

Who sets the agenda? A new perspective on student experience, transition and engagement

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Abstract

The rise in UK university fees has prompted significant investment in the student experience, with increased emphasis on an agenda that promotes student engagement and partnership. Who sets this agenda and who are the stakeholders? This paper introduces emerging research on the topic of agenda setting in higher education, using a case study from a UK institution which is extremely diverse in its student profile and has several off-campus partnerships, both within the UK and internationally. Preliminary research focusses on how both on and off-campus students identify with the institution, it assesses their involvement in setting the student experience and engagement agenda and how they transition into higher education. This paper considers the impact of the terminology used in the UK higher education sector to describe the role of students. It presents a new perspective on partnership by raising important questions about the potential of higher education professionals to empower students to be at the heart of setting their own learning agenda.

Introduction

In 2011 a UK Government White Paper paved the way for universities to charge a maximum of £9,000 fees from September 2012 entry, aspiring for “more investment, greater diversity and less centralised control”. This was followed in 2015 by a Green Paper which set out plans to launch a new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for the UK with ambitions to “drive social mobility by further increasing higher education participation by those from disadvantaged and under-represented groups”.¹ Both papers set out clearly the government’s policymaking agenda: to create further marketisation and diversification of the higher education sector and to ensure fee-paying students receive first-class teaching and increased value for money. The White Paper provided an opportunity for institutions to consider their role in a progressively diverse and uncertain higher education sector, one which has been grappling with the concept of student as “consumer” or even “customer” since the introduction of fees in 1999. The sector has responded to the increase in fees with a significant investment in the student experience focussing especially on an agenda that promotes student engagement. This agenda has led to a rise in a very different terminology to describe the roles and responsibilities of students, one where they are often referred to as “partners” and “stakeholders” in their learning journey. But who really sets and drives this engagement agenda? Do students embrace the terminology and identities that institutions use to describe

¹See https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31384/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf and https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/474266/BIS-15-623-fulfilling-our-potential-teaching-excellence-social-mobility-and-student-choice-accessible.pdf.

their involvement in the student experience? And what are the roles and responsibilities of higher education professionals in setting and driving this engagement agenda? This paper presents a case study from a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI), one which is extremely diverse in its student profile and has several off-campus partnerships, both in the UK and internationally. The case study is based on preliminary research on how both on and off-campus students identify with the institution and assesses the nature of their involvement in setting the student experience and engagement agenda. The case study raises important questions about the potential for higher education professionals to empower students to set their own curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular objectives, based on the six principles of transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009). This emerging initiative paper will help inform and shape the future direction of our research on the topic of agenda setting in higher education by posing questions for audience discussion.

Agenda setting – an emerging perspective

The concept of “student engagement” has become an increasingly important phenomenon in the UK higher education sector, leading to the description of students as “partners” and “stakeholders” in their experience. Universities have emphasised the importance of the “student voice”, informing improvements to the way in which HEIs deliver curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. In response to a sector-wide agenda on engagement, UK HEIs have produced institutional strategic agendas focussing on important developments in teaching, research and even social responsibility.² Enabling strategies have also materialised, highlighting student engagement and partnership; HEIs and Students’ Unions have created student charters to outline expectations of students and staff in a higher education context.³ Employers have also contributed to this agenda, working with universities to provide work experience, internships and placement programmes. Arguably, this engagement agenda has been set by the sector in response to government policymaking, particularly regarding increased tuition fees and the desire to provide first-class teaching and value for money. However, student engagement means different things to different stakeholders: are institutions merely consulting students in the delivery of the student experience or really engaging with them as “partners”? Does the terminology of “partnership” override that of consumerism? How do students identify as “partners” with the institution at which they are studying and how much input do they have into the student experience? Finally, what are the roles and responsibilities of higher education professionals in articulating this student engagement agenda?

Research on agenda-setting is both timely and appropriate: the debate about consumerism in higher education is doubtless affecting students’ expectations of their transition into and across university, how they identify with and participate in their university experience.⁴ 65% of students surveyed by the NUS in 2010 reported that they would have even higher expectations of their university experience as a result of the increase in fees (Thomas, 2012). This poses a number of opportunities for the sector to understand how to empower higher education professionals to work with students to set their own curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular agenda and objectives. It is possible to work with students to design student

² See, for example, The University of Manchester 2020 Strategy which has social responsibility as its 3rd strategic goal: <http://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/vision/>

³ See, for example, the Leeds Partnership Agreement: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/forstaff/news/article/1470/learning_and_teaching_partnership_agreement

⁴ McCombs (2004) discusses the topic of agenda setting in the media, for example, and its effect on public opinion. Arguably, similar principles apply to the topic of agenda setting in higher education.

experience interventions which are built upon a mutual agenda of engagement and participation, thus guarding against the pitfalls of higher education consumerism. Rather than consulting students on the engagement agenda, they become active participants in the agenda-setting process. It is particularly important to work with students to understand how they transition into higher education and embrace a new learning context. The emergence of models articulating the importance of student transition such as transition pedagogy (Kift & Nelson, 2005) in Australia and the UK Student Lifecycle Model and Student Experience Practitioner Model (SEPM) (Morgan, 2012) can help to clarify the roles and responsibilities of staff and students and emphasise the importance of partnership in the student experience, particularly when it comes to navigating different transition points throughout the academic year. A focus on students as partners in setting the engagement agenda can help to build resilient peer relationships and guard against unrealistic expectations, helping students to understand their learner identity and the role that they play in their learning context. New theoretical frameworks such as that proposed by Whannell & Whannell (2015) present an opportunity to understand how students identify with their learning community, both individually and collectively, particularly when they are in transition. Research in this field has the potential to build upon and extend current practice on the application of transition pedagogy, it will help to understand how staff and students can work together to build student experience interventions that encourage students to set their own learning agenda and provide each other with more effective peer support.

