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Systematic quality assurance for diverse student experiences

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This paper discusses the challenges in quality assurance of the student experience and presents a model for systematically considering the needs of diverse groups of students. Drawing from a discussion of student-centred and institution-centred ways of defining the student experience, we suggest that the most comprehensive way to consider the student experience is as the experience of people while in their identities as students, recognising the interconnectedness of academic and other developmental experiences, but also the credentialing or judging function of the institution. We propose a representation of the student experience as four overlapping spheres: umpiring, coaching, enabling and developing. Building on this model, and starting with the identification of possible student cohorts, a 'similarities/differences' analysis of intended outcomes and institutional provision across the four spheres can be conducted. Subsequently, differences in required quality assurance mechanisms can be identified. By making explicit ideas and assumptions that are usually implicit in institutional planning and quality assurance, the potential arises for different ways of looking at old problems and a more holistic consideration of the student experience. Use of this approach may assist institutions to justify and prioritise improvements.

Keywords: student experience, quality assurance, diversity

Introduction

The growth of interest in the 'student experience' as an overarching quality construct in higher education raises some challenges for quality assurance, particularly given the diversity of students and learning situations found in many institutions. In this paper we examine some of these challenges and present a model for systematically considering the needs of diverse groups of students. After discussing ways of defining the student experience, we propose a representation of the student experience as four overlapping spheres: umpiring, coaching, enabling and developing. Building on this model, and starting with the identification of possible student cohorts, we outline an approach to quality assurance using a 'similarities/differences' analysis of intended outcomes and institutional provision across the four spheres.

There are many facets to the student experience of higher education. Some of these elements, such as interactivity, are not readily captured within standard accounts of higher education quality assurance. While most higher education institutions can readily describe their quality assurance mechanisms for curricula, admissions, assessment, teaching, research and student

services, integrating these within a comprehensive quality assurance model that captures the main elements of the rich experience of many individuals is more difficult.

Further, internal quality assurance arrangements within many higher education institutions have yet to fully take account of the diversity of students found in higher education. There are many examples of changes to ‘academic production processes’, e.g. the use of distance / blended education; offshore and partnered higher education; and programs designed specifically for part-time students. However, there is usually less systematic examination of how changes to these processes require changes to quality assurance mechanisms.

Many universities have a well-established strategic planning and budget cycle (Anderson, Johnson & Milligan, 1999), in which plans are updated to take account of changes in the external environment, for example, changes in student demand. However, it not clear that the updating of strategic and operational plans proceeds from a comprehensive review of the differing needs of diverse student cohorts and how best to balance improvements across these cohorts. Incorporating explicit consideration of the needs of different student groups into strategic planning processes may offer institutions an enhanced capacity to manage internal quality assurance while ensuring that the needs of specific student cohorts are not overlooked.

Student-centered ways of defining the student experience

One way of looking at the student experience is to consider what students want and expect from their time at university, noting that this changes over time (cf. James, 2002; Tricker, 2003). The concept of ‘students’ as ‘customers’ or ‘consumers’ is contested even by students (ESU, 2005), and for reasons discussed in the next section we are not suggesting that the student experience should be characterised solely in terms of ‘the customer is always right’. However, it seems reasonable to start a consideration of the student experience with an exploration of what students hope for.

Current research on higher education shows that students want many things from higher education. Overall these ‘wants’ appear fairly evenly balanced between ‘credential / employment’ benefits (a degree, preferably with prestige, and subsequent employment) and the benefits for self-development and personal empowerment that come from learning (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). Facilities and social opportunities for personal growth are also common elements in defining the student experience (e.g. THES, 2009). Time and time again, we find that most students really do want to use their time in higher education purposefully, even where the end goal is enhanced career prospects.

Therefore, a summary of what all students want from higher education might look like this:

1. credibility of qualification (i.e. at least recognised for purposes of employment, from an accredited institution)
2. prestige of degree (i.e. benefits from institutional prestige)
3. affordability
4. effectiveness of learning/opportunities for self-actualisation
5. convenience and service quality of learning opportunities (when the student wants them, how they want them, in a location where they want them)
6. supportive and facilitative environment
7. opportunities to explore alternative activities and develop the whole person.

