A STRATEGIC, LAYERED APPROACH TO EVIDENTIALLY IMPROVING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES WITHIN 'A SUCCESSFUL UNIVERSITY'

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This paper discusses how different strata of a university need to pay heed to the student experience with data garnered, as appropriate, from all levels of sample: international; national; institutional; departmental and course by course. The strata represent those at the top that form policies on teaching across the institution, heads of departments, academic staff and all those involved in helping students learn. It is argued that the student experience provides a bottom-up perspective on the reputation, values and ultimate success of a university in making active and future change in individuals. Finally, it discusses the balance between central systems of improving the student experience versus more devolved schemes such as promoting professionalism through Action Research initiatives for academic staff. Overall, it recommends an empirical approach to research which does not exclude teaching practitioners.

Although there is no one historical text I can quote, those who founded the oldest colleges of the University of Cambridge in the 13th Century probably wished to create an environment where intellectual thought and intellectual discipline could flourish: where academic study was rewarded in a community of scholarly others; and to produce alumni who would sustain and develop the main national educational system of the time, the Catholic Church. Giving a nod to its origins but also modernity, Peterhouse, the oldest college within the University of Cambridge, currently distills their ethos as below[7]:

Throughout, Peterhouse has remained a place where, rooted in tradition and security, new ideas, and successive generations of the brightest young people, have evolved, grown, and taken wing. It has been and is somewhere that values the bold, the characterful and the committed above the commonplace, the familiar and the mundane.

Within universities, two things generally occur: teaching and research. These dual processes both attempt to advance the current state towards an improved end-state. They do this by either applying a process of change or, at least, providing evidentially based reflections and suggestions which are likely to prompt improvement in the future. In the context of research, active change refers to an intervention and future change refers to a recommendation. The very important discussion of the vital factors behind creating a thriving research operation and an ethos of research quality extends beyond the focus of this paper. That said, it needs to be noted how numbers of citations in research publications and Nobel award winners are part of the criteria of what is seen to make a successful university. This is taken to the point that research activities and research influence are seen as worthy of separate assessment in indices such as the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings. Here, research influence is equally weighted with teaching and research[8]. This then leaves the main focus of this paper, what universities do for their students, as only contributing 30% towards the overall rating of a university. Based on this, it would seem students play a minor role in what is globally seen to make a 'world-class' university. Whether this has consequences in the relative priorities of research and teaching for both individuals and the institutions is discussed at length by Giroux (2010) describing 'bare pedagogy' as the response to the commodification of universities. He suggests the marketization of higher education has prioritised glory seeking which has impacted on teaching future generations to think freely and their perception of learning as a process in its own right. Additionally, it has diminished the role of higher education in making a social contribution through narrowing its students'expectations and values.

http://www.pet.cam.ac.uk/welcome-peterhouse/about-coUege

http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2013-14/world-ranking/methodology

These days, most of those aspiring to have a world-class university base it upon a template design that blends teaching and research. Often this follows the lines of an idealised North American model (Ramirez & Christensen, 2013). The two facets of teaching and research are intended to inform each other in forging an academic mindset and the authority that comes from applying theory to practice. Yet, despite the importance of domain-specific research, few universities include an educational research strategy within the wider research ethos for their own and all their teaching staffs betterment (Mercer, 2007). Some examples of institutional educational research do exist but these generally sit within a bespoke office covering all fields of study or as schools of education that do not necessarily conduct insider research. One such example of this is at Penn State University where individual departments are able to call upon the services of the 'Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment[1], for advice upon improvement. This generally results in a top-down, albeit monitored, solution in response to an identified problem. It tends to be a reactive model rather than an inquiry model. The actual responsibility for teaching improvement critically then becomes separate to the practitioner and in response to a well-described and established problem.

This runs counter to the considerations of Schon (1987) and others who emphasise that experts have a part to play in rationalising the teaching process but do not hold an exclusive right to develop theories of how best to teach in a particular domain or set of circumstances. Although much of the current literature and debate around the best way to apportion responsibility for solving educational problems centres on schooling (McKernan, 1991), I would argue that such organisational decisions or policies on who researches and solves problems of learning are highly, if not extremely, relevant to universities. The technical nature and level of domain-specific knowledge required to teach at universities means outside educational experts are potentially less well-positioned than in lower levels of education to provide solutions to those for whom the learning process matters most: the stakeholders of faculty staff and the students in their classes. Furthermore, the relative maturity of university students and their own investment in the process of learning through a student-centred approach as dictated by programmes compliant to the Bologna Process[2] means they should be well equipped to contribute to the process of identifying and suggesting solutions to problems of learning. Ironically, according to Buckingham (1926), who was one of the first to write on the topic of making education more scientific, the duality of research and teaching which was a cornerstone of higher education should be used as a model for schooling. Hence taking a policy of practitioner teachers researching their own problems takes the idea back to its origins and is well overdue.

Furthermore, separating out responsibility for improvement of teaching to external units or experts seems substantially adrift from the ideas of Action Research prevalent in most educational texts. Here every teacher is empowered to be a reflective practitioner and agent of change in their own right whilst simultaneously engaging students and others in the process of cyclical inquiry, analysis and sustained improvements in teaching and learning. Action Research has a long history in the social sciences as a development of applying the principles of research within the physical sciences to social processes (Masters, 1995). Theorists and those upon whom the basis for it began (e.g. Bain (1979), Boone (1904) and Buckingham (1926) Lippitt and Radke (1946), Lewin (1947), Corey (1953), Stenhouse (1975), all cited in McKernan, (1991)), seeing ones teaching as a personally developed and professional activity motivates teachers to work towards collaboratively optimising the learning of each and everyone of their students. In effect, externalising quality enhancement and research activities to inform upon enhancement rather than stemming from within practitioners could be seen as a reduction in the expected professionalism of teachers (Pine, 2009). Many teachers may ensure they meet standards but then leave anything else up to the expert' others and never see the bigger picture of student

[1] *http://www.psu.edu/president/pia/*

[2] *http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=5*

data instead forming their opinion on performance only from any received feedback from their own course evaluations.

Returning to the remit of university teaching to prompt active change, this translates to the level of benefit students receive from their courses. Future change is less measurable and refers to less definite or less quantifiable qualities that affect a student's future. These are often referred to as 'soft skills'within a lifelong learning paradigm (Gibb, 2013) which present difficulties in terms of assessment both at the time (Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteche, Bremner, Greven., & Furnham, 2010) and in the longer term (van de Werfhorst, 2014). Although soft skills are arguablythe most important gain from higher education,teaching ata university should not rely upon future change but also check its actuality. It is relatively straightforward to check the passing over of knowledge alongside determining levels of understanding and application of this knowledge by means of examination. However, checking what students have actually learnt or feel they have learnt is another matter.

The fundamental question then becomes: How do universities know they are optimally affecting students in a worthwhile way? Essentially this is by consensus. Stakeholders at all levels need to be assured that a university is operating successfully. Perspectives extend across the full range of those involved from: maintaining international credibility (e.g being seen to conform to the Bologna Process or position in an international league table); national reputation (national qualifications and external respect for the value of a nation's education); institutional image (reputation and attractiveness to new students, staff, research funders and investors); departmental (a stable, happy environment that fosters an ethos of supported learning and personal development); and, finally, what individual students and groups of students report of their experiences. As far as the students are concerned, all other levels matter too but education affects individuals and it is they who study, think and collect experience into a meaningful whole. Of course much of what students experience is through contact with teaching staff. Hence, the paramount effect on experience is the relationship students hold with their primary interface of the institution, faculty members. By inference it is whether these individuals take the students' learning and experiences seriously that matters most. It therefore follows that fundamental to this, is not to disallow the practitioners to have theories of their own on how best to effectively teach their students the knowledge, skills and competences they expect from their courses.

With regard to the second place effective teaching may hold relative to research, many universities prioritise innovation and science to the neglect of the humanities and 'softer' social sciences or feel it is uncomfortably outside their own main line of expertise (Frank & Meyer, 2007). Others simply do not have a history of embracing such, as the case of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT),the topmost performer[3] in the OS 2013 World University Rankings. Indeed, there is no need for'world-class'universities to have breadth of coverage in disciplines as discussed by many with regards to the impossibility of comparing one university with another in a league table format. This leads to a considerable number of universities not possessing in-house educational expertise to engage with pedagogic practices despite teaching effectively being 30% of their core business. Awakening to this fact, MIT are currently debating[4] whether indeed they should create a School of Education as a social good or as an institutional resource in its own right. As said previously, even universities that do offer research into educational leadership, pedagogic practices or other educational matters do not necessarily draw upon internal expertise to base an improvement strategy but leave it to consultants or those not embedded in a school of education. Understandably, there is somewhat of a conflict of interest

[3] *http://www.topuniversities.com/university-ran kings/world-university-ran kings/2013#sorting=rank+re-gion=+country=+facu[ty=+stars=fa[se+search*

[4] *http://web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/262/saraydarian.html*

for these external agents to recommend devolving improvements in teaching to the actual practitioners through Action Research schemes.

As with any inquiry project, it is wise to use a variety of tools to collect data, in this case students' reported experiences. These range from large international and national surveys such as the world rankings previously mentioned through to module-by-module, topic by topic feedback forms and individual students' case studies. From the perspective of a student, large surveys operate as the external face of an institution so tend to be instrumental in an initial choice of university (HEFCE, 2013) and in potentially the reputation attached to their qualification for a later career (QSIU, 2014). For example, two large-scale national undergraduate surveys, the UK National Student Survey (NSS, 2014) and the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2014), differ in their stated aims and so provide good contrast in terms of what large scale surveys may offer. However, despite these two examples both coming from Western cultures, they reflect differences in student expectations from USA to UK which serves to remind how what constitutes an acceptable student experience has a cultural aspect. Several have argued this is a more general problem with Westernisation of the higher education landscape but as Koch (2014) argues in the cases of Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia, often this Westernisation is tempered under local conditions that mould university outcomes towards national values and aims.

Asides from the scale of the survey, the methodologies and methods behind student surveys are also important in representing the full picture. Attempts by Grebennikov and Shah (2013) to examine the topic of methodology through analysis of qualitative reports on best and worst aspects of courses, end with an automated means to include this type of data alongside the more-easily handled quantitative data. Comparing what quantitative and qualitative approaches to collecting student experience data may afford in the capture of student voice are discussed using this particular example of data analysis; towards providing ideas on more integrated methods of inquiry.

This paper concludes with a small scale research study (Mellanby, Zimdars & Cortina-Borja, 2013), published in an educational research journal, which examined how an individual institution (Oxford University, in this case) can initiate collection of its own research data to monitor students' experiences. In particular, this institutional case study examines the effect of assessment practices and tutorial practices upon gender and end degree performance. This last piece links student experience to student performance and, in its detail, perhaps gives the best overall insight into how students perceive their institution and what effect this might have on their personal success.

All the above leads to the conclusion of this paper which is that a blend of macro, micro and purposeful garnering of research data on students' opinions are the best combination of quality assurance activities an institution can have. It is proposed that continual course improvement through engaging in meaningful self-critique creates a culture of care and enhancement. Reflective practice within an institution benefits not only individuals but also the institution itself; through its overall reputation being based upon the fostering of an open, academic ethos that identifies, researches, debates and solves problems with full recognition of the professional role that teachers are expected to employ. If students recognise they are valued and part of a caring, academic environment that encourages them to flourish and give voice; that, surely, is a successful university. If teaching staff are supported to be more professionally active in their teaching and a research strategy is in place to conduct insider-led improvements, ownership of the teaching and learning process at all levels in the university can be nurtured. Most importantly, it is research of the practitioners by the practitioners that needs most support since it is in the class that the real stories of success or failure for students are sited and it is in the class that the best ways forward need to be mutually agreed upon.

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