Rethinking the values of higher education - consumption, partnership, community?

By Wes Streeting, President, and Graeme Wise, Political Officer, National Union of Students

Foreword

Many terms and phrases are used to describe the relationship between universities and students, such as 'consumers', 'active participants', 'co-producers', 'partners', 'community of learning' and 'apprentices'; all are useful, but each has limitations and particular connotations.

When the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) made the decision to include students as members of Institutional audit and review teams, consequently imbuing them with the authority and responsibility that come with the role, we were asked questions about what this implied about the relationship between students and the higher education sector. Given the level of interest in this and the amount of times QAA was asked for an opinion, we felt it was appropriate to commission some 'think pieces' from a range of leaders in the sector with different perspectives.

Wes Streeting, President, and Graeme Wise, Political Officer, of the National Union of Students, have produced the following thoughtful piece entitled *Rethinking the values of higher education - consumption, partnership, community?* that sets out a positive vision of the relationship between student and institution. Following on from this, Dr Paul Taylor and Danny Wilding from the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research at the University of Warwick have produced a piece entitled *Rethinking the values of higher education - the student as collaborator and producer? Undergraduate research as a case study.*[1]

Higher Ambitions, the Government's higher education framework, together with its impending review of variable fees in England, has placed the student experience and changing relationships between students, their institutions and their learning at the heart of current debates. These pieces are important contributions to that discussion and, together with others to follow, will be welcomed.

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[1] Available on the QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk/students/studentengagement/undergraduate.pdf

Rethinking the values of higher education
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The character of higher education in Britain is rapidly changing. Any short glance at recent reports and commentary in the higher education press reveals a range of competing worries and fears. There are voices of concern for maintaining either 'quality' or 'standards', or both. There are those who are fearful of the impact of a new level of student expectation on academic professionals. There are worries over the 'value for money' that students get for the fees they now pay, about possible 'mis-selling' of university courses, and about the effect on the nature of study itself. Underlying it all, we believe, is the trend - which has been developing for some time now - towards market approaches in the way higher education is organised. One of the most important symptoms of this is the increasingly prevalent notion of the student 'as consumer'.

This notion is situated within a much wider process of change in public services. In a sophisticated but accessible analysis of an emerging 'marketplace democracy', Catherine Needham defines the central issue:

> To claim that citizens are being treated as consumers is to say that the government-citizen relationship is replicating patterns of choice and power found in the private economy.... The government's agenda for public service reform is concentrated on an objective of maximising "customer satisfaction" and expanding individual choice and competition. (Needham, 2003, pp 5-6)

The aim of a 'students as consumers' model is to bring these principles to the higher education environment. It invites students to navigate higher education as a market, making choices and judgements about value for money as they go; it emphasises student satisfaction and calls for institutions to respond to both students' demands, as individual learners, and indeed student **demand**, in aggregate, in a constantly evolving market. We want to pursue an exploration of this issue and we want to do so explicitly from the student perspective.

Let's begin by constructing a straw woman, Kate, who exhibits all the attitudes and behaviours of the 'consuming' student. Kate is concerned about value for money - she's getting into a lot of debt to do this course and she wants to be sure it's worth it. She's pretty desperate to get at least a 2:1 because she fancies working for one of the accountancy giants. She thinks the course materials she's been given are of quite a poor standard, not very accessible, and she's quite irritated that her lecturers won't put the slides up on the university intranet so she can download them, even though she never misses a class. She can't believe the library isn't open 24 hours a day, and when she can get into the library it's far too busy and the core texts are always out. Nothing frustrates Kate more than when her lecturers can only see her at a fixed time, and only a couple of times a term, and only for 20 minutes.

To contrast this, we construct a straw man, Joe, who represents all the attitudes and behaviours of the 'non-consuming' student. Joe would never sacrifice his own positions of principle to get a better grade; he knows that the lecturers think he's usually way off the point, but he thinks his focus is much more important than they do - and actually he should get higher marks for his creativity and persistence. He rarely visits the library, preferring instead to refer to the 30 or so volumes of great, canonical works that he has piled in his bedroom. He often misses class, and isn't too worried about it. Nothing frustrates Joe more than bumping into a couple of his lecturers in a local pub, only to find they don't want to engage him in a discussion about the later works of Foucault.