To gauge how well institutions are meeting student needs and expectations there is an ever-increasing number of surveys, large and small of the ‘student experience’, student or graduate satisfaction and student engagement (see for example Harvey, Plimmer, Moon & Geall, 1997; Audin, Davy & Barkham, 2003; Clewes, 2003; THES, 2009). There is of course an important distinction between ‘actual experience’ surveys that tend to emphasise student learning, facilities and social amenities (‘is this a good place to be?’) and prospective and retrospective surveys, in which other elements of the quality mix, such as perceived prestige or value for money, form an element of students’ judgments about quality.

Our focus in this paper is the quality of the actual experience of students, leaving aside those elements such as prestige, affordability and labour market demand, which may guide student choice but which are difficult to control for many or even all individual higher education institutions. That is, we consider the final four elements in the list above, together with the first (the basic credibility of the qualification).

Drawing from student views of the student experience, we see that the ideas of learning and being empowered to learn feature markedly, together with some sense that the student experience should also encompass the preconditions for this transformation (such as a supportive environment) and more typical consumer elements such as efficient services.

Institution-centered perspectives on a quality student experience

Higher education has some features that make it difficult to guarantee that any particular person will have a good student experience. In the first place, higher education is a service that can only be evaluated by reference to the actual experiences of a person and indeed, involves people in co-production of the experience. In this respect it has much in common with tourism, where a travel company can do much to assure the quality of aspects of its services, such as the sights that are visited, the form of interaction with ‘locals’, the accommodation and transport, the tour guides, but ultimately cannot ensure that every single person participating will have a great time.

Higher education also has something in common with fitness clubs (Deech, 2006), as it can provide the resources but cannot guarantee that those attending will get fit. Moreover, higher education also has a particular judging and warranting function, so not all students are guaranteed to succeed, although of course students should not be admitted unless they have a very reasonable chance of attaining a qualification. That is, “a good student experience is defined not entirely by students but also by academics in terms of what students must demonstrate they have learnt in order to receive a qualification.” (Ng & Forbes, 2008). On these grounds, person-centred approaches that focus wholly on student well-being (e.g. Audin et al., 2003) cannot fully account for the student experience.

Given these characteristics, what we might expect from a higher education institution by way of guaranteeing a good student experience?

One starting point would be to assure the quality of elements that are readily controllable by the institution and traditionally understood, e.g. ‘academic elements’ such as assessment, curriculum, teaching; ‘service elements’, such as facilities, student support services; and ‘social elements’, such as clubs and societies and so on. While such an approach may be adequate, it tends to overlook the interrelatedness of informal interactions in facilitating learning. In this respect, practice within many universities appears to be outrunning the

traditional categories of quality assurance – more and more ‘learning spaces’ are being provided to support less structured and more dynamic socio-academic exchanges among learners. However, from this starting point, we might take the basic elements of ‘academic’, ‘services’ and ‘social’ and the essential role of the institution in guaranteeing the quality of the output (the graduate).

Another starting point would be robust and ongoing discussion within the institution about the definition and meaning of student engagement and how to assure this. The importance of engagement as a contributor to both academic processes and outcomes is now widely accepted (consider for example the National Survey of Student Engagement in the USA and the counterpart AUSSE in Australia and New Zealand) as well as the discussion in the recent Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, 2008). From this starting point, we might take a need to assure the quality of student engagement and also a need to empower students to be prepared for the learning demands and opportunities they will encounter.

Yet another starting point could be a discussion of student diversity and how best to assure the quality of diverse experiences. For example, external reviews considering the theme of ‘student experience’ would typically consider the following questions:

- What does the institution know about the expectations and needs of different student cohorts?
- What about changing expectations and needs over time (student life-cycle models)?
- What features of the student experience are most important to different students?
- What differences in outcomes are there among diverse student groups?
- How well do the institution’s ‘imaging’, services and standards reflect diverse expectations and needs?
- Equivalent, comparable, and different experiences – how are they conceptualised and addressed by the institution?
- How is the research literature on retention and engagement being applied across diverse groups of students?

Drawing from all these views, we suggest that an institution-centred perspective on the quality of the student experience would involve recognition of:

1. the distinction between academic activities and other services and interactions, yet sensitivity to their interrelatedness
2. the role of the institution in maintaining academic standards and the credibility of awards
3. an emphasis on student engagement and transformation
4. the diversity of students and how this might affect both processes and outcomes within the academic production process.

