Higher Education Policy and Student Expectations

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Abstract

Higher Education Policy and Student Expectations

This paper explores institutional feedback data from students at a Midlands-based university in order to explore how far expectations of the student experience have changed in line with recent higher educational policy. Dearing (1997) recommended a commitment to widening participation (WP) and improving access. WP is now central to higher education policy and a key area of research (Woodrow et al., 2002). The economic imperative has been recognised by policy makers. Leitch (2006, p. 3) identified ‘a direct correlation between skills productivity and employment’ and goes on to argue (p. 13) that ‘Ensuring that high skills are of world class quality and relevance to the economy is just as important as determining the quantity of people that should be qualified to these levels’. These sentiments were echoed earlier in the White Paper 2003, higher education must expand to meet the rising skills needs and that universities and colleges can play a bigger role in creating jobs and prosperity.
Presentation

Higher Education Policy and Student Expectations

This paper uses existing student feedback data gathered from several years of student satisfaction survey, to explore the extent to which student expectations are aligned with current higher education and government policy.

“Knowing what customers expect is the first, and possibly most critical, step in delivering service quality” (Zeithaml et al., 1990, p. 51)

There has been considerable debate concerning the term expectation, what constitutes an expectation and how to measure it. The commercial world makes distinctions between ideal expectations i.e. what a customer would ideally like to occur, predictive expectations referring to what the customer assumes is probably going to occur, and normative expectations which evolve from experience of service provision. Consumer’s perceptions are shaped by comparing ideal expectations with normative expectations.

The concept, students as consumers arose in the mid 1990s. Hill, F. M (1995) focused on the role of the student as a primary consumer of higher education services and no longer passive recipients. Hill argues that the transformation has implications for the management of service quality in higher educations since consumers are often part of the production and delivery process. It is not enough to focus on service provider personnel: attention must also be paid to the motivations and behaviour of the consumer as well.

This duel process is also captured by James, R (2001) who highlights that students’ preferences and expectations are exceedingly complex issues for analysis. The complexity is caused in the main part by the highly participatory nature of the higher education enterprise and the two way interaction between the actions of students and those of the universities- the higher education process not only shapes student expectations, the education process is itself influenced by the character of the student expectations.

Since service expectations play a key role regarding the quality perceptions which consumers ultimately develop it follows that HE should take appropriate steps to manage such expectations (Hill 1995 pp.13). Long et al. (2004) warns that the purpose of HE could be distorted or even lost if institutions go too far in the direction of meeting ever changing student expectations.

Student satisfaction has long been recognized within Higher Education as an important element in the discussion of school and program quality and effectiveness. The concept of customer satisfaction and quality has been subject to much debate within service literature, although the two concepts are recognized to be fundamentally different concepts. The debate has concentrated upon the particular relationship, there are some who believe that perceived quality precedes satisfaction (Farrell et al. (2001), Andreassen (2000)). Whilst other advocate the reverse relationship is true, that customer satisfaction precedes perceived quality (Bitner (1990), Parasuraman et al. (1988). Within Higher Education Browne et al. (1988) and Guolla (1999) show that students’ perceived quality precedes student satisfaction.

Policy

Higher education and government policy since early 1990’s has assigned Higher Education institutes with the responsibility to meet the rising skills needs and to fill skills gap to compete effectively in the future national and global economic market. This has required expanding to include non-traditional students and reduce social inequalities within a widening participation agenda. The key policy documents are discussed below.

Dearing, R. Higher Education in the Learning society (1997)

1997 witnessed the publication of a major publication in Higher Education policy, Ron Dearing “Higher Education in the Learning society”. The Dearing report made a total of 93 recommendations. With regards to higher education, the recommendations of interest to this project are relating to learning, nature of programmes, communications and information technology as well as quality issues. The Dearing report suggested that all institutions give high priority to developing and implementing learning and teaching strategies which promote students’ learning (recommendation no. 8). Undergraduate programmes provide sufficient breadth to enable specialists to understand their specialism with its context (recommendation no.16). Institutions should identify more opportunities for students to become familiar with work, and help...
them to reflect on such experience (recommendation no. 18). HEIs should ensure that all students have open access to a Networked Desktop Computer (recommendation no. 46). Lastly it is important to ensure quality through a fair and robust system for complaints relating to educational provision.