Both of these students are in trouble. Joe is either very wealthy or absurdly cavalier, or otherwise has decided to treat his studies as an exercise in style. Kate is worryingly focused on the material aspects of the learning experience; so much so that she must find it hard to concentrate on the actual subject she's studying. Both are likely to panic in the second half of their final year, and not do as well as they could have. It is certain that neither is learning as much as they should be learning.

These are only caricatures, but because the concept of the student 'as consumer' is so hard to pin down, these sketches can potentially reveal more than trying to give an exhaustive definition. In particular, they help us to show that it is as unhelpful to students to become paramount consumers as it is for them to become consciously avant-garde in their approach to their studies. What we should aim for is a healthy, balanced approach. Students should be able to challenge the quality of the learning environment and the support they are getting, and should also be able to take intellectual risks and sometimes pursue interests at a tangent to the main curriculum. It should be obvious that students can't really do any of these things unless they have been reasonably diligent, attended most of the classes, done the background reading, and tried to seek out help and advice. It should be equally obvious that to do this, students need access to well-funded and well-managed resources, and the support of expert and helpful teachers. When all these things are happening in concert, the result is higher education imbued with what we might call 'quality'.

We believe that when a discourse that calls for students to be seen 'as consumers' comes into the mix, it throws the system off balance, and 'quality' suffers as a result. How does this happen? Alistair McCulloch has recently produced a critique of the 'student as consumer' model. He argues that this approach has at least eight weaknesses or problems, in that it:

   a) overemphasises one aspect of the student's role and of the university's mission

   b) suggests undue distance between the student and the educational process, thereby de-emphasising the student's role in learning

   c) encourages passivity on the part of the student

   d) fails to encourage deep learning

   e) implies in the student a level of knowledge and information, and the possession of tools to use them, that are unlikely to be present

   f) serves to deprofessionalise the academic role and encourage the 'entertainment' model of teaching

   g) compartmentalises the educational experience as 'product' rather than 'process'

   h) reinforces individualism and competition at the expense of community.

(McCulloch, 2009, p 177)

There is insufficient space to summarise all these points here, and McCulloch expands each in detail in his paper. Suffice to say, however, that the values of consumption, when applied by an individual to their learning, may cause a range of counterproductive effects - as in the case of the fictional (but all too real) example given above. McCulloch proposes an alternative model. He argues that viewing students as 'co-producers', not as 'consumers', might help to tackle and resolve these problems. In such a model, students are viewed as essential partners in the production of the knowledge and skills that form the intended learning outcomes of their programmes. They are therefore given responsibility for some of the work involved, and are not passive recipients of a service.

It is quite clear that students are invariably responsible for some of the effort involved at all levels of higher education - and arguably all education. Inherent in processes of learning is the requirement for some action on the part of the learner. So at the individual level, co-production is already happening all the time because new skills, knowledge and understanding are 'produced' through a combination of student effort, pedagogy and the learning environment (facilities, resources, and so on). If taken further though, a model of co-production also implies student involvement at the collective level. It suggests that institutions should bring students into the decision-making process, ask students to help design the curriculum, and give students control of some parts of the learning environment. In addition, it emphasises the role of students' unions, course representatives, and so on, in influencing institutional policy by adding a student viewpoint in various contexts, or increasingly by running projects and services on the institution's behalf.

A model of co-production could bring numerous benefits. The New Economics Foundation, for example, suggests that a co-production approach could lead to increased learner satisfaction, reduced student anxiety and greater understanding of learner needs, increased satisfaction amongst academic staff, and improved educational outcomes. But the co-production model can also be criticised on a number of grounds. At its heart is the intent to place more responsibility in the hands of students. Those students are not, by definition, expert in their subject of study, and nor are they likely to be trained in the theory and practice of pedagogy, and this could make involvement in shaping the curriculum quite difficult. Because they are used to navigating markets and making consumer choices quite readily, a new expectation that they should now share responsibility for the management of services and facilities could be too challenging. The language of 'co-production' itself can appear overly technocratic and obscure and not readily appealing to the many students who just want to follow their course and have a good time. Convincing such students that they should **want** to be 'co-producers' might be seen as the greatest challenge.