The student experience and personal identity

A further way of understanding ‘the student experience’ is to consider the concept in relation to the shaping or colouring of personal identity. Broadly, the ‘student experience’ is used to refer to:

- all experiences of *an individual student*, including wider life experiences
- all experiences of an individual student while *in their identity as a ‘student’*
- All experiences of individual students that contribute to their *personal development as learners*

- all experiences of *facets of the institution* experienced by an individual student
- ‘*consumer*’ experiences of an individual student, i.e. facilities and services.

These diverse approaches range from more holistic and person-centred to more atomised and institution-centred. It is unlikely that students divide their identities neatly between ‘learner’ and ‘consumer’ or their experiences between ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’, although many institutions discuss the student experience as if this is the case. On the other hand, an increasing number of students may experience higher education not as a ‘total’ experience, where their identity is defined by being a student, but as only one (quite small) element in the development and continuous re-creation of their personal identities (McInnis, 2003). The second definition, which strikes a balance between person-centred and institution-centred approaches and which permits diverse amounts of time in one’s identity as a student, is the one we use in this paper.

Representation of the student experience for quality assurance purposes

From the discussions in the previous three sections, we suggest that the most comprehensive way to consider the student experience is as the experience of people while in their identities as students, recognising the interconnectedness of academic and other developmental experiences, but also the credentialing or judging function of the institution.

For purposes of quality assurance, we identify a model composed of four overlapping institutional spheres of activity, as in Figure 1.

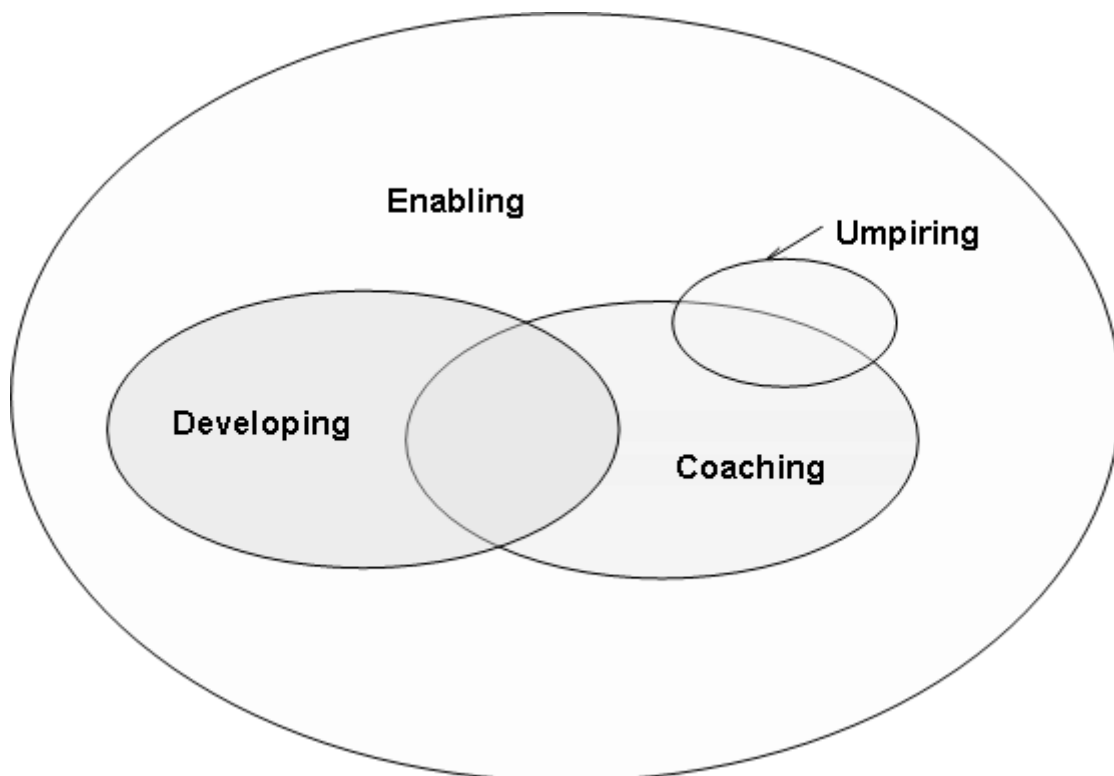


Figure 1: Representation of four spheres of the student experience

The characterisation of these four spheres of activity attempts to introduce a more dynamic and student-centred emphasis than is found in standard divisions of institutional activities into

academic and non-academic. The scope of activities within each sphere is as follows (cf. Baird & Gordon, 2009):

