in schools*

From autumn 2012 universities will be required to publish standardised Key Information Sets (KIS) including data providing information about the amount of scheduled class contact time and the breakdown of assessment into examinations, coursework and practical work. In addition to this, prominence will have to be given to National Student Survey scores and employability data as well as to information about fees and accommodation costs. As well as these very precise information requirements, the new part C ("Information about higher education provision") of the QAA Quality Code for Higher Education requires (in Sound Practice Indicator 3) that "Higher education providers make available to prospective students information to help them select their programme with an understanding of the academic environment in which they will be studying and the support that will be made available to them". Whilst the language of the Quality Code is primarily the language of choice and decision-making there is also a clear recognition by the QAA in their Guidance on Explaining Contact Hours (QAA, 2011) of the place this information may have in transition.

The theoretical framework for this research is that of mass communication theory. Communication theory frameworks sit along a spectrum from a very linear transmission model at one end to a two-way co-creation of mutual understanding by the participants in the communication. For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to discuss the possible frameworks and the language of a basic linear model is used. The focus is on that part of the research project considering the senders and the messages which it appears that the senders are intending to transmit; a later stage of the research will investigate the messages which are actually received by potential students.

The overall research design takes a mixed-methods approach and, for this stage, adopts a content analysis approach from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective (Bergman 2010). The data to be analysed are web pages in which universities describe undergraduate study; the population is the list of higher education institutions funded by HEFCE and the

sample from that population is representative of the different mission-groups within that list. The boundary of the analysis is a maximum of three drill-downs from the entry point to the university website but it is recognised that applicants may enter the university website both on the home page and directly via the course pages. The research investigates both what the universities are saying at the general level of the university and in relation to three specific courses (compared across the sample).

There must be a risk that the stark reporting in the KIS data of scheduled contact hours as a percentage of the notional student study hours available in a full year of study will cause potential applicants who equate learning largely with time spent in class to wonder about the value for money. 120 credits, on the basis of 10 notional of study for one credit, gives a total of 1200 hours of learning during a year of a full-time course; many courses provide fewer than 300 hours in scheduled classes over the course of a year. The findings from a small pilot study suggest that some, but far from all, universities have identified a need to explain that university study is carried out independently to a large extent and to present this positively and with a link to employability. At the time of producing this outline it is not possible to make predictions about the findings from the main study which will be carried out during October and November 2012 after the first set of KIS data is published. It is not possible either to assume that students will base their expectations of learning and teaching at university on the contents of the web pages. The next stage of this research project will be investigating the extent to which students do absorb this information and build their expectations upon it.

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