Arguably the most notorious recommendations made by Dearing are those relating to funding of the learning and teaching. In recommendation 72 Dearing advise the government to shift the balance of funding, in a planned way, away from block grant towards a system in which funding follows the student, assessing the impact of each successive shift on institutional behaviour and the control of public expenditure, with a target of distributing at least 60% of total public funding to institutions according to student choice by 2003.


Since the relationship between business and Higher Education is important for economic competitiveness and quality of life, the White Paper argues for stronger alliances between business and relevant departments in higher education. In order to improve institutions should increasingly be embedded in their regional economies, and closely linked with emerging agendas of Regional Developing Agencies.

The White Paper places teaching and learning in the centre of Higher education, and suggests establishing Centres of Excellence, which rewards good teaching in the shape of monetary incentives. Students are seen as intelligent customers since student choice will be an increasingly important driver of teaching quality as student will choose good-quality courses. Therefore students need accessible information to make informed choices in teaching and quality assurance. The introductions of Personal Development Portfolios are recommended, to measure and record student achievement, which are helpful to student, institutions and employers. Furthermore suggests reforms which give students a greater voice by providing them with a fair, open and transparent means of redress if things go wrong.

Leitch Review of Skills “Prosperity for all in the global economy- world class skills” 2006.

The focus of the Leitch Review was to identify the optimal skills mix required for the UK to actively compete in the global market in 2020. For Leitch there is a direct correlation between skills, productivity and employment. There are 5 principles that underpin delivery of a raised ambition. Firstly there should be a shared responsibility between employers, individuals and the governments. Secondly, a focus upon economically valuable skills which provide real returns for individuals, employers and society. Thirdly the skills system must be demand-led rather than centrally planned. The fourth and fifth principles argue that the framework must adapt and respond to future market needs and build upon existing structures.

The recommendations targeted at level 4 (equates to a degree or their vocational equivalent) suggest that world-class high skills in 2020 would require 45 per cent of the population aged 19 to State Pension age qualified to at least Level 4. However, ensuring that high skills are of world class quality and relevance to the economy is just as important as determining the quantity of people that should be qualified to these levels (67 pp.21). A move towards the principles of the principles of Train to Gain, delivering skills flexibly according to employer and individual demand should apply to higher education too (4.19 pp.76). Whereby additional provision should be based on new types of programs offering specific, job-related skills such as Foundation degrees. There should also be greater emphasis on level 5 activities, again in collaboration with employers. (4.20 pp. 77).

Methodology

This study uses quantitative data that has been gathered as part of the annual student satisfaction survey at BCU since 1996. This is an institution-wide survey of the ‘total student experience’, (Harvey et al. 1992) which includes both academic and non-academic issues, and samples all its taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

The following sections of the Student Satisfaction Survey were explored in this study as they touch upon issues tackled by HE policy mentioned above:

- Learning and teaching
- Computer, both open-access provision and faculty specific provisions
- Course organisation
- Issues relating to student finance
Importance ratings

The satisfaction survey links satisfaction with importance ratings in order to explore student perceptions of the quality of their experience. This paper uses the mean importance ratings to indicate student’s preferences and expectations from their higher education experience. Perceived importance was used as an indicator of expectations. On the basis that if a student was to rate an issue as important they are also likely to expect the service of that particular issue to be good (Hill 1995 pp.16).

For the purpose of this study, the mean score for each question in the above survey sections has been generated and then ranked from most important to least important with the highest mean score first. Data from the survey undertaken in the years 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006 and from the 2007 survey has been examined to explore whether student expectations are changing over time. The changes in perceptions and expectations are monitored by the raise or fall in mean score when compared to the previous year.

