

What is the student experience anyway?

Lee Harvey argues that the consumerist approach to the student learning experience and student choice is illusory.

Ask anyone who works in higher education and was a student in the late 1960s or 1970s and they will say that the student experience was better 30 years ago than it is now. Is this selective reminiscing; a *post hoc* construction of a golden age, or indicative of a fundamentally different experience? Whether it was either of the former is a moot point but that the experience is qualitatively different cannot be denied. Whether better or worse, is the stuff of heated debate.

How has it changed over 30 years? Clearly there are more students studying on a bigger array of programmes in more higher education institutions. The higher education environment is more diverse and the culture within (many) institutions has changed. Students are much more likely to work during term-time and face debts on completion. Curricula are clearer and assessment processes more transparent, if increasingly bureaucratic (rigid processes are not necessarily fairer). It is now much harder to fail. There is more pressure on staff to do research and an increasing administration burden. All of this seems to have resulted in much less face-to-face dialogue, especially on a one-to-one basis with staff. Unitisation and semesterisation have, arguably, led to a less coherent and more anonymous, or even alienating, learning experience. In the US, for example, they are trying to address first-year retention through orientating and supportive first-year seminar programmes and increasingly residential learning communities, which, incidentally, resemble a modern version of the Oxbridge-model college system.

A key aspect of the learning experience is coherence and control. The introduction of cafeteria-type choice systems of options spread, along with semesterisation, to produce bite-sized learning units. These tend to be summatively rather than formatively assessed and there is considerable doubt about the internal coherence of programmes, not least when assessment

regulations abhor precursors or allow a string of failures to be trailed in students' wake as they move from one level to another.

Lack of coherence has not, of course, been the preserve of cafeteria-style modular schemes. It has been the tradition, especially in older research-based universities, that have, in the past, compiled whimsical programmes of study based on the research interests of current staff. This incoherent provider-led approach was precisely what the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)'s quality infrastructure has been best at confronting. In that sense, the student experience has been enhanced. However, the consumerist preoccupation with choice and the mistaken presumption by students that, now faced with paying a significant contribution to their higher education experience, they are consumers, threatens any future coherence.

Students are deluded if they think that choice is in any way empowering. Choice has never been empowering when the options are determined by providers. Choice is only potentially empowering when consumer choice is exercised through the design of the commodity, a rare consumerist event. In higher education, that would be through independent study programmes or research degrees. Choice of options, programmes or universities does not fundamentally enhance the learning experience. At best it provides a mechanism to put pressure on providers to ensure at least an acceptable experience. Given a free choice of consumer products (albeit constrained by cost), people are still ill-informed enough to purchase and re-purchase inferior products. A higher education experience is not a commodity, it is a participatory experience: the time spent doing it is unique. While a student can withdraw or transfer, the previous experience, good or bad, cannot be discarded and it cannot be equated with choosing a product.

Better information can help students make a better-informed choice and, with so many potential programmes and institutions in the UK and abroad to choose from, help is needed. The student of today has better information than in the past

(albeit when choices of programme and institution were more limited). However, the help is limited because even the new TQI website is primarily geared to comparing provision rather than aiding students to choose the learning environment that would best suit them. Again, it is a provider-based choice that fails to empower the learner and fails to ensure an appropriate learner experience.

The consumerist rhetoric in no way places the student in control of determining a good learning experience. It would be like assuming that a choice of hospitals ensures good patient treatment or a choice of schools ensures good basic education. Whatever the Government rhetoric, it is not choice people want but the reassurance that the local hospital provides just as good care as any other, that the school down the road provides as good a start in life as any other school. In higher education, the quality of the student experience is vital, and given the nature of higher education as a participatory experience, a high quality experience must be available in all settings. Control of the experience needs to be a collaborative process, in which meaningful dialogue results in responsive action.

It is time for a fundamental transformation of the culture in higher education institutions: not a shift to consumerist organisations run by marketing departments, but to negotiated learning environments where students are treated as mature partners in a participatory process of learning. Boards, committees and other decision-making bodies should have equal numbers of students and staff, not the nominal and patronised student representative who adorns bodies in UK institutions. Where this has happened, such as at Copenhagen Business School, there have been significant changes in the learning experience and strong student engagement with governance and learning experiences. In short, the student learning experience should be created by a real partnership between students and institutions.

A recent front-page article in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (24 March 2006) berated students who used email in a disrespectful way when communicating with staff. While one should not disrespect one's teachers in any walk of life, the whingeing of tutors about the amount and nature of this asynchronous communication missed the point. On the one hand students were throwing their virtual weight about because they believed they had consumer rights, and on the other it appeared that face-to-face dialogue with students has shrunk and staff resented it being reintroduced by students through email. If staff continue to claim that students don't know what's best for them, and students threaten to take their bat home if their consumer demands aren't met, it will continue a spiral of decline in the student learning experience and this country will be the poorer for it. If I were a student now and wanted a good learning experience I would seriously think of studying abroad.

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Use as pull-quotes:

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