

From Passivity to Partnership: How the Student: University Relationship has Evolved in the Era of the National Student Survey

Rebecca Beech – Coventry University

Peter Wolstencroft – Liverpool John Moores University

For most, January is a time for confirmation of resolutions, establishing a new health regime or a time to recover from the excesses of the festive period, but for those working in Higher Education something else dominates the landscape during the first month of the year.

The primacy of the National Student Survey (NSS) within the sector is well established. Designed to gather the opinions of students on the quality of their course (OfS, 2021), a successful result ensures that the university will rise in the league tables that dictate the perceived status of institutions. Conversely, a poor result will lead to an enquiry within the organisation and a nervous glance over the shoulder at the ever-present threat from the Office for Students that ‘low quality degrees’ will be identified and eliminated.

What this means is that there is significant pressure on everyone with a student-facing role in UK Business Schools to ensure that the student experience of their undergraduate degree is a positive one (Wonkhe, 2020; GOV UK 2022) and that pressure peaks at the end of January when the NSS is launched at most UK universities. The importance of the survey, part of a wider, neoliberalist, shift that stresses the importance of the market as a mechanism for quality control, has fundamentally altered attitudes within the sector. In particular, how we perceive the relationship the Business School has with students. The importance of achieving a positive NSS by ‘keeping students happy’ has led to accusations of ‘spoon feeding’ learning and lowering standards via shortening assessments and reducing reading lists, as well as grade inflation (The Guardian, 2015; Wonkhe, 2020).

Our current research examines the current landscape in Higher Education through the lens of the ‘student journey’ students take during their time within UK Business Schools and what has become clear at an early stage, is that the traditional categorisation of the relationship between students and their universities needs updating and re-evaluating in the era of the NSS.

A key part of understanding this relationship lies in exploring students’ previous experiences within education. The establishment of the national curriculum by the Education Reform Act of 1988 (DfS, 1988) ensured far greater consistency in the curricula experiences of students, however, it also meant a shift in culture within organisations. Counterintuitively, the Act that created the national curriculum’s key aim of increasing the independence of schools, actually achieved the reverse as they were now obliged to follow a set curriculum and were required to focus on the metrics used to judge schools. Hence there was an increased focus on the end product of education, notably exam results, which meant that the approach taken by schools became far more prescriptive.

The importance of achieving good results for students had an effect on the agency of students. Schools became ‘exam factories’ (Coffield and Williamson, 2014) and the role of the student changed from being an active explorer of knowledge, to a more passive role where their goal is to succeed in their examinations, an action that will be beneficial to their school.

This means that when students arrive at university, their frame of reference is that their role is not one of a co-creator of knowledge (in effect the traditional student role), instead it is as passive

recipient of knowledge (the empty vessel described by Piaget, 1952). In some ways this is reinforced by the focus on the NSS and the importance of metrics in UK Higher Education – the student quickly realises that their views are of importance to universities as their happiness affects the performance of the organisation.

This realisation has led to a redefining of the relationship to one that often describes the student as either a customer or consumer (Tomlinson 2017) and the shift assumes that the balance of power lies with the student. This has been reinforced at some universities by approaches which are typified by the oft used slogan ‘you said, we did’, the implicit assumption here is that the organisation listened to their customers and gave them what they wanted. The imbalance of power inherent in this approach remains problematic however. Students are generally experiencing higher education for the first time so haven’t got an anchor to compare their experience to and in addition, students are not buying a homogeneous product and so to view them as ‘customers’ is misleading as this assumes that there is a straight transactional approach to the relationship.

The term consumer has tended to supplant customer in recent years (Tomlinson 2017) and is reinforced by the Office for Students’ focus on the importance of ‘value for money’ (OfS 2021). This is a rather more complex term and is used to describe the way in which students need to contribute to ensure that they get what they are looking for. A simile is the idea that paying for gym membership does not guarantee fitness, just as paying your university fees does not guarantee obtaining a degree. This moves the discussion forward and positions students as being involved in a partnership rather than a straight transaction. However, our research suggests that even this characterisation, which positions students as having the power of a consumer, does not describe accurately the position of undergraduate students as many students still see the relationship in transactional terms rather than a true partnership.

Instead of students as customers or consumers, we would view students as stakeholders. This term implies commitment to the cause, but rather than merely being on the receiving end of the process, they are part of the creation of the journey. This has been characterised by a ‘Students as Partners’ approach in many Business Schools and the shift has been from passivity back to a co-creation role. Other research has supported this and backed the view that students want a wider university experience than merely getting value for money (de Main and Wolstencroft, 2021). This approach encapsulates the idea that to succeed in the NSS, both sides of the partnership need to work together – the university to provide a positive student experience, the student to ensure that they make the most of it by contributing not only to their studies but to wider debates and a broader learning experience.

So, what does that mean for Business Schools preparing for the NSS? Well, the key point is that we need to prepare students from the start of their studies to move from passivity to stakeholders, we need to accept that for many students, their experiences within compulsory education have not been conducive to a partnership role. If we accept this and work with students to develop their understanding of the role using two-way communication then the partnership will evolve throughout their studies. This means that when the launch of the NSS comes in their final year, everyone is prepared and ready, so January becomes rather less stressful for everyone in Higher Education, and we can go back to rather more traditional January activities.

The full study will be published later this year. Please feel free to contact the authors if the initial findings are of interest to you.

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Dr Rebecca Beech is a Lecturer in Business Management at the School of Strategy and Leadership in the Faculty of Business and Law at Coventry University

Dr Peter Wolstencroft is Subject Leader of Liverpool Business School, part of Liverpool John Moores University