It is important to note that the survey varies from year to year as it responds to issues raised by students within the focus groups and in accordance to the Student Satisfaction Approach. These changes are indicative of student changing expectations and therefore retained in the analysis. In addition to the types of issues addressed in the survey there are also variations in the number of questions and the phrasing of questions, and both these factors especially the latter may influence the score. However, it is possible to make comparisons.

Multivariate analysis

A multivariate analysis has been carried out in order to explore differences between full- and part-time students, year of study and the difference between men and women in relation to factors considered most important.

Limitations of the study

Because of its limited scope, data has been gathered from one source only the findings of this study may not be generalized to the student population as a whole. The study examines expectations of students whilst studying and is not able to look at expectations before commencing HE or after leaving the course. Furthermore it only considers the student’s expectations and not the staff or the institution.

The Student Satisfaction Approach

The Student Satisfaction Approach has provided an effective mechanism to obtain, analyse and report upon students’ views of their experience at BCU since the late 1980s. The approach is made up of several stages where each stage builds on the next (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: The Student Satisfaction Cycle
The first of these are stakeholder consultations, focus groups with students to ensure that the questions are student led. Issues of interest and concern to students are identified at the focus group stage which is translated into satisfaction questions in the survey. At BCU, the questionnaire results are fed back to the directorate as well as faculties through an annual report, the comments are also sent to each faculty. As a result of the annual report, strategies to address areas of concern as well as to maintain and improve quality are discussed in meetings between the directorate and faculties. From the outcomes of the meetings, a feedback flyer is created, which is included within the questionnaires distributed to students the following year, as well as being available throughout the university. Student focus groups and staff concerns lead to the development of the new questionnaire in the spring, when the cycle begins again.

The questionnaire covers academic and non-academic aspects. Students are asked not only to rate their satisfaction with their experience, but also the importance that they attach to each of these aspects. Students rate each item on a scale between 1 and 7 for both satisfaction and importance. A mean score can therefore be generated for each item for both satisfaction and importance. Satisfaction and importance rating are analysed together to provide indicators for intervention and action. There is also a wealth of qualitative data generated by student comments in the questionnaires. Further details of the methodology can be found in the Student Satisfaction Manual, Harvey, L. et al (1997).

**General Findings**

Overall, there are more similarities in preferences or expectations amongst the student body than there are differences. There are naturally changes in mean scores over time, but these are usually small differences in mean scores and therefore caution has been exercised in these instances to not attach inappropriate meaning. The data has been analysed by firstly, placing in rank order the most important variables across the years, with particular emphasis placed on the 5 most important issues to students, and secondly a comparison between mean scores across all variables to highlight differences in important ratings between part-time and full-time students, year of study, and gender.

**Learning and teaching**

From year 2002-2007 the single most important aspects of learning and teaching for the student body as a whole was how the course has developed their subject knowledge.

Although change in order varies slightly from year to year (2002-2007), the following aspect of learning and teaching issues remain high on the importance rating for students.

- Relevance of course content to future employment
- Development of skills and abilities required for your future employment
- Reliability/punctuality of teaching staff
- Suitability of the work experience
- Organisation of the work experience
- Approachability of teaching staff *(during 1996-2000 only )
- The enthusiasm of the teaching staff * (during 1996-2000 only)

**Table 1.1: Rises in mean important scores ≥ 0.20 (2002-2007)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>↑</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suitability of the work experience</td>
<td>6.53</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of the work experience</td>
<td>6.53</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to learn from others on your course</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.2: Rises in mean important scores ≤ 0.10 (2002-2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>↑</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You are learning what you expected to learn</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching staff encourage you to learn effectively</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course has developed your self-confidence</td>
<td>6.09</td>
<td>6.02</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for informal discussion with staff</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>6.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff treat students as mature individuals</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>6.34</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results reveal that students expect higher education to prepare and assist them for future employment in line with recent policy aims. Students also expect effective teaching and appreciate the informal interactions with their teachers who treat them as mature individuals.

The stability in expectations found here supports the findings of Hill (1995) who also found that course content, teaching quality and methods were factors that remained stable over time. These findings are similar to previous study results which also indicate the importance of ‘approachability’ found by Sandler et al (2000), effective teaching and being treated as individuals found by James (2001). Hill (1995) also found the personal interactions between academics and students are crucial in regard to perceived service performance. The perception of reliability, ‘involves consistency of performance and dependability’ found by McElwee and Redman (1993) is also seen as a key factor.

Voss, R. and Gruber (2006) found that students are concerned about vocational aspects of their studies and less interested in their subject. The findings of this research suggest that although the former part of the statement holds true the latter does not. Although issues concerning employability are clearly important to students, students primarily expect the course to develop their subject knowledge.

Multivariate analysis

Gendered Expectations

In general, women rate learning and teaching issues slightly more important than men. However, when we compare what aspects are more important to women than men, the results reveal that women rate the suitability and organisation of work experience (mean score ≥ 0.50) and the development of skills such as interpersonal, team-working, analytical, practical, communication and critical ability (mean scores difference ≥0.30).

Mode of study

Part time students generally rate most aspects of learning and teaching less important than full-time students with the exception of wanting the opportunities to learn from others on your course, amount of formal individual tuition and development of your problem-solving skills as more important than full-time students.

Yr of study

There appears at first glance little difference in preferences or expectations amongst students regardless of the Yr of study, or time spent at higher education. However by the third year, obtaining suitable work experience and employability issues in general are more important, which is not surprising. This becomes more apparent when a comparison between mean important scores is conducted between year 1 and year 3. The greatest difference in mean important scores (≥ 0.20) relate to skills based questions i.e. team-working, interpersonal, practical, problem solving and communication skills.
Table 1.3: list first five most important aspects of learning and teaching by year of study (2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yr 1</th>
<th>Yr 2</th>
<th>Yr 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The course has developed your</td>
<td>The course has developed your</td>
<td>Suitability of the work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subject knowledge</td>
<td>subject knowledge</td>
<td>experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suitability of the work</td>
<td>Suitability of the work</td>
<td>Organisation of the work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td>experience</td>
<td>experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of the work</td>
<td>Organisation of the work</td>
<td>The course has developed your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td>experience</td>
<td>subject knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability/punctuality of</td>
<td>Reliability/punctuality of</td>
<td>Development of skills and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching staff</td>
<td>teaching staff</td>
<td>abilities required for your future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff treat students as mature</td>
<td>Relevance of course content to</td>
<td>Relevance of course content to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individuals</td>
<td>future employment</td>
<td>future employment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Course Organisation and Assessment

From 1996-2007 the single most important aspect of course organisation and assessment for students overall is the usefullness of tutor/lectures feedback.

Although change in order varies slightly from year to year (1996-2007), the following aspect of course organisation and assessment remain high on the importance rating for the student body.

- Clarity of information about assessment criteria
- Availability of information about assessment dates
- Knowing what you can expect from your course and your tutors
- Knowing what is expected of you as a student
- Timetabling of assignments

Table 2.1: Rises in mean important scores ≥ 0.20 (1996 – 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>↑</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Availability of personal/pastoral tutorials</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing what you can expect from your course and your tutors</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>6.08</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2: Rises in mean scores ≥ 0.10 (1996 – 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>↑</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior notification of changes to course arrangements</td>
<td>6.22</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promptness of feedback on assignments</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>6.09</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from the faculty administrative staff</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing what is expected of you as a student</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The way your timetable is spread over the day/week</td>
<td>6.03</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical progression of work through your course</td>
<td>6.09</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency of application of assessment criteria</td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness of tutors'/lecturers’ feedback</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timetabling of assignments</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results reveal that usefulness of feedback and assessment criteria remain important to students as also found by James, R. (2001) students have straightforward views and expect feedback on progress, transparent assessment. However by looking at what is becoming more important to students over the years we can see that student preferences are responding to the changes in HE. The results indicate that students want more pastoral assistance, Hill (1995) argues that with growing numbers of students it is becoming increasingly difficult for academic staff to provide pastoral care a fact which may well have negative implications for perceived service performance. Timetabling of lectures and seminars have become more important, this comes as no surprise as more are using part-time earnings to supplement learning see financial impact.

