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Student Expectations and Perceptions of Higher Education (0099)

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Research Domain: Student Experience

Abstract

This Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)-funded research project explored the views of students entering higher education in the four countries of the UK in 2012-13 and those entering in earlier years, to investigate their perceptions and expectations of the quality of their learning experience and the academic standards of their chosen programmes of study. This project provides illustrative examples of the issues affecting student perceptions and expectations regarding quality and standards in the first year of a funding model in England that is significantly different both to that in existence in previous years and to that operated in the other countries of the UK.

Research consisted of conducting interviews and focus groups with over 160 students (primarily Years 1 and 2) at 16 institutional locations, across a range of mission groups, institutional types and UK-wide geographical location. Concept maps of students' higher education experience were collected along with transcripts of interviews.

Long Abstract

This Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)-funded research project explored the views of students entering higher education in the four countries of the UK in 2012-13 and those entering in earlier years, to investigate their perceptions and expectations of the quality of their learning experience and the academic standards of their chosen programmes of study. Essential to student engagement are students' expectations, and subsequent perceptions, of the student experience (Lowe & Cook 2003). Quality assurance determinations need to take into account how students engage, and how institutions can encourage and support educationally purposeful activities (Coates, 2005). This project provides illustrative examples of the issues affecting student perceptions and expectations regarding quality and standards in the first year of a funding model in England that is significantly different both to that in existence in previous years and to that operated in the other countries of the UK.

Methodology

Research consisted of conducting interviews and focus groups with over 160 students (primarily Years 1 and 2) at 16 institutional locations, across a range of mission groups, institutional types and UK-wide geographical location. Students represented a range of subjects, across disciplines, professional programmes and joint honours students.

In the interviews and focus groups, students were asked to make concept maps of their higher education experience. Concept map use within qualitative research can facilitate the eliciting of perceived importance of concepts and the visualising of the relationships between concepts (Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2012). The concept map generated was then used as a point of departure for a series of questions about how students' experiences mapped against their

expectations of higher education, and follow up questions about a number of questions related to quality and standards.

Analysis

Analysis of the data is on-going. The initial phase consisted of content and structure analysis of the concept maps, with coding for key themes that emerged. This was done alongside initial informal coding of interview transcripts, followed by deep grounded theory coding of selected transcripts. Case studies of major themes are being developed. Six major themes emerged:

Consumerist ethos: Student perceptions of value

There was no noticeable trend in changes to students' expectations and perceptions of higher education from first-year and second-year students. What did emerge was a 'consumerist ethos' across all student years and across countries in the UK with different fee regimes, with four main themes. The first was contact time, and whether students were getting sufficient contact time for the amount they were paying (regardless of that was). The second theme was about what resources the institution offered and what additional costs students faced. Next, there was a sense of "symbolic value", in both a tangible sense (such as contact hours) but also more ephemeral, such as the institutional investment in students and student life, buildings and spaces. Lastly, students noted the reputational value of a degree (and their subject) and of the institution.

Student expectations of the learning environment: Minimum standards

Most students had minimum standards in mind in relation to the learning environment. If these were met, they often had little to say. If they were not met, students were often quite vocal about their discontent. Instrumentally, students expect a reasonable number of (available) computers, regular wifi access and sufficient (available) library books. They also expect functional and adequate learning spaces. Organisationally, students expect coherent timetabling and course structures. Interpersonally, students had expectations of lecturers with a sound knowledge of the course material and ability to deliver it.

Beyond the course: Student expectations for employability

Students had expectations about their institution's responsibility for employability. This included formal services such as internships, careers guidance and networking, and informal aspects such as skills that could be gained through volunteering, social activities and sports. If this was done outside the course, some students asked if it should be part of the formal activities.

Feedback: For me, for others or where did it go?

Feedback to and from the institution (although this usually meant the course from the students' perspective) was a significant concern. Students rarely heard whether or how it was acted upon. Students did not distinguish between feedback from the course, institution, course representatives or the union. A concern emerged as to whether the feedback was to help students' own experience or help other students' experience.

Lecturers: Good, bad and apathetic

Many students made comments about "wanting to fire bad teachers" given what they were paying. Students' perceptions about 'good' lecturers were that they were passionate and knowledgeable about the subject, approachable, willing to invest time in students and offered close tutorial support. 'Bad' teaching included notes being read off Powerpoint, reading

direct off lecture notes, not knowing the material and being unwilling to engage with students. Students praised good teaching but had a minimum standard of at least apathetic teaching, acknowledging that every course would have good and bad lecturers.

Individuality of student experiences: Trajectories in and out of higher education

An important note is the individuality of each student's own experience, including their reasons for attending university, where they chose to study, what they want to get out of their degrees. Students' incoming expectations stemmed from family and friends; secondary schooling and FE; and the general media/political discourse. Students' expectations after university included employment; improved quality of life; and knowledge of their subject/profession, both for employment and an expanded worldview.

In many ways, 'the student experience' is fused with the commodification of education, arguably occluding more diverse perspectives on both 'students' and 'experience' (Sabri 2011). This project aims to understand the student experience from students' perspectives, highlighting the individual nature of each student's own experience and raising awareness of what matters to students in higher education. Further, this work provides examples of issues affecting quality and standards of higher education from students, in context of their experience and from the voice of individual students.

Coates, H. (2005). The value of Student Engagement for Higher Education Quality Assurance. *Quality in Higher Education*, 11(1), pp. 25-36.

Lowe, H. & Cook, A. (2003). Mind the Gap: Are students prepared for higher education? *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 27(1), 53-76.

Sabri, D. (2011). What's wrong with 'the student experience'? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 32(5): 657-667.

Wheeldon, J. & Ahlberg, M.K. (2012). *Visualizing social science research: Maps, methods and meaning* (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage).