

Student participation in quality assurance in the FE and HE sectors

Introduction

Students began to be institutionally more involved in quality assurance after 1992 when the then Conservative government initiated a variety of consumer-oriented 'charters', mandatory in FE through Ofsted audit and voluntary in HE. The introduction of top-up fees accelerated the ethos of consumerism as NUS reinvented itself - despite dislike of the terminology and implications - as the champion of the 'consumer' at the same time as national quality improvement agencies and local managements responded with a series of bureaucratised quality improvement methodologies and frameworks across both sectors.

The debate was and is polarised, with advocates regarding it as self-evident that students are customers and should be treated as such, while critics regard it as self-evident that the incursion of the 'customer' concept into higher education degrades educational standards and damages educator/student relationships.

Further education

In FE, student participation in quality improvement has developed and grown through:

- The 2006 Education and Skills Act supported the policy of the White Paper Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances, March 2006:
- 'We know that when learners participate in decisions affecting their learning experience, they are likely to play a more active role in the provider's quality improvement process. Equally, the involvement of some learners can directly improve the responsiveness of the system to the concerns of learners more generally. We will encourage more learner representation in all aspects of the system from national policymaking to course content and delivery.'
- For 14-19 provision, colleges must also support related DCSF 'Every Child Matters' themes, in particular 'Enjoy and achieve' and 'Make a positive contribution', along with the DCSF 'personalisation' of the teaching and learning agenda
- The 2006 legislation codified new forms of student engagement in quality improvement through college 'Learner Involvement Strategies' and the 'Framework for Excellence' quality improvement frameworks required by the LSC. Interviews with students and/or students' unions became a new requirement of the revised Ofsted Common Inspection Framework

- The current (2008) Instrument and Articles of College Government requirement that FE corporations have 'at least two (up to 3) student governors' who are often also members of Quality Improvement sub-committees
- Systems of classroom and/or course representatives where college learner engagement strategies support them
- The longer established and well-regarded exemplar 'Student Participation in Quality Scotland' (Sparqs), a cross-sectoral HE and FE staff and student representative training and development scheme funded by the Scottish Joint Funding Council since 2000 and accepted by UCU Scotland
- Some colleges still use 'FE college charters', statements of college/student rights and responsibilities, which were initially introduced through the cabinet office under Blair
- An LSC-supported FE 'National Learner Panel' has been in operation since it was proposed in the 2005 Foster Review of FE, now augmented by a 14-19 Learner Panel: both of these are more DCSF ventriloquism than they are the authentic 'learner voice'
- The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) learner involvement strategy modelled on the NUS model Learner Engagement Strategy. LSIS holds an annual 'Learner engagement' conference for FE students and staff with NUS
- FECs providing HE in FE courses (11% of the undergraduate population) must also use the QAA's Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) Handbook developed by the QAA specifically for HE in FE provision, which requires student input
- The National Student Survey (NSS), which has applied to HE in FE students since 2006

Higher education

In HE, a similar process has occurred, but with a much stronger input from NUS nationally and through its support and development of individual HE students' unions work on 'student voice'. Again, the 'charter initiative' of the mid-90s began the transformation of a 'university student' into a 'consumer' through an emphasis on complaints, despite their low volume - 900 in England and Wales in 2008, only 63 upheld – coupled with HEIs' growing fear of litigation.

The introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS), a National HE Student Panel and a whole raft of initiatives pursued by both HEFCE and the QAA culminated in June 2008 with the phased addition of student reviewers to QAA institutional audit review teams as full members, modelled on the 'Sparqs' programme and the elaboration by NUS and the QAA of the idea of staff and students 'co-producing' teaching and learning outcomes.

Lord Mandelson's late November speech to launch 'Higher Ambitions' re-emphasised the ascendancy of 'students as consumers' demanding 'value for money', arguing that universities should indicate how much students could earn once they have their qualifications, a proposal modelled on United States Community College practice. These themes now drive a HEFCE consultation launched on 1st December 2009.

Analysis and critique

HE and, in part, FE are perhaps unique as economic market activities in that the 'consumer' (the student) is also partly an input, partly a resource and partly a 'product' in the HE 'market': high A Level entry scores at 18 probably have a positive effect on degree results and certainly they raise an HEI's league table position and hence the brand value that impacts on future earnings of alumni. This also works as a quasi-market proposition where government policy attempts to steer market forces and the behaviour of HEIs over non-market outcomes such as widening participation.

The proposition that students in HE and FE are 'customers' and should be treated as such is an arena for political dispute between different policy actors competing to dominate the representation of student interests in the organisational field of quality improvement, in strategic discourses invoked to legitimise these actions and in the unfolding re-construction of institutional HR practices, all conditioned by institutional structures and existing power relationships.

One of those policy actors, Paul Ramsden, CE of the HEA, responded unequivocally to 'Higher Ambitions':

'Seeing students as consumers of a product risks compromising one of the things that makes our higher education truly great: an engaged relationship between students, their courses and their tutors. A vision of students as passive consumers is inimical to a view of them as partners with their teachers in a search for understanding – one of the defining features of a higher education from both academic and student perspectives. Universities, as well as students, are eager to strengthen that engagement, and to reap the benefits to the student experience of shared responsibility.'

But this view is neither universal nor shared by other policy actors. According to research commissioned by HEFCE, universities think listening to their students is very important but they put more emphasis on viewing students as 'consumers' than on seeing them as 'partners in a learning community'. Although institutions may be 'signed up to listening and being responsive, there has been no fundamental debate about why student engagement is important. The language of student as customer is very strong, but the language of student as junior member of a learning community is less often heard.'