**Multivariate analysis**

**Gendered Expectations**

Women rate all course organisation and assessment issues more important than men. The types of issues of greatest importance to women can be categorised as organisational issues such as, prior notification of changes to course arrangements, timetabling of assignments and recognition of commitments outside the university). They are also more concerned with fairness issues consistency of application of assessment criteria, university appeals procedures and support availability of personal/pastoral tutorials. All these factors means score rose ≥ 0.30 from 1996-2007.

**Mode of study**

Full-time student have rated all issues more important than part-time students with the exception of wanting commitments outside the University recognised.

**Yr of study**

It is not surprising to find that by the third year students hold important the opportunity to feedback their views (mean score ≥ 0.20), and want clear complaints/grievance and university appeals procedures (mean score ≥ 0.30) Supporting the need for a robust appeals and complaints system as recommended by HE policy.

**Computer Services**

The results of this research reveal that the most important aspect of computer service to students is the availability and reliability of computers. In addition students want access to the internet/email and up-to-date software (1996-2007).

**Financial Impact**

The Dearing report, published in July 1997, recommended that students should pay for 25 per cent of the costs of tuition. Later that month, education secretary David Blunkett introduced a new system of means-tested tuition fees, abolishing at the same time the remnants of the student grant system, something Sir Ron had rejected. Tuition fees were first paid by students in September 1998.

In 1996 23% (507 out of 2113) of respondents indicated that they supplemented their income with part-time earnings. By 2007, this rose to 51% (1016 out of 1992) of respondents. More than double the amount of students working part-time, the largest proportion work 20 hours or more (13.9% or 468). 7% admitted missing classes as a result of working part-time, which has a clear impact upon engagement and the total student experience, as fewer students are spending time on campus.

When asked to rate how they would describe the impact upon their financial situation has upon their academic work it is interesting to note the largest proportion of responses felt that there was neither a positive nor negative response. In 1996 52% of respondents choose the middle ground, in 2007 that dropped to 39% (originally a 5 point scale in 1996, this was altered later in 2007 to a 7 point scale which enables us to discriminate more clearly between the scores). Student perception has not largely changed.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to explore the extent to which student expectations are aligned with HE and government policy by examining Student Satisfaction Survey results for several years. The study shows that although not an exact fit for purpose, Student Satisfaction Surveys can be used to indicate student expectations and preferences through an exploration of mean important scores and changes within
mean important scores.

In summary the finding revealed more similarities than differences in expectations, with only slight variations between years. Student preferences have therefore not altered greatly in the last decade, but do appear to be aligned with current HE policy thinking. It has not been the purpose of this study to investigate the cause and effect relationship of policy and expectations, although one such a study would be interesting. Perhaps the most striking thing about the evidence is that students appear to be responding to the Higher Education environment they find themselves in. The study argues that HE and government policy needs to be more responsive to the heterogeneous make up of the student body as differences in preferences and expectations exist between men and women, part-time and full-time and during the course of study.

Track Theme Relevance

This paper attempts to provide some insights to the questions raised in the expectations track, namely “What are student’s expectations of Higher Education Institutes?” In addition this paper asks and seeks to answer “how if at all have student expectations changed over time?”, by tracking satisfaction rating over ten years at one midlands based university. The methodology employed by this paper; the student satisfaction approach can furnish a means in which to master expectations?
References


Dearing, Ron. (1997) Higher Education in the Learning Society


