

## **The changing management of the student experience in England**

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### *Research questions and methodology*

1 This paper reports on one element of a Higher Education Academy (HEA) research programme to examine how the shifting landscape of UK higher education is affecting teaching and learning. This particular project aims to assess how the shifting landscape is affecting the management of the undergraduate student experience in England. The research questions for the study were:

- ◆ Are changes in the higher education landscape leading to changed institutional policies and practices which affect the student experience?
- ◆ Are there differences according to institutional types?
- ◆ Which managerial approaches appear to be the most effective in leading to enhanced student experiences, and why?

2 We conceptualised our study in terms of “the student journey”, which we divided into:

- ◆ the application experience
- ◆ the academic experience
- ◆ the campus experience
- ◆ the graduate experience

This conceptualisation also allows us to draw on a number of theoretical ideas – human capital theory in relation to the academic experience, social capital theory in relation to the campus experience, and economic capital in relation to the graduate experience.

3 Six institutions were selected as case studies to give a spread of institutional types: two (R1 and R2) from the group of institutions where dual support research income constitutes 20% or more of total income; two (X1 and X2) from an intermediate group; and two (T1 and T2) from those where research income is less than 3% of total income (taking all institutions, 3% is the median figure). The institutions are spread reasonably widely across England.

4 Additionally, a focus group was conducted, with 15 academic and professional managers. The split here was 40% R, 20% X and 40% T.

## *Background to the study*

5 The idea of the student experience, as a set of linked activities to be managed institutionally, is relatively recent: in the UK, it effectively dates back only to the 1990s. Haselgrove's *The Student Experience* (1994), the result of an SRHE project, was a pioneer in tracking what would now be called the student journey. In this book, Green *et al* (1994) note that the relationship between student satisfaction and educational quality is not straightforward, not least because it is not obvious that students are always the best judges of whatever is defined as "quality". This debate continues to this day – for example, Staddon and Standish (2012).

6 Different issues arise when support services, rather than curriculum matters, are considered. Generally in our case study universities services such as catering and accommodation are operated on commercial principles: students are indeed customers. Other student-facing services such as admissions, academic administration, and student support, while not operated on commercial principles in the usual sense (though some may be outsourced to commercial firms), are clearly providing services to student consumers, if not exactly to customers.

7 The increasing salience of "the student experience" in the literature is associated with the introduction, first, of "upfront" undergraduate tuition fees in 1998, and with the later loan-based fee regimes introduced in 2006 and in 2012. These were in turn associated with the appearance of various student surveys, predating the appearance of the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2005. These developments, part of a broader trend towards marketisation in higher education, helped to crystallise the current idea of the student experience.

## *Findings*

8 The English student fee regime introduced in 2012 has been the single event with the greatest impact on the present higher education landscape so far as the undergraduate experience is concerned, we were told. All the universities we studied had set the maximum allowable undergraduate fee of £9,000, and although they were not competing on price – as nearly all other universities had set a similar fee – competitive pressures had, for various reasons, nevertheless increased.

9 In our four non-research intensive universities, a change in institutional cultures appears to have taken place in the last few years – primarily, but not exclusively, as a result of the new fee regime. The crucial point is that the new fee regime was introduced at a time when "recruiting" institutions were already engaged in intense competition. But our "selecting" institutions also felt impelled to introduce changes, albeit of less radical kinds.

10 According to our respondents, high fees appear to have changed the way in which many students relate to the university services on offer, with a trend towards more assertive consumer attitudes. This in turn has driven universities to make wide-ranging changes in order to maintain each university's competitive position - which seems to have had the effect of reinforcing the view among students that they should indeed be treated as paying customers. These changes seem less pronounced in the R institutions, but are still present.

11 A trend towards centralisation seen in the Ts and Xs and to a lesser extent in the Rs, believed to be necessary in order to provide improved and consistent levels of service to students, can create difficulties. The removal of discretion at faculty level over a range of detailed matters, and the distancing of administrative processes from day-to-day academic work, may be creating a "them and us" culture.

12 The emphasis that we found on NSS results, league table positions and marketing activity is a reflection of competitive pressures. Intense involvement with social media, in various ways, is another symptom of this need for prominence in the communication channels favoured by young people. Investment in new technology in response to student demands was apparent, as was 24/7 service provision – libraries but other services also.

13 We found an emphasis on employability, with the T and X case study universities focusing on producing graduates who meet employers' needs. This was to be achieved through curriculum change, as well as through advice services and placements.

14 There was a sense in several places that the appearance of the campus was important in marketing terms. There was an emphasis on providing high-quality informal social spaces, as well as campus improvements more broadly.

[992 words]

## References

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