

Response to the HEA's investigation into teaching and the student experience

1. The University and College Union (UCU) represents nearly 120,000 further and higher education lecturers, managers, researchers and many academic-related staff such as librarians, administrators and computing professionals across the UK. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the DIUS reviews of higher education policy, including the HEA's investigation into teaching and the student experience. Our response will focus on the three questions outlined by Professor Paul Ramsden.

How do you think students' expectations of their educational experience have changed over the last 5-10 years?

2. It is difficult to assess changing student expectations over a period of time. Having said that, students are now more likely to expect a high quality of input by lecturers, including rapid communication, use of web-based learning, much more focused provision of subject information, and reliable information about processes. These are legitimate student expectations but there are key issues relating to pedagogy, funding and staff conditions of employment that require greater consideration than is currently the case (see paragraphs 9-17).

3. UCU members report an increasing, though not too great, tendency to go for appeals and to question assessment. And many students now seek special consideration resulting from pressures of paid work - for example, attendance requirements may need to be relaxed where a particular form of employment cuts across lecture or tutorial hours. Where a web-based learning approach is used, some of the effects of this can be mitigated. At the same time, we must redouble our efforts to tackle growing inequalities in educational access and participation (see paragraph 20).

4. With the introduction of undergraduate tuition fees and the expansion of foundation degrees there is clearly greater instrumentalism amongst students and more emphasis on a degree as an investment in a career. Partly as a result of modularisation students tend to think about completing a series of assignments, not reading for a degree or studying a subject. The consequences are that:

"Students are becoming increasingly intolerant of low marks and more willing to complain if the mark is lower than they expected. This will develop/ has already developed into a view of entitlement to a 2.1 degree or better, because they have paid the tuition fees."

5. Another trend is the tendency for many students to buy uncritically into the employability discourse, which places the responsibility for full employment on individuals

not on society. The employability agenda underestimates the role played by structural factors such as race, class, gender in determining labour market opportunities and outcomes.

6. Students expect more flexible and personalised learning and more specific guidance on how to complete assignments. We suspect that this may reflect their experience of testing and assessment regimes in schools. In fact, one of the many challenges facing teachers and lecturers is bridging the curriculum and assessment gaps between the secondary and tertiary education sectors.

What changes in students' expectations do you think are likely to happen in the next 5-10 years?

7. The UCU expects the above trends (greater instrumentalism, growing desire for e-learning etc) to continue. The push towards "co-funded" places with employers will increase these tendencies.

8. What is less clear is whether forms of litigation might become more common. This is more of a problem where significant fees are charged. We expect that the pressure to deliver success at first degree level will lead to more and more disillusionment about the value of a first degree, and an increase in the need for affordable taught masters and postgraduate vocational programmes.

What would you say are the top three challenges in meeting these changes?

9. The UCU believes that the sector as a whole – from Russell Group universities to FE Colleges – must put the quality of the student educational experience at the top of their agenda. At the same time, the campaign for quality higher education should not be based upon students asserting their rights as consumers. We believe that it is inappropriate to use the language and methods of the market in higher education.

10. To some extent, Paul Ramsden's question appears to fall into the trap of seeing students as customers, or at the very least assuming that universities should always give students what they want. We would like to question some of these consumerist assumptions. For instance, students may want to opt for e-learning *only* courses, but doing everything on-line removes the humanising aspect from education and can retard student social skills. Similarly, giving everyone a 2.1 would reduce the standards of *all* degrees. An HE experience should enable students to become aware of their responsibilities to study, to successfully pass their degrees and to enable them to function as autonomous learners, rather than blaming everything on the lecturers or expecting staff to do it all for them. At the same time, we recognise the structural barriers, such as term-time working and caring responsibilities, which can limit educational opportunities for increasing numbers of HE students. Hence, there is a need to strengthen the links between the widening participation and teaching, learning and assessment agendas.