Case Study

Context

This first stage of this research has been conducted both on campus and at off-campus sites at the University of Bolton, UK to understand how students identify with the institution and the role they play in setting the student engagement agenda. This research has been prompted by the need to identify the different, and competing, identities that our students have and how this affects their transition and subsequent interactions with the institution. The data collected has helped to understand the role that students play in setting the student engagement agenda, and how this affects their participation in the curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular learner experience. We have an extremely diverse student population: approximately 11,000 students of which 55% are mature, 35% part-time, 30% members of an ethnic minority, 46% male and 12% students with disabilities. NUS research commissioned by Bolton Students' Union in 2014 found that our students fall into two very different groups depending on how they identify with the institution and with their friends and family: only 9% of our students are 18-21 and live residentially. We occupy a unique position within the sector, one where our student profiles differ quite substantially from other institutions, making it increasingly important for us to understand the impact that colleagues can have in helping students to set their learning agenda.⁵ Understanding student engagement in this context is challenging and complex:

⁵ A segmentation analysis revealed that our students fall into two categories: (1) *Home Town Socialisers* – identify more with home town friends & family. There are two sub-categories within this category (a) *Home Comforts* (21% of Bolton student population compared to 13% nationally) i.e. choose not to participate in extra-curricular activity as part of University life and (b) *In & Outs* (31% of Bolton student population compared to 23% nationally) i.e. feel closest to family and friends from school but do also engage occasionally in extra-curricular activity as part of University life. (2) *University Socialisers* – those who identify closest with University friends and peers (a) *Resident Partiers* (9% of Bolton student population compared to 36% nationally) i.e. those who are extremely sociable, usually live in halls and socialise both during the day and in the evening and (b) *Study Buddies*

empowering staff to help students set their own learning agenda is at the heart of an early-intervention model designed to support students who are “at risk” of attrition and low academic attainment.

Approach and methodology

Students were asked to participate in questionnaires and semi-structured interviews which assessed how they identify with the institution and with their subject area/school and the different roles in their life (i.e. student, parent, worker, carer, other). The questionnaires and interviews also asked students to highlight their participation in the student engagement agenda and involvement in activities such as clubs, societies, course representation and peer mentoring. Off-campus students were asked how they identify with the University of Bolton, their engagement with on-campus students and the impact that this has had on their learning experience.

Preliminary findings

Preliminary findings suggest that our students have different, even conflicting, identities which affects the way that they participate in setting the student engagement agenda. Many of our students come to the University with a wide range of pre-entry qualifications and “marginalised learner identities” (Reay et al, 2002): many do not identify, primarily, as students and most have competing demands on their time, often balancing family, caring and/or work commitments in addition to their studies. This impacts significantly on the time that they have to engage in curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities and any opportunity to involve them in the agenda-setting process. Most identify with their school or subject rather than with the institution, suggesting that centralised university initiatives have very little impact on their overall experience and are not successful in engaging students as partners. The differences between residential and non-residential status also affects the way in which our students transition into the university and the role that they play in setting their learning agenda. The data also highlights the importance of tutor relationships in helping our students to develop their learner identities, providing an opportunity to explore further the roles and responsibilities of academic staff in setting and driving the engagement agenda.

Discussion points and questions

We would like to raise several questions for discussion with the audience which have been prompted by findings from the preliminary research. The opportunity to discuss these questions with other higher education professionals will be integral to informing the next stage of data collection and the development of the research project on agenda setting. It will also help to formulate our approach to designing and developing student experience interventions, underpinned by transition pedagogy, to empower staff to ensure that students play an integral role in setting the agenda for their own learning experience:

- (1) Who really sets and drives the agenda in the higher education sector?
- (2) What is the impact of using different terminologies, such as “partner” and “stakeholder” to describe the role and responsibilities of students in their learning journey?

(18% of Bolton student population compared to 28% nationally) i.e. feel closest to course mates and whilst they socialise during the day, are less likely to socialise during the evening (NUS Report, 2014).

(3) Do students embrace the terminology and identities that institutions use to describe their involvement in the student experience?

(4) What are the roles and responsibilities of higher education professionals in setting and driving this engagement agenda?

(5) How can transition pedagogy be applied to ensure that staff support students to set their own curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular learning agenda?

Expected impact and conclusion

This emerging initiative highlights an important opportunity for the university to assess the role of staff in empowering students to set their own learning and engagement agenda. It is possible to engage students as partners in the agenda-setting process by designing and developing interventions that focus on personal tutoring, peer learning and social participation. Such interventions will be based within schools or programmes, designed around an early-intervention model which focusses on identifying students who are “at risk” of attrition or low attainment and to engage and support them, from an early stage, in setting the agenda for their learning experience. Responses from the above discussion questions will be fed back into the next stage of the research project and used to design questionnaires and semi-structured interview questions for members of academic staff who are involved in supporting the student learning agenda. Questions will assess the roles and responsibilities of staff in the student experience and their potential to empower students to set their own learning agenda. The outcomes of both stages of data-collection will be compared with data from another research project which has been designed to map the Bolton student journey. The data from both projects will inform the design and development of a new model of personal and enhanced personal tutoring at the institution as well as new school-based Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) and Peer Mentoring schemes. These interventions will enhance students’ individual and collective identities and provide enhanced peer-led support for students in transition, supported and championed by members of staff. The interventions will be focussed around the academic, social and administrative dimensions of the student experience, highlighted in the Student Experience Strategy (2015). Finally, the data from the experience of off-campus students will be used to design a new engagement agenda for off-campus partnerships, based on social and collective identity and where students are also active participants in setting their own learning objectives.

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