

Engagement is key

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Frank Furedi ("When trust slips", THES, November 12) has articulated the growing concerns of teaching staff in higher education.

Students are not "consumers" or "purchasers" of knowledge despite the shift in the funding burden. They are participants in a process of learning. As such, they have a responsibility to engage in the process of becoming critical lifelong learners.

That is not to deny students access to complaints. On the contrary, it is important that students have vehicles to express views about their learning experience in a structure that results in action and feedback. Where action is not forthcoming, students should have recourse to effective complaints procedures.

The rise in mass higher education is reflected in a marked increase in instrumentalism among students. Rather than engage with the learning experience, students are "consuming" courses and expect that, through consumption, they will acquire the appropriate outcomes irrespective of their own input. As a result of this failure to engage with courses, there is a tendency for students to resort immediately to complaints rather than to discourse about their learning experience.

This leads to frayed relations between students and staff and to a growing sense of mutual distrust, which is not conducive to learning. Teaching staff in a range of universities are now adopting various tactics to head off potential complaints. Such tactics include noting all conversations with "problematic" students; avoiding giving students marginal fail marks unless they are clear fails, in which case very low (unrecoverable) marks are awarded; returning to examination assessment even when they consider examination a poor form of assessment; and generally disengaging from any but the most motivated and interested students.

All of this reflects a situation in which teaching staff feel under siege and unsupported by senior managers, whom they perceive to be more interested in avoiding litigation than valuing well-established teaching staff.

In that climate, students are getting a less than satisfactory experience, and the highly motivated students are becoming disillusioned with the learning community, which has all but disintegrated.

The sooner we end the rhetoric of consumerism and reinstate the rhetoric of scholarship along with structures to establish responsive collegialism, the sooner universities can again become learning communities.

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