



Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Students' roles in maintaining quality and in enhancing learning - is there a tension?

Journal Item

How to cite:

Little, Brenda and Williams, Ruth (2010). Students' roles in maintaining quality and in enhancing learning - is there a tension? *Quality in Higher Education*, 16(2) pp. 115-127.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2010 Taylor Francis

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/13538322.2010.485740>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Students' Roles in Maintaining Quality and in Enhancing Learning: Is There a Tension?

BRENDA LITTLE & RUTH WILLIAMS
Open University, UK

ABSTRACT

This article is about student engagement and in particular the engagement of students in internal institutional quality assurance processes in the UK. It discusses the extent to which the introduction of more explicit internal and external quality assurance processes militate against the notion of the student as a part of a 'cohesive learning community' in favour of the notion of the student as 'consumer'. Based on findings from a research study on student engagement undertaken for the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the article notes that an underlying rationale of student as consumer still prevails in many institutions' quality processes. Such a rationale is hampering students' full engagement in learning communities in ways that inform and enhance the collective student learning experience. Whilst these findings are drawn from a UK study, they may also have some relevance for other countries facing similar challenges.

Keywords: learning communities; quality assurance; quality enhancement; student engagement; students as consumers

Introduction

Within the UK, moves towards placing more emphasis on the learner voice as a way of enhancing learning engagement can be seen across the various stages of education: in compulsory education (up to 16 years old); in the post-16 sector; and in higher education. It has been suggested that the key government drivers influencing learner-voice initiatives within statutory education include: a greater emphasis on children's rights; a desire to promote at an early age notions of active citizenship; practices to promote school improvement; and personalised learning (Walker & Logan, 2008). In the post-16 sector (comprising primarily further education colleges), all providers since 2007 have been required by the relevant funding council, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), to develop a 'learner involvement strategy' as part of a wider programme of change to ensure provision meets learners' needs. Such a development can be seen as part of a broader personalisation agenda which suggests that services will be improved by putting users at the centre of any given service and understanding and acting on their needs.

In the higher education sector, students have always been expected to play an active role in the educational process. Primarily, this has traditionally been through actively engaging with the teaching and learning process and through their contributions to departmental and institutional quality assurance mechanisms. However, within the UK (and elsewhere), the higher education landscape has changed over the last couple of decades:

- The higher education sector has expanded and differentiated, both vertically through reputational and prestige differences and horizontally via functional

differences (for example, programme types, subjects covered, links with industry) (Teichler, 2007).

- The student body has become more diverse, which means that students will enter higher education for a greater variety of reasons (for example, interest, enter/return to the labour market, change job, to meet an employer's needs).
- Universities are expected to be accountable for the public funds they receive and more relevant to economic and social needs.
- Universities are expected to be more transparent about the education they provide and its outputs/outcomes for human capital development.
- The higher education sector has shifted to a more market-led culture.
- Most students in the UK make a contribution to the costs of their tuition.

Alongside these developments, there is greater emphasis on explicit procedures for assuring quality and standards, both within institutions and through external quality assurance arrangements. There have also been changes to institutional governance with shifts towards more business-like structures and processes of management. As a result of these developments, students in the UK now play a more central role in university governance mechanisms and national policy development; for example:

- they contribute to assuring the quality of the student experience, through questionnaires and surveys and representation on staff/student committees at course and departmental levels;
- they contribute to institutional governance and accountability mechanisms through student representation bodies;
- they help inform the choices of prospective students by expressing their views through the national student survey;
- they are members of external institutional audit teams;
- through national student representative bodies, students are able to express their views to government and higher education policy-makers.

