

## Empowering Learners\*

The rapid changes taking place in higher education have placed increasing emphasis on the role of universities in national, and indeed European, economic competitiveness. There is growing pressure on universities to demonstrate accountability for tax-payers' money and, increasingly, for growing student contributions to the cost of higher education. Economic competitiveness requires a well-educated workforce and this, along with the growing consumerist rhetoric in higher education, is leading to more emphasis on responding to student needs.

'Empowering learners' is a phrase that is growing in currency in academic debates about the future of higher education. However, empowering learners means many different things and it is debatable how seriously we really are about giving students control over the educational process and their post-educational lives.

There are four ways in which learners can be empowered, through:

- choice within the curriculum;
- feedback designed to monitor service provision and the learning experience;
- representation;
- the development of a critical, transformative approach to learning.

### *Choice*

It is assumed that the more choice learners have within the curriculum the more they are empowered. This is misleading and is a restatement of the consumerist myth that equates choice, from within a dominant frame of reference, with power (to transcend that frame). The selection of a curriculum usually means, in practice, choosing which *teaching* programmes to attend and thus which assessment to undertake. While superficially liberating this does not necessarily empower the student. The American experience suggests the contrary. An unstructured collection of small units, which the student selects from a bewildering array of available options, often results in lack of coherence and progression in a programme of study. Recent American research has suggested that where there is a return to a coherent 'course' graduates are intellectually better than their peers on 'cafeteria' programmes with virtually unlimited choice.

A more empowering variation on the theme of choice is the development of a learning contract. While apparently more restrictive, a learning contract has a much greater potential to empower students. The student does not simply choose which teaching programmes to attend but negotiates a *learning* experience. The teacher is seen as a facilitator. The object of the programme is to achieve specified learning objectives through the identification of required knowledge, abilities and skills. The learning contract, negotiated between student and facilitator, identifies how the required outcomes can be achieved. The student controls *how* they learn and when and how it is *assessed*. In an extreme case there could be no lectures or seminars at all.

## ***Monitoring***

Student evaluations of service provision, including the teaching and learning experience, are increasingly evident in higher education institutions. Indeed, many national systems of external quality monitoring require that such systems are in place. Broadly speaking, there are three types:

- student evaluations of the teaching (and learning) at a unit or programme level;
- evaluations of the wider student experience, including all those elements of their experience that impinge upon their learning such as, programme organisation, the library, information technology provision, through to the cafeteria and the car parks;
- monitoring of the ‘contractual provision’ guaranteed by institutions in the form of ‘charters’.

Student evaluation of teaching performance often relies on ‘happy forms’. These are simple questionnaires which ask whether the teacher presents well, is enthusiastic, turns up on time, makes useful comments on assessed work, and so on. Although student feedback on teaching and learning is important, such stylised forms of student monitoring of teacher performance is a limited form of empowerment for several reasons. First, as a procedure it tends to be effective in identifying very bad teachers but far less effective in identifying the mediocre and good. More importantly, it is not an effective means for suggesting how improvements can be made. Nor is it a method for ensuring such changes are put in place rapidly, or even at all. Learners are often not involved in formulating the questionnaires and the questions tend to represent the interests of teachers or of their managers. Finally, and most damning, ‘happy forms’ rarely ask student to reflect on their *learning*, rather than the lecturers’ teaching.

Broader evaluations of the learning experience, through such things as institution-wide student satisfaction surveys offer a means of ensuring a student voice and a continuous process of monitoring and improving provision in respect of all aspects of the learning experience. However, this is only an effective form of empowerment if learners are involved in the identification of the areas of concern and if there is a clear process of accountability and action that follows the analysis of student views. Such an action cycle requires the involvement of senior management and a procedure for ensuring that appropriate action takes place. However, even in such ideal circumstances, this is a limited form of learner empowerment as its focus is on the continuous incremental improvement of the learning context rather than the direct empowerment of the learner.

## ***Representation***

Student representation provides another potential form of empowerment. It is vital that students are represented on higher education committees and decision-making bodies, not least so that they can monitor and report back on the procedures and outcomes. Ideally, it would be preferable if students on such decision-making bodies also had an effective voice. All too often, students are not only in a tiny minority but are not able to engage effectively because of the infrequency of the meetings, the rapid turnover of students and the lack of opportunity to prepare themselves for the style and content of meetings.

Even when students are listened to, it is often the case that the points they are making are not heard because they lie outside the frame of reference or taken-for-granted of the meeting. There is a danger that representation apparently empowers but, in practice, disempowers. In reality, learners need to have equal representation on decision-making bodies if the learner perspective is to be heard.

### *Critical*

While each of the above approaches offers some control over the education process it is debatable how far they go to empowering learners in their post-education careers. The fourth approach attempts to do both. Students, it argues are empowered by developing *their* critical, reflective and transformative abilities. This requires an approach to teaching and learning that goes beyond requiring students to learn a body of knowledge and be able to apply it analytically.

Developing a critical approach to learning is about challenging preconceptions, both those of the learner and the teacher. It is about being able to develop opinions and be able to justify them, to be able to think about knowledge as a *process* not some 'thing' they tentatively approach and selectively appropriate. A critical approach is about students having the confidence to assess and develop knowledge for themselves rather than submitting packaged chunks to an assessor who will tell them if it sufficient or 'correct'. It requires students to self assess, to be able to decide what is good quality work and to be confident when they have achieved it. In short, it is an approach that treats students as *intellectual performers* rather than as compliant audience. It transforms teaching and learning into an active process of coming to understand. It enables students to go beyond the narrow confines of the 'safe' knowledge base of their academic discipline to applying themselves to whatever they encounter in the post-education world.

Increasingly, in a world of change, in which flexibility is a watchword, learners need to be able to help the organisations in which they work after graduate to transform in the face of this rapid and continuous change. They will not be able to do that if they are not able to work in teams, communicate well, analyse, and synthesise. More importantly the future graduate needs to be self-transformative, which requires reflective and critical abilities.

Emphasising the need for the development of critical, reflective, empowered learners raises fundamental questions about traditional forms of teaching in higher education and the priorities of higher educational institutions. In so doing it asks some difficult questions about 'real' empowerment of learners.

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