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Pedagogic Stratification and the Shifting Landscape of Higher Education (0004)

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One of the few areas of consensus among commentators on the recent reconfiguration of the higher education landscape is that the current intensification of marketization will lead to greater institutional stratification (Brown, 2012). Our own research indicates how such stratification has informed widening participation policy and practice, changed the student profile and impacted on the student experience. Within this increasingly stratified marketplace, and among an expanding diversity of higher education providers, little attention has, however, been paid to how processes of institutional stratification may intersect with approaches to teaching and learning. Our research uses the term 'pedagogic stratification' to explore this relationship, to analyse how institutional type may relate to different conceptions of 'teaching excellence' and 'the student experience' adopted across the sector. Through this focus on 'pedagogic stratification' we aim to attend to the diversity of teaching and learning approaches across the sector, while simultaneously exploring how particular pedagogical approaches might be enabled or constrained by institutional 'type', as well as differentiation/ stratification in terms of subject/disciplinary area.

We have chosen to concentrate on three key focus points of current teaching and learning discourses: accounts of 'teaching excellence'; accounts of the 'student learning experience'; and accounts of how recent changes to the higher education landscape have impacted institutional pedagogic approaches. We have operationalized institutional type within an increasingly diversified English higher education sector through a novel typological matrix, which incorporates a range of relevant factors, including institutional self-identity (for example, institutions self-identifying as either 'teaching' or 'research' institutions); market position; size of institution; mission group alliance; national teaching funding allocations as a proportion of the overall recurrent grant allocated by the Higher Education Funding Council; location; undergraduate student demographics (notably including the proportion of undergraduate students from 'widening participation' target groups) and National Student Survey scores.

As part of the research we have undertaken semi-structured interviews with senior academics in each of 12 universities, purposefully selected against an innovative matrix for institutional type. The interviews have allowed us to explore how universities conceptualize notions of 'teaching excellence' and the 'student learning experience' and how institutional identity(ies) impacts on pedagogic approaches. We have also surveyed 'front-line' teaching staff to explore how such institutional positioning and conceptualizations are being played out at 'grass-roots' level. Finally we have undertaken a critical discourse analysis of the websites and key documentation (OFFA agreement; WP Strategic Assessment) of each of the 12 universities enabling us to identify how universities choose to position themselves in terms of their institutional identity and their market position, and thus their approaches to 'teaching excellence' and the 'student learning experience'; as well as elucidating insights

into the way institutional discourses may/may not re/produce social and political inequalities, and the different interests being served.

We present the accounts of pedagogical approaches provided by these academics, against our innovative matrix for institutional type, exploring connections between approaches to teaching and learning and the type of higher education provider. In so doing, we will also explore dis/continuities between interpretations of 'teaching excellence' and the 'student learning experience' adopted across the sector. In particular we highlight the ways in which teaching excellence is (or is not) differently recognized and/or valorized across the sector; the differences/similarities in how the 'student learning experience' is understood and/or valorized across the sector; and the diversity of institutional pedagogic approaches being implemented as a consequence.

The research enhances understanding of the impact on learning and teaching of the recent significant changes in UK higher education policy. In particular we highlight how recent changes to policy in higher education have effected teaching and learning; how changes to the funding of higher education has had an effect on teaching and on the student learning experience; and, finally how, concerns to widen participation have impacted on institutional pedagogic approaches. We conclude by exploring the implications for the HE sector both in England and more broadly and, in particular, for widening participation.

References

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