Elsewhere in Europe, the higher education landscape has also seen a rise in student involvement in quality processes, with student participation in quality assurance being a key priority in quality debates (EUA, 2009, p. 13). A 2003 Council of Europe survey of policies and practices for student participation in university governance found strong student participation and representation at institutional and faculty level but weaker arrangements at departmental level (where it is less regulated) (Bergan, 2003). However, a 2007 survey of national student unions conducted by ESIB (the National Unions of Students in Europe, now ESU) found students were not participating in quality assurance at all levels (national, institutional, faculty and departmental) throughout the European Higher Education Area (ESIB, 2007).

The student as consumer, co-producer or member of a learning community

Within the UK, students' more central role in institutional and national policy developments can be seen in the form of the national student survey (NSS). Introduced in 2005, the NSS aims to gather feedback from final-year undergraduate students on the quality of their courses 'in order to contribute to public accountability as well as help inform the choices of future applications' (HEFCE, 2009). The results of the NSS and other information relating to the quality of higher education teaching in the UK are put into the public domain.

Notions of the student as consumer have been further reinforced in England with the government's publication of Higher Ambitions, which sets out the strategy for sustaining the strength of higher education (DBIS, 2009). This document places

students at the centre of that strategy. It states that students' choices and expectations should play an important part in shaping provision and encouraging universities to adapt and improve their services. The government considers that the publication, by all universities, of a standard set of objective information setting out what students can expect of the nature and quality of their programme and the long-term employment prospects it offers will create well-informed students able to drive improvement by demanding better service.

However, such developments are not without their critics. Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) questioned whether underlying assumptions relating to students using such information to demand high quality provision and apply pressure on providers to make courses more relevant are in fact well-founded. They also questioned other related assumptions; for example, that 'consumerist forces will have a positive impact on the professional practices of academic staff since the increased competition within and between universities will force providers to respond to student pressure or lose out on "customers"' (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 268).

Citing McMillan and Cheney (1996), McCulloch (2009) also noted that the notion of student as consumer has a certain appeal in its apparent challenge to organisational and institutional power and its alignment to individual rights. However, he argued that such a metaphor is partial and inappropriate to the realities of contemporary higher education. For example, a number of aspects of the educational process may be hidden by the metaphor, including the notion that more emphasis is placed on the end-product rather than the educational process and experience itself; that students who see themselves as 'consumers' may act in a passive manner (waiting for information to successfully complete their programme); and the metaphor reinforces individualism to the detriment of notions of community. McCulloch also noted that models of consumer behaviour emphasise the role of the consumer in making informed choices but he questions whether students applying to higher education are initially well-placed to exercise such 'informed choices' as far as learning processes are concerned.

For McCulloch, a more appropriate metaphor to characterise the relationship of the student to the higher education provider is one of co-production. Using this metaphor, students, lecturers and others who support the learning are viewed as being engaged in a cooperative enterprise 'focussed on the production, dissemination and application of knowledge, and on the development of learners rather than merely skilled technicians' (McCulloch, 2009, p. 171). For McCulloch, a metaphor of student as co-producer also emphasises notions of community and the 'collective' experience of the learning group, and the importance of the group in encouraging learning. As McCulloch (2009, p. 181) noted, such 'active participation with others to enhance learning is encouraged by most higher education professionals and is a required part of university curricula'.

Streeting and Wise (2009) though went further by rejecting both the consumer and coproducer models. They believed that power is key: in consumerism, power is 'cleaved'; in co-production, power is seen to be shared, which might be too challenging for students. Instead, they preferred the 'community of practice' model whereby the learning process is one of induction and building relationships between students and teachers and between students and other students. The discourse of these various models has resonance with the various literatures on concepts of communities. For example, McMillan and Chavis's (1986) research on the psychological sense of community identified four elements of community:

(i) membership; (ii) influence; (iii) integration and fulfilment of needs; and (iv) shared emotional connection. What the community of practice model has in common with this literature is the way in which influence (or power) is exerted; as Streeter and Wise (2009, p. 5) noted, in the community of practice model 'power is seen as relational, dynamic and ever-shifting'.

