

What are student experience surveys for? Shared and contested ambitions

The term “student experience” increasingly functions as a fraught nomenclature and a discipline of its own within higher education. Under this banner different political ideas about the university, the purpose of education, student voice, economics and learning are played out. These issues manifest most abruptly within student experience survey work. This paper discusses student experience surveys, the National Student Survey (NSS), satisfaction and engagement models of data collection from an institutional perspective, identifying critical literature and emergent debates in the field and the shared and contested ambitions that such work expresses.

In presentation, this paper will be illustrated with findings from qualitative research with undergraduates examining their experiences of university survey work. It will also demonstrate survey measures that have been iteratively developed, with students and departments, to develop nuanced cross-institutional approaches to engagement and satisfaction that foster students’ critical reflection on their own learning and their relationship with their institution, alongside evaluations of institutional experience. This discussion is grounded within a major on-going initiative at King’s College London, the King’s Experience Project, which is developing evidence-based strategies to improve student learning on the basis of quantitative student self-evaluation.

The quality of student engagement has always been essential aspect of teaching, with research into active student engagement in partnership with universities, bearing out the importance of autonomous learning and the role of research in securing this (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Ewell & Jones, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

However, policy changes have thrown student *experience* to the forefront of debate by promoting a different model, that of Student as Investor, or Student as Consumer. The Browne Review, consultation on Fees, and changes to HEFCE have led to new models of funding and regulation. The shift from central allocation to a student purchase model places greater emphasis on bottom-up data collection: for information for applicants as well as institutional marketing (Allden 2011). In this respect, the nature of information about student experience, how this information will be used and who it will be used by, are all undergoing radical change.

Within a student investor/consumer model, student experience is statistically linked to pre-entry student expectations, on course programme satisfaction and post-course graduate reflection, employment and salary data. Amongst these the NSS and its resulting data set has become a touchstone of student experience metrics. Other student experience data includes internal sources, such as student achievement data collected as part of QAA, departmental teaching and learning reviews and student services research must also be recognised. Universities have an interest in taking advantage of these data to inform and develop teaching, however, in practice, conflicting lineage, aims and epistemologies at the point of contact with complex organisations (universities) make this a complicated picture. As any student survey will implicitly transmit a certain paradigm of learning, it is essential that institutions deploy quantitative research instruments that are appropriate, cohesive and meaningful.

There are substantial institutional concerns with the NSS as a basis for teaching and learning development. These issues are both epistemic and methodological. Significant methodological concerns relate to the timing of the NSS, student interpretation of survey statements (as reviewed by Hirshberg et al 2011), applicability across disciplines, and the central issues of the validity of student evaluations of teaching quality and the representational validity of results. Epistemic issues raised within research and polemic are however, more indicative of the interests at work in student experience research.

The NSS does not touch on *active* student engagement with the curriculum or co-curriculum; it collects student perception data based on satisfaction measures. Only two questions relate (rather cosmetically) to learning. This highlights an implicit measure of students as consumers of education, with an inherent focus on ‘satisfaction’ as opposed to ‘engagement’ (Kuh 2009). Current measures do not engage with students’ intellectual development. This is despite the fact that ‘student experience’ originated in qualitative ‘Voice’ research principles. In its current majority use, ‘student experience’ is now fused with the commodity of education, arguably occluding more diverse perspectives on both ‘students’ and ‘experience’ (Sabri 2011). In short:

‘The student experience’ homogenises students at the same time as apparently giving them ‘voice’ (Sabri, 2011 p657).

In term of learning experience, Sabri’s discourse analysis highlights how experience is represented as individual rather than co-created or social. The NSS discourse of satisfaction evokes oppositional relationships between university and student. The unit of analysis as ‘the course’ silences arguments about institutional responsibility and policy context (Sabri, 2011). In addition, as Feldmen (2012) and many others have observed, ‘A good score for “teaching” does not necessarily equate with good teaching or learning. Students don’t necessarily respond well to difficult concepts or challenging assessments’ (Feldmen, 2012). Critics have also observed that high satisfaction rates do not relate to predictors of employability and that the NSS is based upon a flawed inquiry into student’s Public Information Needs. With regard to the latter, the problem of ‘neat data’ for applicant interpretation, the potential for the NSS to occlude differences between HEIs, courses and departments, and suggestions that NSS data will be “innovatively presented” by third party providers (Partington 2011), have amplified controversy.

Central actions to improve NSS scores on the basis of NSS result raise concerns, as the NSS is an administrative metric, not an iterative institutionally controlled management tool. To enhance student experience, more meaningful and on-going engagement with students is necessary to ensure that the aspects of student experience measured are the correct ones and that pressures to enhance experience do not result in counter-productive moves that narrow curriculum content or inhibit innovation. Within this, a key question is whether voice, engagement and satisfaction measures and perspectives can, or should, be reconciled. Each has their place, however, moving forward, our presentation will focus on whether and how institutions can articulate pragmatic and ethical survey metrics to answer such multi-faceted ambitions.

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