

Higher education in a state of crisis: a perspective from a Students' Quality Circle

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Abstract This article introduces a Students' Quality Circle in higher education, in the context of current debates. With increasing numbers of students entering the university and constrained financial resources in the sector, new approaches are needed, with new partnership between lecturers and students. The first Students' Quality Circle at Kingston is located in a wider international context.

Keywords Engagement · Higher education · Learning · Participation · Partnership · Quality · Student experience · Students' Quality Circle · Teaching

1 Quality in learning and teaching in higher education

Significant macro- and micro-environmental changes in recent decades have culminated in a series of current challenges for learning and teaching in the Higher Education sector. These changes include widening participation and meeting the needs of a diverse student community; the move to a 'mass' or 'universal' education approach to accommodate increasing student numbers since the 1960s; the increasing accountability of publicly funded institutions; and political imperatives linking higher education to wider innovation and economic growth (Ertl et al. 2008).

In addition, the increasing student loan burden has fostered student demand for 'value for money' in higher education (Dearing 1997). This, combined with strong

competition between higher education institutions (HEIs) and the increasing commercialisation of the sector, has fostered a concept of 'student as customer' and sparked concerns over student satisfaction. As a result of these and other factors, the student experience has altered considerably. These factors have also contributed to the widespread shift in pedagogical perspective, from a focus on what constitutes good teaching, to a focus on learning (Gibbs 2003), and how students perceive the educational experience. The term *student learning experience* has been employed by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in an effort to develop a shared conceptual understanding of the area, which currently lacks clear definition as well as a cohesive research approach.

The contemporary focus on the student experience, encompassing the popular discourse on student engagement, reflects a broader shift in the balance of power in HEIs. The introduction of tuition fees sparked an irrevocable trend, as students gained the ability to lay claim to higher expectations of quality. As many of today's students take on debt to fund their education, and as fee levels are set to rise further under the Coalition government, the concentration of power at the top layers of the academic community is being challenged. Furthermore, the traditional pedagogical model, which sees teachers as sources of definitive wisdom, instructing students who passively receive their knowledge, is shifting to a model of mutual discourse and participatory learning. Students are seeking greater involvement in influencing the experiences and outcomes of their education.

Yet, despite the research and rhetoric about giving students a voice, practical application is disjointed, and students remain underrepresented, in terms of both actionable involvement and perceived legitimacy. The context outlined here suggests the need for innovations in the learning

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