Reference to community is a useful reminder that higher education in the twenty-first century is no longer the preserve of a small proportion of the young age group: in many industrialised countries higher education systems have expanded greatly in the past 50 years, which has brought with it a much greater diversity within the student population (and amongst higher education providers), although some note that heterogeneity has long been a characteristic of the higher education landscape (Fuller, in Edmonds et al., 2009). Nevertheless, it is generally acknowledged that higher education is now catering for an increasingly culturally, educationally and economically diverse student cohort, with universities trying to foster a sense of community among students to provide an enriched, supportive and collaborative learning experience in a cost-effective manner (Smith et al., 2004). Dawson, Burnett and O'Donohue (2006, p. 133) noted that higher education is seeking to promote notions of community to 'address some of the potential negative implications associated with an increasingly diverse student cohort'. However, McGinnis (2010) suggested that higher education is under pressure to adapt to significant changes in students' needs and expectations and traditional notions of the university as a cohesive learning community in preparing undergraduates for citizenship and the workplace, are being tested in most developed countries.

The developments and debates outlined above give rise to a number of questions:

- Is there a notion of the cohesive learning community? Have students become more passive and instrumental rather than active learners and co-producers of knowledge— depending on their motivations?
- Given the multiplicity of roles of students outlined above, are there tensions in performing these roles and engaging in the learning process? Is there a lack of clarity and acceptance about these roles and responsibilities among the student and staff body?
- Does emphasis on the notion of the student as consumer challenge the student–teacher relationship; given that the relationship between students and staff is pivotal to the educational process?
- Do different subject/discipline cultures mediate notions of learning communities and, if so, in what ways?

Quality assurance and the student's role

Some of the answers to the above questions may lie in students' roles in institutional (and external) quality processes and the centrality of that role was noted above. In the UK, it could be argued that the increased prominence of the notion of the student as consumer, alongside a more expanded and differentiated higher education system, has meant that quality assurance processes have become one of the main means of engaging students; this has been at the expense of the traditional student–teacher relationship.

The quality debate (and its associated terminology) is a complex one and it is not the intention to repeat it here. However, several authors have pointed to the limitations of quality assurance as a regulatory mechanism for monitoring purposes, especially when used by external agencies. For example, Filippakou and Tapper (2008, p. 91)

distinguished between quality assurance, which is about making judgements against defined criteria and quality enhancement, which is 'less bounded', enabling 'a more complex discourse providing more interpretive space'. In recent years there has been a greater emphasis on quality enhancement in the UK and especially in Scotland. However, Filippakou and Tapper (2008, p. 92) argued that there may be tensions between the two: 'quality enhancement can only blossom in the context of a flexible, negotiated evaluation', the implication being that the UK (or more specifically the English) model of quality assurance does not provide this context. Harvey (2009, p. 1) pointed out that many academic staff are sceptical of both internal and external quality systems, which 'raises issues about the efficacy of systems that generate reports but do not engage with the heart of the academic endeavour'. He further argued that improvement (or enhancement in our terms) 'does not occur as the result of regulation but occurs through critical engagement' (Harvey, 2009, p. 4). What Harvey proposed is a quality culture in which efforts are focused on the 'development of transformative learning', in which students are participants and not consumers or products.

A similar debate at the European level has been central to a project undertaken by the European University Association, which is that quality assurance processes (in the broadest sense) may inhibit or enhance creativity. The final report (EUA, 2009) of this project identified the role of the students as being particularly central to creativity and innovation in teaching and learning. Creativity also depends on the interaction of the teacher and students and students being supported and encouraged to play an active role. However, this report, too, identified tensions in achieving creativity. It made the point that quality assurance processes should enhance creativity and innovation, rather than be confined to 'fulfilling the requirements of a threshold or minimum standard of quality' (EUA, 2009, p. 16). However, given that these processes are usually connected to demands for accountability, risk-taking is likely to suffer in favour of 'playing it safe' (EUA, 2009, p. 16). Thus, a balance needs to be found.

