Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Going beyond metrics- how can we determine the value of less tangible aspects of enhancement?

Alastair Robertson[1], Elizabeth Cleaver[2], Fiona Smart[3]

[1]Abertay University, Dundee, United Kingdom [2]UWE Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom [3]Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

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Abstract:

Currently UK policymakers use proxy indicators such as student satisfaction, educational outcomes and graduate salaries to measure teaching quality and student success/ graduate outcomes. However, it is recognised that these proxies are not without significant limitations and do not tell the whole story. This project has sought to provide a renewed understanding of contributory aspects to student success in higher education that are important yet not easily measurable or quantifiable i.e. so-called intangible assets. A novel conceptual model and accompanying evaluation process for evidencing these intangible assets will be presented.

References

Bamber, V. and Stefani, L (2016) Taking up the challenge of evidencing value in educational development: from theory to practice, *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21 (3), 242-254, DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2015.1100112

Gibbs, G (2010) *Dimensions of Quality.* York: Higher Education Academy.

Haskel, J & Westlake, S (2018) *Capitalism without Capital: the Rise of the Intangible Economy.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Paper:

Background

Across the UK there is an ongoing considerable effort to measure teaching quality, driven in part by a growing focus on accountability across the public sector, especially education. With ever-more focus on metrics-based measures of success the higher education sector now recognises that 'official' accountability for teaching quality can rely only on proxy indicators such as student satisfaction (NSS) and graduate earnings (LEO). The reality, recognised by many commentators e.g. Gibbs (2010), is that measuring teaching quality is a messy problem; it does not boil down to numbers or proxy output measures. The authors have become increasingly interested in this area and how we might gain a better understanding of the impact of "softer" enhancement activities: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/teaching-quality-a-sticky-wicked-problem/.

Intangible Assets

The key to success for today's companies is now being seen as investment in so-called intangible assets such as research and development, branding, marketing, social media, internal know-how and technological expertise (Haskel and Westlake, 2018). These assets are not easily measurable in the same sense as more traditional assets such as resources (financial, staff), premises, machinery, physical stock and the outputs from production lines. This changing investment profile of companies means that many business critical investments are ignored by the dominant conventions of quantitative measurement that grew up in earlier eras. There are clearly similarities between these new and emerging forms of capitalism and contemporary forms of education.

The McNamara Fallacy

The McNamara fallacy, named after Robert McNamara, the US secretary of defense from 1961 to 1968, involves making a decision solely on quantitative observations and ignoring all other. The rationale that qualitative data is not easily proven and therefore worthless can, however, be flawed (Yankelovich, 1972). This begs the question, is there a risk that UK higher education is falling into such a trap in trying to measure educational excellence without counting all of the education?

The current study- initial workshops

The current study was funded by QAA Scotland as part of the current Scottish quality Enhancement Theme "Evidence for Enhancement" to create several Collaborative Clusters. The project team from Abertay University, the University of the West of England and Edinburgh Napier University, ran a series of 9 workshops across the UK from October 2018 to February 2019 asking stakeholders (academic and professional services staff, senior managers and student representatives) what factors they felt were important to them in their role yet were not easily measured. This methodology aligns with Bamber & Stefani's (2016) idea that there are ways in which our 'practice wisdom' can be collectively used to recognise impact.

The overwhelming feedback from the 150 workshop participants was that commonly used metrics used in the HE sector, such as, student satisfaction, graduate earnings, student attendance etc were insufficient proxies for measuring "intangibles". This aligns with the motivation for the project and, therefore, although it is not a new finding, it provided reassurance that this area is one of significant concern in the HE community. There was a significant correlation between intangibles which participants felt were most important to them in their practice and those that they felt they had the most difficulty in identifying tangible measures of 'value'.

Intangible assets conceptual model and mapping tool

In response to these findings, the project team have developed a novel conceptual model and a process that allows institutions to identify and map intangibles in their context which may be at micro (module or programme), meso (faculty or department) or macro (university) level and within several broad domains such as: 1) systems and structures, 2) resources, 3) services and products and 4) culture and behaviours. The model and process tools were again trialled and refined with the sector with two additional workshops in May 2019.

Priority Intangible Assets

Despite the variety of stakeholder groups involved in this study, a fairly high degree of commonality arose across stakeholder groups in terms of intangible themes that participants identified yet and, as highlighted above, there was significant correlation between intangibles which participants felt were most important to them in their practice and those that they felt they had the most difficulty in identifying tangible measures of 'value'. Using the outputs generated through the nine initial workshops, it was possible to rank their importance as identified by participants (a voting system was used in each workshop). The following common priority intangible asset themes emerged:

1. Sense of belonging/ part of an (academic) community. This applied to both staff and students and is in line with a significant body of academic literature, for example, Tinto (1975), demonstrated that students who feel part of a learning community amongst their peers and academic staff are more likely to successfully complete their studies and achieve better outcomes.
2. Building effective relationships (between students and staff and between staff). This, of course, helps to foster strong learning communities and, for students, leads to potentially higher levels of engagement, knowledge and understanding, retention and achievement.
3. The wider transformational impact of a university education on students. In other words beyond core academic studies and also the longer term impact of a university education in terms of attitudes, behaviours, values and attributes (meta-skills).
4. Wellbeing (of students and staff). Individuals are much more likely to be engaged, productive and successful if they have positive wellbeing and mental health.
5. Student engagement in their own learning but also the wider student learning experience.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this project has developed a novel conceptual model and process for mapping and evidencing the value of "intangible assets" that have a positive impact on enhancing the student learning experience. The authors are not arguing that metrics do not have value but rather we, the sector, should avoid the trap of measuring and valuing only what is easily measurable and discounting other important factors that contribute to excellence. These are important findings in the context of growing accountability, the focus on data and evolving methodologies of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), quality reviews etc.

References

Bamber, V. and Stefani, L (2016) Taking up the challenge of evidencing value in educational development: from theory to practice, *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21 (3), 242-254, DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2015.1100112

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