0010

The student experience initiatives in higher education: an occupational perspective

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Part 2

Introduction

The student experience initiatives are increasingly seen amongst the strategic priorities for many universities and with that, they are becoming a considerable feature of work and organisation in higher education. A number of regulatory documents: the Browne Report (2010), the Green Paper (DfBIS, 2015) and the White Paper (DfBIS, 2011, 2016), reinforce the sector focus on improving the quality of student experience. In addition to the regulatory pressures, the universities have responded to the new realities of student expectations with improvements in governance and management arrangements aimed at enhancing student learning and a wider student university experience (McInnes, 2003, 2010; Ramsden, 2008, 2013).

Occupations and the student experience initiatives in higher education

The notion of an 'occupation' is traditionally understood as a mechanism for dividing, allocating and directing labour (Abbott, 1988; Barley, 1996; Scott and Lammers, 1985; Simpson, 1985; Stinchecombe, 1959; Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). Abbot (1991: 873-874) argues that a typical understanding of occupations 'includes three things: a particular group of people, a particular type of work, and an organised body or structure, other than the workplace itself'.

Activity in higher education has been defined traditionally in relation to three broad categories: teaching, research and either service, administration or knowledge transfer (Whitchurch, 2013). Central to the academic/non-academic binary is a perceived split between the collegial approaches, implying academic autonomy and freedom, underpinned by the contribution of higher education to the advancement of knowledge; and functional activity, such as planning and budgeting, that is geared to what are seen as management goals. This binary is reflected extensively in the literature (De Boer et al. 2010; Deem et al. 2007; Enders and Weert, 2009a, 2009b; Fulton, 2003; Kogan and Teichler, 2007; Walker and Nixon, 2004).

Alongside academic and non-academic occupational groupings, there is a growing number of academic management roles that operate horizontally across the institution as well as vertically managing academic staff (Fitzgerald, White, Gunter, 2012; Gornall and Thomas, 2014; Locke, 2014; Locke and Bennion, 2011). Deem and Breahony (2005) argue that the creation of the leadership opportunities and the professional development provided, has

become a significant attraction for academic staff. In the academic literature, this occupational grouping has been termed as 'manager-academics'.

This study considers views of the three occupational groupings: academics, manager-academics and non-academics, in relation to the nature, scope and direction of the student experience initiatives in a university. Despite the current intensity of the sector focus on student experience, Macfarlane (2011) reminds that this focus has been seen as vital to recruiting and retaining students for decades. Many universities, since moves to widening participation begun in the UK, have been engaging in efforts which enable a diverse community of students to be successful. The majority of these efforts were associated with support and non-academic activities. It is only recently that scholarly literature started to re-position the academic sphere as being central to the experience and the success of students in higher education, resulting in conceptualising student experience as "the totality of a student's interaction with the institution" (Temple et al. 2016).

Research approach and methods

This study has adopted a qualitative, case-based approach (Eisenhardt, 1989) to the enquiry based on the access granted at a post-92 university operating in the Midlands. The research design is a single, in-depth, ethnography influenced, case study.

An intensive schedule of 31 interviews was used to explore the respondents' positions in relation to the student experience initiatives. Alongside these, a total of 28 participant observations of the university-level committee with responsibility for students experience strategy were carried out. The study materials were analysed using a thematic analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings

The analysis of the interview and participant observation materials reveals diverse views of the university occupational groupings summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Representative views of higher education occupational groupings

Views in relation to:	Academics	Manager-academics	Non-academics
Student experience	Supremacy of academic experience	Importance of 'felt' and 'data reporting' side of student experience	Every aspect of student university experience
Student experience initiative	Centrally driven approach, undermining trust in academic colleagues	Focus on feedback mechanisms and NSS performance management; Student experience as a university 'offer'	Difficulty in identifying 'ownership' of the student experience agenda
Currency of student experience initiative	Limits role of the teacher/lecturer to 'satisfying' customers	Misalignment between centralised and localised initiatives.	De-professionalisation of a Programme Leader role
Priority issues	Teaching, learning, Students' personal and professional growth	Trouble-shooting; People, places and spaces	Managing transition through the student life-cycle effectively, Value for Money
Students as	Students; Learners; Apprentices; Customers	Customers; Co-creators; Shareholders; Co-producers; Partners; Students	Consumers; Customers; Students; Clients; Individuals; Partners
Role of students	Customer-like discourse as a hinder of student-staff relationships	Bespoking student experience from a range of opportunities	Need to clarify student rights and responsibilities and the university student charter
Role of staff	Construction of student/learner identity	Immediacy of student experience; Importance of staff skills, attitudes, behaviour and values	Boundary setting and relationship management

The following areas of tensions are identified:

- For the majority of the academics interviewed, the primacy of the student experience lies in the academic student experience. Non-academics and manager-academics assign more to a holistic view: from the experience in halls to the experience of interfaces with a university through VLE and social media channels.

- The student experience initiative is seen as being 'owned' by the central, non-academic departments with a prime focus on student satisfaction. This view is supported by non-academic staff to some degree. Academics expressed frustration to such an approach as it was seen as undermining the credibility of the academy. It is seen by many respondents as a university response to the increasing marketisation of the higher education (Collini, 2012; Brown, 2014; Brown and Carasso, 2013).

- The tensions surface from the misalignment of the priority issues associated with the student experience. For academics these are issues around learning, teaching and assessment (LTA), pastoral care and students' personal and professional growth. For non-academic staff, priorities lie with supporting students through the various stages of the student lifecycle. Manager-academics are mostly concerned with a trouble-shooting and addressing the underperformance.

- A view of students as customers was echoed across all three occupational groupings, however, less so from academics and manager-academics. A wide array of the opinions expressed suggests a sector-wide trend towards the re-definition of the role of students in higher education and their relationship with a university.

- The academics emphasised the role of the university staff in 'construction' of student identity. The non-academic staff emphasised the importance of boundary setting and relationship management with other university occupations in order to ensure 'seamless', 'failure-free delivery' of students experience. The manager-academics paid attention to the immediacy and the 'people-to-people' aspect of student experience and having staff with the "right set of values, behaviours and attitudes".

Conclusion and implications

The study emphasises the importance of the relational dynamics between the university occupations in 'driving' the university student experience initiatives. There is a need for a deeper understanding of the potential tensions amongst the university occupations in relation to the nature, ownership and management of the initiatives. In light of this, an important element of the university strategy for student experience must include initiatives that develop staff competence, motivation and passion for learning and a wider university experience. These initiatives should target development of the effective collaborative practices of working amongst the increasingly diverse higher education occupations.

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