This paper analyses the findings of an empirical study of student engagement to shed light on some of these issues and questions.

The study

The Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Information was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to undertake a study on student engagement. However, the study did not focus on broader notions of engagement as characterised in some of the US and Australian literatures and operationalised through surveys of student engagement (Ewell, 2004; Coates, 2009). Rather the study was concerned with institutional quality assurance and student union practices, such as those relating to student feedback and student representation, which seek to inform and enhance the collective student learning experience, as distinct from specific teaching, learning and assessment activities designed to enhance individual students' engagement with their own learning (Little et al., 2009). The main part of the study was undertaken during June to October 2008 and comprised interviews with key stakeholders; an online survey of all higher education institutions in England and their student unions and those further education colleges with a significant higher education provision; fieldwork with a selected group of higher education providers (nine higher education institutions and four further education colleges), student representatives within the higher education providers (57 in all) and student unions (10 in all). The selection of the fieldwork institutions and student unions was discussed with the relevant stakeholders commissioning the

study. Of the nine higher education institutions, five were pre-1992 universities, two were post-1992 and two were specialist institutions.

The study set out to:

- determine the current extent and nature of student engagement in higher education in England;
- explore current models of formal and informal student engagement;
- explore institutions' rationales for student engagement policies and practices, their
- measures of effectiveness and perceptions of barriers (if any) to effectiveness.

The basic model of formal student engagement for quality assurance purposes comprises two main elements: student feedback questionnaires and student representation systems. In essence, student feedback questionnaires provide opportunities for the (anonymous) views of individual students to be collected, aggregated and reviewed. Student representation is the means whereby the collective views of students are represented at various levels of an institution's academic organisation, providing direct student input into decision-making and discussions about programme and institutional development. The representation is undertaken either by one of the student's peers (that is, a student representative) who is studying concurrently, or by a representative of the student union who is concurrently undertaking other student union duties. Student representation is often organised by student unions in co-operation with academic departments and central support units.

As noted above, as well as fieldwork with selected higher education providers and student unions, the study comprised an online survey of all higher education institutions in England and of further education colleges with significant higher education provision. Sixty-two percent of higher education institutions responded to the survey; around one-third of the further education colleges responded, most of whom were members of the mixed-economy group of colleges. As such, data derived from the survey responses can be viewed as broadly representative of higher education providers in England. From the survey data it was clear that the majority of higher education institutions and further education colleges rated their current student engagement processes as reasonably or very effective, though student unions were less likely to do so. However, the survey data also showed that the vast majority of higher education providers and student unions considered that current student engagement processes need to be more effective. However, when asked in interviews during the fieldwork phase to articulate what 'effectiveness' meant in practice, interviewees were less certain what constituted 'effectiveness'. Questions of effectiveness are of course predicated on underlying notions of purposes of the processes in question. It is this latter aspect of the study, namely, institutional rationales for student engagement policies and practices, that forms the primary focus of this paper.

Institutions' Rationales for Student Engagement Policies and Practices

The issue of rationale was explored during the fieldwork with higher education providers, student unions and other student representatives. Staff interviewees within higher education providers included senior academic and administrative staff with responsibility for student affairs and quality issues and a selection of deans or heads of department in four different subject areas (art, design and performing arts; business studies; engineering; mathematics). Student views were sought through two

routes: discussions with student representatives in the same four subjects (or similar areas) and discussions with the institution's student union where interviewees included the relevant sabbatical officer (with responsibility for education or quality issues) and in many cases the outgoing or incoming student union president or the student union member of staff with responsibility for coordinating the student or course representative system within the institution. Views from the wider student body were not sought.

