

## But what do the numbers say? How the movement towards datafication might change English higher education by *Peter Wolstencroft, Elizabeth Whitfield and Track Dinning*



“The simple truth is that the average student leaves university with £45,800 of debt and if they have nothing to show for it then we have failed them” (Hansard, 2021). The speaker of these words was the then Minister for Higher and Further Education, Michelle Donelan and the sentiment underpins many of the current

mechanisms used for assessing quality in English HE. The publication by the Office for Students (OfS) of their new expectations for student outcomes (OfS, 2022a) has, once again, triggered a debate about how we measure the quality of a university education and its impact on the students that study in English universities. The stakes have never been as high, as the OfS state: ‘Universities and colleges that perform below these thresholds could face investigation to allow the OfS to understand the reasons for their performance. If, following investigation, performance is not adequately explained by a provider’s context, the OfS has the power to intervene and impose sanctions for a breach of its conditions of registration.’ (OfS, 2022a)

Since the Browne Report (2010) normalised the payment by students of increased fees for undergraduate programmes, universities have faced a balancing act between two separate imperatives that have influenced the relationship between students and universities. These two approaches are firstly, the educational imperative, that stresses the primacy of the learning experience and the student’s journey through their studies and secondly, the economic imperative, that requires organisations to ensure that their finances allow them to continue to operate. It can be argued that the growing dominance of the latter is rooted in the increased measurement of the sector and how this is used to define the quality of provision provided by any given university. In practical terms, what this means is that, for English universities, adherence to benchmarking figures and ensuring that targets are met may be a key driver in decision making at all levels of the organisation. Whilst the datafication of education (Stevenson, 2017) is not a new concept, the new OfS guidelines are likely to exacerbate this approach, indeed it can be seen as a formalisation of an ongoing process. A key consequence of this shift has been a reimagining of the relationship between the student and the institution. Originally characterised by some in the post-Browne era as one akin to a customer purchasing a product, it evolved into the student being viewed as a consumer who uses a service but who is also an active participant in the learning process and from there to a co-creator of the process (Tomlinson, 2017). Whilst this apparent balancing of influence has generally been viewed as having a positive benefit in terms of the student experience, the shift exemplified by the new regulations means that the performance of students is increasingly measured in quantitative terms. The danger with this approach is that there is the potential for universities to focus on the quantitative measure of success alone, which would neglect all of the wider, but not measured, improvements in the student journey that have occurred since the Browne Report, such as the increasing amount of employer engagement and the amplification of the student voice.

Concerns increased with the publication of the latest expectations from the OfS and their focus on quantitative measures. Whilst other quality mechanisms such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Ofsted inspections rely on a mixture of quantitative measurement and a supporting narrative, the new guidelines focus largely on data and the outputs for each student. Targets are set for continuation and completion rates as well as graduate outcomes and these targets are aggregated in each of a phalanx of different subsections of students. Many concerns within the sector relate to the vague nature of the wording regarding non-achievement of the targets. Despite the assertion that “(the) OfS only makes a judgement that a provider is not compliant after considering the context in

which it is operating" (OfS, 2022a), there is currently no guidance as to how this consideration will be achieved.

English universities have greeted the new guidance with some concern: for example, the latest intervention focuses partially on the salaries students receive fifteen months after completing their programme of study (known as 'graduate outcomes'). This is controversial as it is a measure that attempts to compare very disparate programmes. The Complete University Guide (2022) quotes average salaries after fifteen months' employment for accounting and finance as £25,000; optometry is as low as £17,000 and music degrees average £21,000. In contrast medicine graduates earn an average £30,000. Aside from the issue of disparities in earnings, there is also a lack of accounting for regional disparities with Statista (2021) reporting the median annual earning for full-time employees in the North West being 30% lower than salaries in London. This inequality and its impact on graduate outcomes has already been cited in the decision by some universities to stop offering programmes despite their educational benefit (Weale, 2022).

The backdrop to the revised guidelines (commonly known as 'B3' after the subsection of the document it occupies) has been an ongoing discussion about the desirable outcomes of degree level education. The discussion has increasingly focused on how to root out supposed poor practice. If students invest significant amounts of money in their education then many assert with the HE Minister that they should get 'value for money' and a positive outcome when their studies are complete. Defining these points drives much of the current discussions. What constitutes a 'low quality degree' has been one facet of this discussion, but more pertinent is the achievement gap that exists between differing groups of students and differing programmes of study. Whilst this has always been known, increasing spending has meant that there has been greater scrutiny on groups and programmes perceived to be underachieving.

The revised guidelines focus on definitions; the changes might seem relatively minor when looked at in isolation, but when grouped with other changes in the sector they might have profound implications for university procedures. Universities previously had to ensure that benchmark figures for retention and achievement were met for whole cohorts, but the sector will now subdivide student groups using criteria such as gender, sex or background (OfS, 2022b) and explore the performance of each group. This is likely to change the approach for many universities, as often these subgroups are likely to be small in number, which means that one student's failure to complete their studies is likely to have a proportionally greater impact on the university as a whole. There is therefore a considerable danger that universities which serve large numbers of disadvantaged students will be less inclined to take risks in admission: this will narrow, rather than widen, access and participation.

On the surface the definitions appear straightforward, with universities needing to make sure that a set percentage of their students continue with their studies, complete their studies and are in what is deemed 'graduate employment' within 15 months of graduation. However these figures may lead to a significant change in the way universities manage data and indeed, deal with students.

Under pressure to meet set benchmarks, universities are likely to focus even more attention on the definition of a student within HE. There is always a set period of time between a student registering and when they are included in official figures. This allows for 'buyer's remorse' when students withdraw early on and it also allows people to transfer between programmes if they decide that their initial choice was not the one they want to pursue. Students who withdraw from a programme before the cut-off date are not taken into account in the final figures used when calculating retention figures. This change might affect English HE in the same way as it did when introduced to the further education (FE) sector. Within FE, students were not counted in final figures until they had been enrolled for 42 days. This meant that many organisations completed what became known as a 'data cleanse' before

the cut-off date, a process where students who were deemed to be at risk of failing their programme were removed from their studies, or moved to a different award.

The danger when introducing new metrics is always that there will be unintended consequences. Whilst trying to measure the quality of a programme of study is clearly worthwhile, the primacy of the data could cause problems. The need to ensure that programmes of study are seen as high quality means that ignoring metrics is often foolhardy and can have detrimental effects on the whole university. Instead, careful analysis is likely, to ensure that programmes score as highly as possible in each category. This could lead to a range of ethical dilemmas regarding the amount of support students receive if they are in danger of failing in their studies.

Looking further down the timeline, the shift towards the datafication of the sector is likely to affect the validation of new programmes of study. Whilst employability has been a strand within many programmes for some years, potential graduate outcomes are likely to be viewed as critical to the acceptance of a programme of study, marking a significant shift away from a purely educational analysis of proposed programmes. The challenge is to make sure that programmes of study continue to be challenging and rewarding for students but that they also meet targets, close attainment gaps and ensure positive learning outcomes for graduates.

The new guidelines are another stepping stone in the balancing act between educational and economic imperatives. The new guidelines set clear targets but it is the unclear consequences of not meeting these targets that will cause universities most concern. Universities with large numbers of disadvantaged students might need a fundamental rethinking of their student population. If there is no allowance for the incoming student population when measuring outputs, universities will need to review the level of support they provide and face the ethical dilemmas involved. Without greater clarity from the OfS, failure to meet targets may mean that more programmes in subject areas with historically low graduate starting salaries will close, data will increasingly become the key determinant of educational decision making and the relationship between students and universities will once again be redefined.

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