

A time to reflect?

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Education is not the piling on of learning, information, data, facts, skills, or abilities—that’s training or instruction—but is rather a making visible what is hidden as a seed... To be educated, a person doesn’t have to know much or be informed, but he or she does have to have been exposed vulnerably to the transformative events of an engaged human life... One of the greatest problems of our time is that many are schooled but few are educated

Thomas Moore (Education of the Heart)

I first encountered the above quotation as the tag line to a post on a football message board, an incongruous location for such a deep and thought-provoking text. But it set in motion a train of thought influenced by ponderings on the nature of the university and, as a consequence of my day job, the concept of student satisfaction. I have been ruminating on both of these topics as a consequence of the on-going debate in the UK concerning quality in HE and the concept of placing the student ‘at the heart of the system’ and after undertaking some research focused on looking at university charters. I should point out at this juncture that I fully support efforts by HEIs to engage students and to determine how the quality of the experience offered can be improved. What concerns me is that we now appear to have reached a point where, for want of a better phrase, ‘the lunatics have taken over the asylum,’ where sound and rational thought, careful planning and informed action have, to a degree, been overtaken by knee-jerk responses and hastily conceived and executed schemes that simply serve to fight localised fires rather than tackling the overall inferno. We need to take a step, or several steps, back.

Again, I should point out that I am fully aware and sympathetic to the plight of UK HEIs who are fighting to maintain their market share in an increasingly competitive sector. They are operating in an era of instantly accessible information, both official and unofficial, which can determine whether a student will choose to study at their institution or opt for a competitor. This is compounded by the cult of league tables, not a precise method of determining quality, that exercise university

management. In the UK, a one or two percentage point drop in NSS scores can send an institution plummeting down the table and result in frantic efforts to determine ‘the cause.’

The NSS and its ilk is, of course, the elephant in the room. I’ve lost count of the number of times that the very mention of the survey results in a resigned shrug of the shoulders, or throwaway comment along the lines of ‘we just have to live with it.’ Do we have to live with it? In the short term, the answer is probably yes, but I sense a growing disenchantment with measures of this kind and a desire to return to a more precise and holistic measure of student experience that reflects the distinctiveness of the individual institution rather than the homogenous whole. This path will, however, require institutions to re-think their approach and this brings us back to the opening quote. Institutions need to be clear about what they exist to do: I understand that HEIs have to respond to government agendas and produce work-ready graduates, but can we seriously ignore the transformative element of the university experience? Are we really little more than training academies? It would be a bold step, but I feel the time is right to re-claim some of the ground that some feel has been lost in recent years.

How can this be done? My work on student charters revealed a somewhat depressing rush to homogeneity: surely a better option would be to understand what makes each HEI unique and distinctive, and then market this individuality. In a recent seminar I listened to a colleague recount anecdotes from former students who, having moved to competing institutions to undertake postgraduate study, missed the time, care and attention that they had previously received. Indeed, my colleague felt that the institution had attained a cult status among students because of staff accessibility and willingness to ‘go the extra mile.’ The flip side of this story is that the same colleague was unwilling to promote these anecdotes to the marketing department of the institution for fear that this ‘butterfly’ of provision would be ‘nailed to the wall’.

This brings us to a consideration of one of our greatest assets – our staff. They could be forgiven for thinking that they are marginal given the centrality afforded to the student in recent years, but shouldn’t the university experience be a partnership? The anecdote recounted above would not have existed if the staff in question had not been doing what they are good at – a common sense observation that is sometimes overlooked.

So what are the implications for institutional research? In simple terms, those at the institution are best placed to understand it and know when things are working and when they aren’t. We have staff in all areas of provision that have their finger on the collective pulse of the institution; these are the people, along with our students that we should be talking to.

To conclude, it is always wise to remind ourselves that we are in the people business and people, by their very nature, are complex, capricious and often bloody-minded. They often refuse to do or

say the things that we want them to – this is a good thing. Generating an environment where people are comfortable to express their true feelings is a measure of success, as long as we have the mechanisms in place that can act on criticism and complaint and demonstrate that we are actively doing something about it.

David Kane is a researcher with the Social Research and Evaluation Unit (SREU) within the Faculty of Education, Law and Social Sciences at Birmingham City University (BCU). David has a keen interest in all areas of higher education policy and practice, particularly the student experience of higher education. He has presented several papers at international conferences on this subject and has worked on institutional student satisfaction surveys for a number of HEIs since 2005 with colleagues at SREU. David is also interested in the application and use of technology, including social media, in learning and teaching and is developing this interest with colleagues across BCU.

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