

Promoting the University: constructing students as consumers

In response to increasing tuition fees paid by individual students, recent HE policy documents emphasise a requirement for institutions to provide students with ‘much better information’ through ‘a new focus on student charters, student feedback and graduate outcomes’ (BIS: 2011). Institutional information appears in the public domain in the form of Key Information Sets (KIS) and student charters. Such sources promote an image of a university to prospective students and simultaneously regulate the expectations of current students.

In this paper I conduct a policy analysis of government-driven changes to the HE sector designed to promote greater transparency of information, from *The Student Charter* of 1993 to *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS: 2011). Comparison will be drawn with US HE policy from the same period, in particular the influential *Spellings Report* from 2006. I use discourse analysis (Fairclough: 2003) to explore a range of institutions’ student charters and KIS data. Taken together, such an analysis helps to expose the processes by which the provision and nature of information is not neutral, how this may be highly promotional and may construct a particular concept of the student experience. In so doing, this may help shape student identity. My argument is that charters and KIS construct students as consumers of HE both before and after entering university. This has a detrimental impact upon the concept of HE and what it means to engage in learning.

Key Information Sets

Government policy suggests institutions publish KIS which provide ‘information on the proportion of time spent in different learning and teaching activities’ (BIS: 2011) as well as details of the form and frequency of assessment, degree results and employment gained by graduates. There is an assumption that KIS will enable students to compare HE institutions in order to make informed choices within a marketised HE sector; however such information is also considered necessary for the *establishment* of a market. There is little evidence to suggest how students interpret such data.

The attempt to quantify education for comparison encourages the perception of education as a commodity or entitlement. Qualitative information on the individually transformative nature of the learning experience or the nature of the intellectual challenge is difficult to include within a KIS framework. Instead, students are presented with what they can expect to receive in return for their payment. This corresponds with a shift in the focus of students which has been identified: instead of seeking to ‘be’ a student, youngsters instead seek to ‘have’ a degree (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion: 2009). The attempt to quantify a student’s entitlement formalises the status of students as consumers (and lecturers as service providers) in a way that fee-paying alone does not.

Student Charters

Students at the Heart of the System suggests all institutions should have charters that provide: ‘Information for students when they are starting a course – and during the course – so they know what they can expect and what is expected of them’, in order to ‘establish clear mutual expectations, and help monitor the student experience and how relationships are working.’ In setting out the mutual expectations of students and lecturers, student charters go beyond the provision of information and begin to establish a contractual relationship whereby students’

expectations as to the level of service they will receive are matched by expectations upon them to behave in a particular way.

In practice, charters most frequently take the form of bullet-point lists of things that students and staff will commit to do 'to create an outstanding student experience'. For example, students are expected to 'be prepared for and not miss out on scheduled learning' whilst members of staff are expected to 'keep-up-to date with developments in learning, teaching and assessment' (*University of Sheffield Student Charter*). One problem with this increased contractualisation is that it suggests education is a *quid pro quo*, with a guaranteed outcome resulting from particular behaviours. This reinforces a consumer-like focus for students upon what they will 'get' rather than the experience of intellectual engagement.

Undermining Education

In the process of commodifying HE into a service, or product to which students are entitled, charters undermine the concept of education. National policy acknowledges that 'to pursue higher education is to belong to a learning community and that the experience will be most enriching when it is based on a partnership between staff and students' (BIS: 2011). Yet this sentence begins: 'Charters should emphasise that [...]', which suggests a belief that learning communities and effective relationships between students and academics can be imposed upon institutions. Despite the commitment of staff at Sheffield to 'provide inspirational, engaging and knowledgeable teaching'; spontaneity, passion and enthusiasm are all difficult qualities to legislate into existence.

That much of the learning that takes place in HE is through relationships between fellow students and between students and academics is recognised by the *Student Charter Group* which emphasises 'the importance of partnership between staff and students'. However, the more relationships between staff and students of a university become regulated and formalised through such instruments as charters, the less effective they are at bringing about learning. Student charters erode trust between students and academics which is necessary for academic risk taking and learning to take place. As education cannot be contractualised, charters become reduced to service-level agreements, characterised by Morley (2003) as symptomatic of a low-trust/high-risk culture. Academics are often irrelevant to the process of producing charters: vice-chancellors and senior management teams negotiate with student leaders at each institution the standards that they will promise to deliver to undergraduate and postgraduate students. Sabri (2011) has noted the absence of the academic from HE policy.

There is little opposition to charters from lecturers as arguing against the dominance of the student voice has become akin to challenging the 'sacralisation of the consumer' (Sabri: 2010). Charters and KIS both enshrine the status of students as HE consumers and in so doing they erode the trust between students and academics which is essential for academic risk taking and learning to take place.

References

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