The study found that senior institutional staff viewed student engagement (as defined by the study's parameters) as central to enhancing the student experience though the reasons underlying such centrality varied both between and within institutions. A 'listening and being responsive' (to the student voice) rationale pervaded most of the interviews alongside an acknowledgement that:

students are now consumers and they can choose accordingly ... they want the best for their time [at university] ... all the opportunities we give them should make students feel they have a voice. (Senior administrative staff member, institution A)

our institutional set of values includes a customer focus ... so we are taking seriously what the students have to say ... students and their extended families are becoming much more discerning customers. (Senior academic staff member, institution B)

However, within the same institution (B), another interviewee (with responsibility for quality enhancement) considered that such a customer–supplier analogy did not adequately encompass a proper concern for maintaining and enhancing standards based on notions of partnerships in learning endeavours; fundamental debates were needed within the institution to explore such issues at programme level.

References made by senior academic and administrative staff interviewees to the 'student as consumer' were regularly accompanied by comments about the need to 'nip problems and issues in the bud'. The study noted that such sentiments were likely to reflect the institutions' desire to tackle issues early on and before too many students might be (adversely) affected. However, could they also be seen as having undertones of damage limitation, in the sense of reacting (only) to negative voices from students and, hence, students themselves being viewed as, and acting as, rather passive recipients of teaching and learning? Certainly, staff recognised that students tended to make use of certain student representation processes only if they had a problem:

democracy is really hard work ... when you do things really badly, the students mobilise themselves; when it's okay, it's hard to get them to engage in trying to improve things a little more. (Senior administrative staff member, institution C)

At another institution, a senior administrative staff member acknowledged that in the past, the student representation system may have been a means of channelling complaints but suggested that the institution is trying to move towards a more positive system rather than one that is dominated by the negative. Such comments chimed with those from another institution:

it does seem that students only come to our staff–student forums if they have a problem ... and we are trying to raise [students'] perceptions of the value of tutor sessions ... so they're not seen as useful 'just' if you have a problem. (Senior academic staff member, institution D)

Student unions' views on their institutions' rationales for student engagement policies and practices tended to place more emphasis on trying to engage students as partners in learning and teaching and giving students a voice in meaningful decision-making processes (and by extension, students being able to make a difference). Most student unions also recognised that students are customers and need to know what is going on within the institution (including prospects for the institution's own development). As the incoming president of one student union commented:

the introduction of top-up [tuition] fees has shifted the balance from students being critical of the world about them towards consumerism and passivity ... but the student union has a central role in having a say about students' education and influencing the university and providing the collective student voice.
(Incoming student union president, institution E)

But another student union suggested:

students aren't consumers but there is a consumer relationship with the university in the sense of buying access to membership of a community. (Student union officer, institution F)

Those student representatives interviewed as part of the study considered that the wider student body was not necessarily connected with or interested in student representation processes as part of the institution's practices for enhancing students' learning experiences. Whether this was a reflection of students' general apathy or that the wider student group considered such processes were not effective was less clear. There may also have been an issue about the underlying purposes. As the student representatives at a specialist institution noted:

people are too busy to raise problems unless they are really serious ... students are having to manage their time ... they are not apathetic. (Student representatives, institution G)

Whilst highlighting the issue of students' 'busy lives', the quote does (yet again) suggest that the prime underlying purpose of student engagement processes as exemplified through representation processes is to relay issues and problems for discussion at relevant decision-making forums.

This particular quote is interesting from another perspective in that it emanates from student representatives at one of the two higher education providers (in the study) that specialised in art, design and performing arts. As noted above, the fieldwork element to the study aimed to focus on a small number of specific subject areas, as well as exploring institution-wide processes. Through this, the study aimed to explore whether and to what extent there may be certain aspects of student engagement policies and practice that seemed common to a particular subject area.

Though the study found that the basic models of student engagement processes did not vary between subject areas, some interesting variation was discerned in underlying rationales between art, design and performing arts and the other subject areas chosen for the study.