11. *One of the big challenges facing the sector is providing sufficient individual tuition for those students who need it.* Such an objective requires sustained public investment in our teaching base. The decade of under-investment in the 1990s, although partially reversed under recent Labour Governments, has continued to dog the sector. While large funding increases have gone into the research and science base, the unit of resource for teaching has remained static. A related problem is the dominance of research as the driver of the HE system, which manifests itself in terms of funding levers, institutional prestige and staff reward structures.

12. In terms of current resource constraints in HE teaching, we would like to focus on four key challenges.

13. First, under-funded expansion has resulted in much larger class sizes, thus denying staff proper time to devote to individual students' academic and pastoral care. UCU believes that we need serious investment in higher education to reduce current student: staff ratios.

14. Second, under-funded expansion has meant reductions in students' contact time with staff. Because of funding constraints and pressures on staff to publish and bring in research grants, most universities have reduced formal teaching hours. For example, a lot of institutions have switched from weekly to fortnightly seminars as well as now having to teach a much wider ability range.

15. Third, under-funding means institutions are increasing reliant on the use of casual, hourly-paid lecturing staff. Research shows that many of the estimated 70,000 hourly-paid lecturers lack basic [access to facilities \(desk space, computers, admin support, printing & photocopying\)](#), [let alone access to staff development](#) and proper terms and conditions of employment. We need to transform the career structure for fixed term staff and believe that the conversion of hourly paid posts onto fractional contracts offers the only way forward in this area.

16. Fourth, the need to attract additional resources has forced institutions to focus primarily on their research strategies, particularly in the form of RAE ratings and project bids. As a result, staff appointment and promotion procedures tend to recognise and reward good research rather than good teaching. Although there has been some progress in recent years, its still the case that of you want to get on in academia, excelling in research is the best way to do this. We need to see greater transparency in promotion procedures and genuine parity of esteem between research and teaching. UCU has been working at a local level, through the new pay and grading structures, to help deliver this but more needs to be done at departmental, institutional and national levels.

17. *Although closely related to funding issues, another challenge will be to defend academic standards.* Many of our members are concerned about declining academic standards, including widening gaps between university and school practices and growing

institutional pressures on university staff to pass students. On the latter, universities need to be clear they are not *selling* degrees.

18. Overall, the role of higher educational professionals has been downplayed in recent debates about teaching, assessment and curricula. For example, while we understand the decision of the HEA to prioritise the student learning experience, it is important that this doesn't lead to a narrow focus on "student-centred teaching". Universities need to focus more of their energies and resources on so-called "teacher centred teaching", i.e. recognising that specific skills are needed for different styles of teaching such as tutorials, lectures, on-line learning, PBL and practical work, and not expecting lecturers to excel at all of them. Moreover, as Professor Patrick Bailey has suggested: "...building our teaching around the qualities of our teachers, is surely one way of improving the student learning environment, and perhaps leading to happier students and more fulfilled lecturers".¹

19. Although quality higher education cannot be provided purely by electronic means, we recognise that those delivering teaching will have to get up to speed with e-learning. Done well, this can free time to return to more manageable tutorial groups - aiming, for example, at 10 or fewer. Systems will have to ensure that the quasi-legal information provided to students is fireproof if long and costly appeals are to be avoided. Above all, staff will need to be properly supported in delivering quality education (including web-based forms) - not forced to spoonfeed large classes on a maximal interpretation of the teaching part of the contract.

20. *We have briefly referred to the challenges posed by unequal access and participation levels.* Cutbacks in levels of student support mean that more and more students are forced to work excessive hours during term-time. Claire Callender's seminal research on student expenditure has shown that students working long hours are less able to focus on their studies and tend to have lower levels of attainment. Improving national student support systems, therefore, is one of the necessary ingredients in reducing the educational disadvantages of working-class students in higher education. In addition, we believe that something will need to be done about making access to post-first degree education available to those who are financially disadvantaged. The present system just shifts the middle-class advantage from degree level to postgraduate level. Unless there are significant changes we will be looking at a more socially exclusive staffing demographic in higher education (for example, mirroring trends in other professions such as journalism).

¹P.D. Bailey (2008) 'Should 'teacher centred teaching' replace 'student centred learning'?' *Chemistry Education Research and Practice*, 2008, 9, 70 - 74.