We wish to explore a further alternative approach. We refer primarily here to work done by Professor Frank Coffield for the Learning and Skills Network, in which he develops the concept of the 'community of practice' in learning. In the 'community of practice' approach, the learning process is not seen as delivery or production, but as induction. It is the journey learners take on their way to becoming active participants and practitioners in a particular trade, profession, discipline or discourse. The emphasis is on building relationships - not only between teachers and students, but between students and other students, at the same and differing levels of study. It is an approach that calls for cross-disciplinary interaction to happen much more, and in ways that involve students at every level of study. It requires open debate about the direction of policy and strategy, in which all members of the educational community can participate and contribute. The difference between this participative approach and the product-acquisition approaches of consumerism and co-production can be quickly summarised in a table:

	Acquisition	Participation
Goal	Individual enrichment	Community building
Learning	Acquiring facts	Becoming a participant
Student	Recipient, customer	Apprentice, peripheral participant
Teacher	Deliverer, provider	Expert, dialogue partner
Knowledge	Possession, commodity	Aspect of practice
Knowing	Having, possessing	Belonging, participating

(Coffield, 2008, p 7)

It can be seen how the 'community of practice' approach represents quite a radical departure from other models. It takes a naturally collectivist, flexible and organic view of the educational process and asks us to think critically about how such an approach might be supported and stimulated. It is now incumbent on us to take the concept a little further, with a brief but relatively practical indication of what this approach might mean for policymakers and practitioners in higher education, outlining some of the ways a 'communities of practice' model could be developed. Many of these ideas are already being pursued in the sector so there are some examples to follow, and where this is the case we indicate it - but perhaps what remains to be done is the purposeful coordination of all these ideas (and others like them) in an overall strategy reflecting the 'community of practice' approach.

- Establishing more extensive student induction programmes, perhaps even on an accredited basis, which would address academic values, ethics and ways to expand the learning experience (as in UCL's 'Transition' programme: www.ucl.ac.uk/transition).

- Supporting self-organising study and discussion groups for different subjects within the institution, and also crossing subject boundaries (schemes such as PASS at the University of Manchester: www.manchester.ac.uk/undergraduate/academiclife/supportservices/pass and PAL at Bournemouth University: http://pal.bournemouth.ac.uk).

- Creating networks for students in similar subject areas across several institutions where there is a common interest either by geography or by mission, or other factors (currently being explored and developed in Scotland through the work of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in Scotland and student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs) on subject networks).

- Increasing the frequency of student presentation of research and ideas, and for a greater audience (as in Warwick University's Reinvention Centre: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/rsw/undergrad/cetl).

- Concentrating effort on improving student feedback and follow-up from presentations and assessments, and making the sources of feedback more diverse (the NUS has recently done a great deal of work on feedback, as has the HEA).

- Circulating student work amongst other students (with appropriate measures in place to ensure this is done positively and to mitigate the risk of plagiarism).

- Organising regular, open discussions and debates about institutional policy and strategy, in which both students and staff (academic and administrative) could participate (as in the University of Exeter's 'Students as Agents of Change' project: http://as.exeter.ac.uk/eeu/projects/studentprojects.shtml).

- Allowing some course content to be shaped by open discussion amongst participants about the direction of programmes; so that participants gain a greater sense of the scope of the subject and the many possible alternative directions that could be taken.

- Increasing the amount of joint work and joint assessments, especially in subject areas where this is not the norm.

- Using new social networking technologies to increase the exchange of ideas and views amongst students who may not naturally make contact with each other in the classroom.

We believe this issue is ultimately about power, and in particular, who has the power to determine action in the educational environment. In a model of consumerism, power is cleaved; consumers exert it through their market choices and their complaints to the provider, but the provider makes its own decisions about how to respond to these pressures, through policy and management practice. In co-production, power is shared; both students (as users) and institutions (managers and academics) each have joint responsibility for change in policy and

for their own roles in practice. Both approaches are problematic because they are insensitive to the reality of the world of higher education in all its complexity, and create differing but often unhelpful pressures for all concerned.

In the approach we have briefly outlined, power is seen as relational, dynamic and ever-shifting within communities of practice and within a wider educational community. There are moments when a student holds the power over action almost solely within his or her own hands - after all, it is the student's own work that represents the final outcome, and no-one else can do that work for them. At other moments, it is the teacher who has the power to define the boundaries of the subject, introduce the key critical concepts, act as the referee for arguments, and oversee the student's ongoing work while offering guidance along the way. In still other situations, the power to initiate new action is found at the points where minds come together (students in debate with each other, for example), shaping cognition and provoking new work.

The most important aspect of this approach is that all participants, especially students, 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. We consider that this might be a better route to strengthening the relationships and fostering the attitudes which must underpin improvements in quality.

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