Subject Variation in Rationale for Student Engagement Policies and Practices

A 'listening and being responsive' rationale pervaded most of the fieldwork interviews with senior institutional staff and rather less reference was made to student

engagement being of central concern to creating a cohesive learning community of teachers and learners. However, it was found that the latter sentiments were more likely to be expressed by senior staff in the specialist institutions and departments of art and design, as can be seen from the following quotes:

all the students and the staff are here to learn and to learn from each other and the only distinction is age and experience. (Senior member of academic staff, institution H)

the [institution] wants students to be part of the academic community ... not consumers—they are co-producers of knowledge. If the notion of the consumer pushes too hard, it will be difficult for students to engage ... [but] growth in student numbers may challenge this. (Senior management staff, institution H)

our school [department] genuinely wants engagement ... the whole point is to try to remove a 'them and us' sense of learning and teaching, and engender a better sense of learning and teaching as a shared endeavour. (Senior member of academic staff, institution I)

A central message from the fieldwork seemed to be that the very nature of the art, design and performing arts disciplines and associated learning and teaching pedagogies required staff and students to interact with each other on an ongoing and often 'equal' basis. The public nature of the learning experience—regular critiques of students' work, exhibitions and performances—served to reinforce this interactivity:

the nature of studio-based practice defines the way in which students interact with the institution; the output of learning is so public that it impacts on relationships between students and staff; and staff (including non-academic staff) share a sense of pride in the students, especially during the degree show. (Senior manager, institution H)

Student representatives in these subject areas also tended to be more confident about the positive ways in which the institutions listened to, and took seriously, their views and considered they were kept well-informed about decisions made and actions taken as a result of their feedback.

The fieldwork showed that, with the exception of one institution (a pre-1992 university), all senior staff and some of the student representatives in the area of art, design and performing arts stressed the importance and effectiveness of informal processes for students to express their opinions, discuss issues and resolve difficulties. In all cases, such informal processes operated alongside the more formal ones: but it was not possible to discern from the study whether the reported quicker resolution of issues through informal processes meant that the formal processes could, as a consequence, focus on broader aspects of learning and teaching and hence inform and enhance the collective student learning experience.

Whilst the foregoing relates to one of the four subject areas chosen for particular attention within the study, other disciplines may also exhibit similar emphases. In this respect, it should be noted that senior managers in one of the fieldwork institutions suggested that a concept of partnership (in learning) and user engagement was more readily accepted by staff delivering higher education programmes that embraced a specific ethos of empowering users in the community (for example, social work, youth and community work), where notions of empowering the client are central to some public service employment areas. Such sentiments clearly resonate with

McCulloch's (2009) references to the concept of co-production of public services and Streeting and Wise's (2009) call for communities of practice.

Measures of Effectiveness

As noted above, the survey found that the vast majority of higher education providers and student unions considered that current student engagement processes needed to be more effective. However, when asked in interviews to articulate what 'effectiveness' meant in practice, interviewees were less certain, although a range of measures was suggested (Little et al., 2009, pp. 42–43). Although not mutually exclusive, they can be seen as reflecting certain underlying rationales for student engagement (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Institutions' suggested measures of effectiveness of student engagement, grouped by underlying rationale

Underlying rationale	Suggested measure
Being reactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A low level of student complaints relating to learning and teaching • Issues identified through student representation processes being the same as those identified through the national student survey and internal feedback questionnaires • Having the requisite number of student representative posts filled • Being able to demonstrate that deliberate attempts (after due consideration) have been taken to improve the student learning experience
Students and staff working in partnership to improve learning experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student representatives being able to comment on programme delivery and wider issues without this being seen as threatening (to staff) nor negatively affecting their academic performance • Having a student representation system that is not dominated by negative comments and specific issues but can input to broader discussions and be forward looking and contribute to programme and institutional developments • Student representatives (and staff) having a sense of shared responsibilities for a student's own learning and the learning of others on the same programme • All students having an equal opportunity to have their voices 'heard'

Certainly, a number of these measures hint at trying to move towards a situation wherein students and staff are co-producers of the learning experience and engaged in a cooperative enterprise (McCulloch, 2009). Other measures, which tended to be more readily mentioned in the fieldwork interviews, centred around being 'reactive' to issues raised by students and, hence, arguably re-emphasised a sense of students being seen as (and behaving as) consumers of a (learning) product.