This trend is both contradictory and ironic as 'many of the routine practices of HE – teaching, assessment, examining – are increasingly influenced by their impact on student satisfaction. However, the current fixation of university managers with customer satisfaction has the regrettable downside of distracting from their intellectual mission' (Frank Furedi, 'THE', 4 June 2009)

The dominant metaphor/model used to characterise the relationship of the student to the university, that is, the 'student as consumer', is partial and not appropriate to the realities of contemporary higher education. An article by Alistair McCulloch in 'Studies in HE' suggests that 'co-production', a concept drawn from public administration literature, offers a more appropriate metaphor. In this metaphor, the student, lecturers and others who support the learning process are viewed as being engaged in a cooperative enterprise focused on the production, dissemination and application of knowledge, and on the development of learners rather than merely skilled technicians.

This is precisely the position NUS has now settled on, articulated in a QAA paper (www.qaa.ac.uk/students/studentEngagement/Rethinking.pdf) 'Rethinking the values of HE – consumption, partnership, community?' NUS wholly embrace McCulloch's critique of the eight serious weaknesses of the 'student as consumer' product-acquisition metaphor:

- its overemphasis of one aspect of the student's role and the university's mission
- de-emphasises the student's role in learning
- encourages student passivity
- fails to encourage deep learning
- implies a level of knowledge in the student unlikely to be present
- de-professionalises the academic role whilst simultaneously encouraging an 'entertainment' model of teaching
- compartmentalises teaching and learning as 'product' rather than 'process'
- reinforces individualism and competition at the expense of community.

But if teaching and learning are perceived as co-production, new skills, knowledge and understanding are 'produced' through a combination of student effort, pedagogy and the learning environment (facilities, resources). The NUS paper also welds the concept of a 'community of practice' (Wenger, Coffield) in learning onto 'co-production'. In a community of practice approach, the learning process is not seen as delivery or production but as induction, the journey students take on their way to becoming active participants and practitioners in a particular trade, profession, discipline or discourse, dependent on the relationships built up between students and lecturers and between students and other students.

Student participation in quality assurance: the European experience

In a number of European countries student representatives have been involved in quality assurance systems at the institutional and national levels, pre-dating the recent 'student as customer' debates and referring to older traditions of collegiality. The Bologna Process and the work that has evolved as a result of Bologna, has given this role a significant new impetus. The European Students' Union (formerly ESIB) gained access to the Bologna Process at its outset in 1999, as a consultative member of the Follow-Up Process (BFUG)

and worked closely with three other consultative members, the European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) and the bodies representing university and other institutional providers of higher education, the ESU and EURASHE: these four are known in BFUG as 'the quartet'. A concrete outcome of that collaboration has been the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), as separate body with strong links to the BFUG, and which is currently chaired by a former ESU President. The Register is open to quality assurance agencies that substantially comply with the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance.

ESU's close involvement in EQAR reflects the high priority the ESU attaches to the student voice in quality assurance as well as in governance systems and a wide range of substantive issues. EI as the voice of academic and academic related staff in the BFUG has made common cause with ESU on a range of issues (notably mobility of staff and students), but it may be that the likely increasing demand for a larger student vice in decisions on QA at the European level could become an issue where we will need to differ.

The ESU publication 'Bologna with Student Eyes 2009' published in May, says: 'An encouraging trend is also visible in terms of student participation in quality assurance processes, with the situation having generally improved relative to 2007. Serious issues remain, however, with students continuing to face a widespread reluctance in terms of their involvement in actual decision making. The student experience also seems to depend heavily on whether it is internal or external evaluations that are involved, with the most vocal criticisms being made in terms of the former. Above all, there appears to be a clear correlation between the degree to which the ESG are implemented, and the level of student involvement in quality assurance, strongly indicating that the former is crucial in terms of delivery of the latter.'

Daire Keogh gave a presentation on QA to the last meeting of EI Europe's Higher Education and Research Committee in September, and it was agreed that EI should conduct a review of its current policies on Bologna, led by a review of QA, which we anticipate becoming a high profile issue within Bologna in the next two years. It will be an opportunity to alert European colleagues to a number of specifically UK concerns, like the student as customer model, grade inflation and the perceived quality of academic qualifications in the labour market.

UCU is now planning a seminar in late Spring 2010, and that will be an opportunity to carry our work on these issues forward.

Current UCU policy

The union is not opposed in principle to participation by student representatives in quality assurance processes. We encourage student participation on representative bodies within college and university governance and student input on course design, assessment and feedback methods and other academic matters. We do not support the direct student

involvement in the assessment of the performance of individual lecturers through participation in inspection regimes or classroom observation or student questionnaires.

UCU alternative/suggestions of what UCU may do

It is clear that NUS has and will continue to occupy a high profile in FE and HE quality improvement, and has had a role in defining a model of teaching and learning that moves away substantially from a crude 'student as consumer' product acquisition model and towards the Wenger/Coffield position on 'communities of practice', a current and widely accepted view in both the theory and practice of teaching and learning which supports and substantiates practitioner professionalism and the agency of learners.

'Co-production' is also clearly not crude consumerism but it was developed out of 'Public Value' Theory, the reconceptualisation of public services begun in Clinton's America and transposed to the New Labour government's reconstruction of public services delivered to empowered citizens, where 'the market' remains a register of satisfaction.

Given that key players in HE – the QAA and NUS, along with the HEA and by implication the HEFCE – have all variously embraced these concepts, they have become the major discourse on how and why students should have a role in HE and FE quality improvement which UCU should further analyse, critique and deliberate on through its relevant committees.