

The paradox of student engagement and policy-led measures of teaching excellence

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Introduction

High levels of student engagement are regarded as a sign of quality in the higher education (HE) student experience (Trowler, 2010). Many institutions expend energy and resources in the development of student engagement, invariably through 'partnership', 'change agent' or 'producer' models. But what happens when student engagement runs in opposition to measures of quality within policy frameworks?

Student engagement and the Teaching Excellence Framework

Within today's policy landscape, dominated by the HE and Research Bill, the discourse of 'teaching excellence' implies that a highly-engaged student body equates to positive measurable outcomes. Highly-engaged students will provide constructive feedback, enable continual improvements in teaching quality and be employed in graduate-level work quickly after graduation. This may well be the case, although a high level of engagement may also lead to significant challenge where the type and form of engagement does not sit comfortably within the externally-imposed framework.

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), with its use of National Student Survey (NSS) data, assumes that students will comply with requirements to complete a survey without critiquing the very principles on which the survey is founded. Over the years, students have become accustomed to the usefulness of providing feedback in a structured way and to seeing institutional responses over time. However, recent policy developments have provided cause for critical reflection and an ensuing boycott of the NSS, orchestrated by the National Union of Students. Here is an example of politically-engaged students, calling into question the mechanism through which they are being asked to engage.

Although the boycott appears to be achieving mixed outcomes, the greatest impact will be felt by those institutions which are unable to reach requisite 'threshold' response rates. Whilst a desirable outcome for some student leaders, a non-return of data will have detrimental consequences. It may be that TEF improvement (for example, from Bronze to Silver) can be achieved only through development of NSS scores; NSS is also a key metric in a variety of university league tables and is displayed publicly on websites used by potential students. Could a high level of student engagement in this debate serve to undermine the public profile of institutions at a time when optimum recruitment of students is the bedrock of institutional sustainability?

Maintaining a focus on student engagement

In such circumstances, one might be forgiven for reducing student engagement, to problematise the very thing that has been previously embraced. Yet this runs against the constructivist assumption that learning is a joint proposition dependent on universities' providing the conditions, opportunities and expectations for students to become engaged (Coates, 2005). Instead, student engagement must continue to be central to any hoped-for

transformational learning process; to effect a deep, structural shift in thought, feelings and actions (O'Sullivan, 2003), we must redouble our efforts to foster engagement.

Student engagement is not solely characterised by NSS response rates – in fact, there are multiple examples of student engagement that have little to do with NSS and TEF. In my own institution, students and staff are working collectively on a range of initiatives, including curriculum reviews, development of teaching and learning policies and student wellbeing provision. In such projects, our students are a significant asset to the institution, as they bring their life experiences to bear on University processes. The circumstances faced by students are shaped by countless social and cultural drivers, which give rise to possibilities of action or constraint; in turn, these possibilities are affected by our 'configuration of concerns,' leading to courses of action which are produced through the reflexive deliberations of us all (Archer, 2003).

As we work to make sense of prevailing policy frameworks, we must strive to understand all views and perspectives. We should endeavour to develop new ways in which the student voice can be foregrounded, even where – and particularly when – this voice is one of dissent. A commitment to partnership working need not blindly expect compliance and agreement, but necessitates a nuanced and clearly-articulated approach to working through challenges collectively. As we grapple with the outcomes of the ever-evolving TEF, its future meaningful progress seems possible only with the engagement of satisfied *and* dissatisfied students *equally*. As Collini (2012, p. 185) posits, many of us may still hope that students 'come away with certain kinds of dissatisfaction...and it matters more that they carry on wondering about the source of dissatisfaction than whether they liked the course or not'.

Reference list

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