Nevertheless, the study uncovered institutions' attempts to establish a (better) sense of cohesive learning communities between students, academic and others involved in supporting learning, irrespective of specific disciplinary cultures and ethos. Some were introducing (or re-launching) learning and teaching partnership agreements in which the mutual roles and responsibilities of students, academic departments and central services were set out. Others were trying to re-invigorate their student societies, although there was no discernible pattern within specific disciplines. On a broader front, examples were given of the deliberate involvement of students in aspects of institutional 'life', wider than learning and teaching per se but germane to building and maintaining a sense of wider student engagement.

Conclusion

This study was concerned with institutional quality assurance and student union processes and practices, such as those relating to student representation and student feedback, that seek to inform and enhance the collective student learning experience. This article has focused particularly on what was learned about the rationales underlying such processes. The study concluded that though institutions view student engagement as central to enhancing the student experience, more emphasis seems to be placed on viewing students as consumers and less on viewing students as members of a learning community. Student representatives' views also tended to this perspective, although for student unions the emphasis tended to be on the latter aspect, which may well constitute an 'ideal' position that has yet to be reached in practice. Indeed, of the community of practice model, Streeting and Wise acknowledged that to develop this model, a 'purposeful coordination' of ideas is required.

The study did not generate sufficient data to analyse institutional rationales in sufficient depth to develop well-evidenced models of student engagement (for example, consumer; co-producer; learning community). And as noted above, institutional rationales did not necessarily focus on one dimension (for example, student as consumer) to the exclusion of others. In fact, it was possible to discern different emphases to the fore within the same institution and between different disciplines.

Nevertheless, it is suggested that a sense of one-directional transactions between the higher education provider and learner might flow from an 'over-emphasis' on the student as consumer. This might lead to students behaving as passive recipients of higher education and restrict their full involvement in a learning community in ways that inform and enhance the collective student learning experience. Certainly some elements of the UK's higher education system (including the requirement for students to pay tuition fees) and of the quality assurance framework (including the national student survey) tend to heighten notions of students as consumers or customers of higher education. Such pressures as these on universities and colleges to demonstrate accountability and compliance to various forms of regulation and shifts to a more market-led culture could be seen to militate against the nurturing of learning communities.

However, it is argued that other aspects, including the involvement of students in institutional (and now national) arrangements for quality assurance, where the emphasis is on 'enhancement' rather than just assuring standards and mitigating risks of negative or poor learning experiences, should be viewed positively. These aspects signal a pull in the direction of the co-producer and learning community models, as well as a greater role for students in the community charged with assuring and enhancing academic standards. Nevertheless, the current policy discourse on

higher education suggests that the student as consumer continues to have the upper hand.

From the study, it seems that an underlying rationale of the 'student as consumer' still prevails in many institutions' quality processes. That said, there is some evidence that, particularly within their student representation processes, some institutions are actively seeking to move beyond a 'student as (only) a consumer' and encourage a greater sense of partnership between students and staff by explicitly encouraging discussion of broader and less immediate issues affecting learning and teaching.

The study called for wider discussions to be initiated across the higher education sector about the nature of higher education learning communities, to include a more explicit focus on concepts of partnership and perceived barriers to, and effective practices in, creating cohesive learning communities. However, this should not be seen as solely the responsibility of institutions: higher education students and their unions also have a role to play in such discussions. As Streeting and Wise (2009, p. 5) noted, students need to 'understand that they do have power—and that it can be exercised through their commitment and contribution to their community of practice, as opposed to the exercise of power simply through choice-making, complaint or by responding to consultation'. However, the UK government's call for greater emphasis on notions of the student as consumer will certainly challenge moves towards this goal.