- **Umpiring:** this sphere is concerned with the ‘rules of the game’, i.e. rules for participating in higher education, including admission, progression, assessment of students’ work and requirements for awards. It includes ensuring the integrity of the institution’s judging and warranting functions.
- **Coaching:** this sphere is concerned with the actions of academics and other staff to enable and facilitate student learning. It covers teaching, specialist advice, the structuring of formal (and more informal) learning opportunities, such as group discussions and specific learning tasks and challenges, e.g. assignments, quizzes and projects. It also includes facilitation of student learning by staff who are not necessarily discipline experts, e.g. language and learning advisers, academic developers.
- **Enabling:** this sphere is concerned with the physical facilities and resources that enable learning and networking to occur, including not only resources such as IT, libraries, laboratories and teaching spaces, but also those facilities that allow people to participate in higher education, such as car parking, accommodation, child care.
- **Developing:** this sphere is concerned with the opportunities that are available for informal learning, social interactions, personal growth and empowerment. It covers opportunities for students to interact with each other (and also with staff) across a wide range of situations and activities.

These four spheres are sufficiently familiar to encompass familiar institutional domains yet they highlight the permeability of divisions, such as the division between ‘academic/ non-academic’ and ‘formal / informal’ forms of learning, just as an athlete might receive coaching advice from a range of physical therapists and from other athletes as well as from experts in the discipline. They form the ‘ground’ for quality assurance of the student experience.

Systematic quality assurance across the four spheres

The four spheres address the criteria suggested above as important for assuring the quality of the student experience, but we also need a means to take account of diversity in the student body. We do this by taking a ‘similarities/differences’ approach to analysing intended outcomes and institutional provision across the four spheres.

Our proposed approach to systematic quality assurance of the student experience is summarised as follows:

1. Identify likely variables that might affect the student experience and group these variables into tentative student cohorts.
2. For the ‘umpiring’ and ‘coaching’ spheres, consider the desired academic outcomes and standards, and what ‘what needs to be the same? / what should be or needs to be different?’ for different student cohorts.
3. Taking into account any differences in outcomes and standards identified for the ‘umpiring’ and ‘coaching’ spheres, consider the necessary or desirable differences and similarities among methods, opportunities or facilities across the ‘coaching’, ‘developing’ and ‘enabling’ spheres, considering how overlaps among the spheres might be used to ensure consistency and improve student empowerment and engagement.

4. Having identified the range of potential opportunities and facilities, identify how quality will be assured for each element, including the setting of standards for service delivery, means of assessing performance against standards, and the use of feedback loops.
5. Identify the similarities among different groups of students and refine cohorts if necessary.
6. Identify potential improvements to quality or quality assurance within the sphere, for particular groups of students, taking account of overlaps among the spheres.
7. Discuss and review approach with students to refine and inform.

Illustration

To illustrate, we take the example of the ‘coaching’ sphere. The first step is to do a rough cut for a cohort, by identifying of some of the broad variables that may affect a student’s experience, such as:

- academic discipline area(s), including generalist/specialised program of study and the extent of workplace practice requirements
- gender
- age
- full-time/part-time
- re-locating
- internal or external or blended study mode
- campus (e.g. main campus or campuses, branch campus, learning centre or partnership onshore, learning centre or partnership offshore)
- language background other than English
- ‘first in family’ to higher education or not /socio-economic status
- special needs, e.g. students with a disability
- indigenous students
- cultural background/ethnicity/religion
- entry pathway / prior experience with vocational or higher education
- personal issues.

The year of study will also be important, e.g. undergraduate/postgraduate, first year, final year. A number of universities have identified distinctive student cohorts through cluster analysis of these types of variables (Messinis, Sheehan & Miholicic, 2008). There are few surprises in this list but it does suggest that institutions should be collecting information on most of these variables and using the data to identify cohorts where outcomes or engagement are comparatively poor. Also, the identification of variables and cohorts does not have to always come from data or be based primarily on demographic factors: discussions with students are likely to engender a range of more creative ideas about variability.

Having identified likely cohorts (and it should always be kept in mind that other variables may emerge as significant), the next step is to work out whether the institution wishes to ensure achievement of the same level of outcomes/standards for all cohorts of students or whether there should be planned differences in student outcomes due to the coaching that is provided. (This is a different question to that for the outcomes of ‘umpiring’, which considers among other matters whether any groups of students should have their work judged differently to other groups).

The ‘outcomes/standards’ step is often overlooked, as it is usually taken for granted that academic standards and outcomes across institutions must be comparable for all graduates in a particular discipline. In fact, academic standards across a wide range of institutions must be

‘equivalent’ in many education systems, either by regulation or by codes of practice (such as the subject benchmark statements in the UK). Of course, most academics would want students to pursue common intended final outcome standards. At the same time, academics might accept different rates of progress towards these standards to take account of situation of particular groups of students.

Let us assume for now, however, that the institution does not wish to see any variance in student outcomes due to planned differences in coaching. The next step is to consider the methods (pedagogies in this case), opportunities or facilities that ‘need to be the same / should be or need to be different’ for different students or variables to achieve an agreed level of student outcomes, looking within the ‘coaching’ but also across the ‘developing’ and ‘enabling’ spheres. This is familiar territory in regard to ‘coaching’, as clearly the nature of coaching would be expected to differ between on-campus and online students. But pedagogy and teaching, including additional or alternative support or more informal learning opportunities, may also differ for students whose first language is not English or who are at risk of dropping out. As for outcomes, the important feature is that the institution plans for the differences that it considers need to be there, including differences in and across the ‘developing’ and ‘enabling’ spheres.

The next step is to identify the tools and routines that will be required for effective quality assurance, tailored to different methods and outcomes. There are a range of quality assurance devices relevant to coaching and umpiring, including the use of skilled and experienced staff, peer review, a range of checks and balances, feedback from stakeholders.

For example, the quality assurance requirements for effective ‘coaching’ and ‘developing’ of online part-time students may be different to those for on-campus full-time students (e.g. different skills sets and different forms of peer review). The performance measures may also differ accordingly. On the other hand, given the increasing use of online techniques, perhaps the methods for effective coaching of both groups have largely converged, so the quality assurance regimes and service standards can be similar.

Having been through these steps, a general picture or map should have emerged of proposed similarities and differences in outcomes, processes (methods, opportunities, facilities) and quality assurance tools by student cohorts across the four spheres. At this stage, the overlaps across all the spheres should be considered to see if there are synergies or new ways of doing things. Then, similar processes that have been proposed for different groups can be identified, to reduce duplication or perhaps consider new cohort groupings. This mapping should then identify desired improvements within the sphere and the student cohorts or groups that will most directly benefit.

Finally, institutions should not forget to involve students in discussing this approach, explaining the thinking and refining the mapping. The proposed map could form the basis of more ‘negotiated engagement’ (McInnis, 2003) with students prior to enrolment about expectations and the assistance that is available to achieve particular outcomes.

Concluding comments

The proposed approach draws in each of the four spheres through a consideration of the role of ‘enabling’ and ‘developing’ spheres in ensuring good umpiring and coaching. It also relates quality and service standards for each sphere, e.g. standards for child care and IT in the ‘enabling’ sphere, to desired student outcomes. Although we have suggested a whole of institution model, the approach is scaleable: it could be used for students in a particular faculty or program, provided that staff working across all spheres are involved in the process.

Some elements may be considered discretionary: in the ‘developing’ sphere, for example, it is up to an institution to determine whether it plans for the same range of opportunities for all students or whether it plans for some particular groups of students to access to fewer ‘developing’ experiences (on the assumption that this will not adversely affect academic outcomes) but perhaps to pay less. This is not as far-fetched as it may seem. Some universities in Australia have entered into agreements with private providers to offer what is effectively the first year of a degree program at alternate campuses with fewer ‘developing’ opportunities, while in the USA, the State Board of Education in Pennsylvania has proposed creating a four-year ‘no frills’ institution ‘without extras like athletics programs, fancy gyms, and plush dormitories’ (TCHE 2009).

Much of what we are suggesting is not new, in the sense that there is ongoing deliberation within institutions about better tailoring of services and support to improve student engagement and the quality of learning. However, by making explicit ideas and assumptions that are usually implicit in institutional planning and quality assurance, the potential arises for different ways of looking at old problems and a more holistic consideration of the student experience. This approach also indicates some of the ways in which institutions might better tailor their student feedback surveys for more differentiated information.

Use of this approach may assist institutions to justify and prioritise improvements to the student experience. Under our model, improvements to the validity of assessment methods are considered to be improvements to the student experience just as new sporting facilities would be. Improving the student experience inevitably involves making trade-offs but a comprehensive identification of improvements may help to ensure a sensible balance between ‘coaching/umpiring’ and ‘enabling/developing’ elements.

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