References

- Bergan, S., 2003, Student Participation in Higher Education Governance (Strasbourg, Council of Europe).
- Coates, H., 2009, Engaging Students for Success. Australasian Student Engagement Report. Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (Victoria, Australian Council for Educational Research).
- Dawson, S., Burnett, B. & O'Donohue, M., 2006, 'Learning communities: An untapped sustainable competitive advantage for higher education', *International Journal of Educational Management*, 20(2), pp. 127–139.
- Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2009, Higher Ambitions. The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy (London, DBIS).
- Edmonds, N., Fuller, A., Hillier, Y., Ingram, R., Little, B., Reeve, F. & Webb, S., 2009, 'Really useful qualifications and learning? Exploring the policy effects of new sub-bachelors degree qualifications', paper presented at the 39th Annual SCUTREA conference, Cambridge, 7–9 July.
- European University Association, 2009, Improving Quality, Enhancing Creativity: Change Process in European Higher Education Institutions. Final Report of the Quality Assurance for the Higher Education Change Agenda (QAHECA) Project (Brussels, EUA).
- Ewell, P., 2004, The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (North Carolina, University of North Carolina, Department of Public Policy, Public Policy for Academic Quality Research Program).
- Filippakou, O. & Tapper, T., 2008, 'Quality assurance and quality enhancement in higher education: Contested territories?', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(1/2), pp. 84–100.
- Harvey, L., 2009, 'A critical analysis of quality culture', paper presented at the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) Conference, New Approaches to Quality Assurance in the Changing World of Higher Education, Abu Dhabi, 30 March–2nd April. Available online at:

- www.caa.ae/conference/DesktopModules/presentations.aspx (accessed 10 March 2010).
- Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 2009, National Student Survey. Available online at: www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss (accessed 16 July 2009).
- Little, B., Locke, W., Scesa, A. & Williams, R., 2009, Report to HEFCE on Student Engagement (Bristol, Higher Education Funding Council for England).
- McCulloch, A., 2009, 'The student as co-producer: Learning from public administration about the student– university relationship', *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(2), pp. 171–183.
- McGinnis, C., 2010, 'University students' experiences of higher education', in E. Baker, B. McGraw & P. Peterson (Eds) *International Encyclopedia of Education*, 3rd edn. (Amsterdam, Elsevier).
- McMillan, D. W. & Chavis, D. M., 1986, 'Sense of community: A definition and theory', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(1), pp. 6–23.
- McMillan, J. & Cheney, G., 1996, 'The student as consumer: The implications and limitations of a metaphor', *Communications Education*, 45(1), pp. 1–15.
- Naidoo, R. & Jamieson, I., 2005, 'Empowering participants or corroding learning? Towards a research agenda on the impact of student consumerism in higher education', *Journal of Educational Policy*, 20(3), pp. 267–281.
- National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB), 2007, *Bologna with Student Eyes*, 2007 Edition (Brussels, ESIB).
- Smith, B., Macgregor, J., Matthews, R. & Gabelnick, F., 2004, *Learning Communities: Reforming the Undergraduate Education* (San Francisco, Jossey Bass).
- Streeting, W. & Wise, G., 2009, *Rethinking the Values of Higher Education— Consumption, Partnership, Community?* (Gloucester, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education).
- Teichler, U., 2007, *Higher Education Systems: Conceptual Frameworks, Comparative Perspectives, Empirical Findings* (Rotterdam and Taipei, Sense Publishers).
- Walker, L., with Logan, A., 2008, *A Review of Learner Voice Initiatives Across the UK's Education Sectors* (Bristol, Futurelab). Available online at: www.futurelab.org.uk (accessed 1 May 2009).