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Higher Education and the Student Experience

Professor Les Ebdon

It's a pleasure to be here. I could put a number of hats on. When you come from Luton hats are important! I could put on the hat of the Chair of the Student Experience Policy Committee, I could put on the hat for Chair of the Million Plus think tank, or the hat of the Vice Chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire, but I thought I'd speak in a personal capacity this morning. Mrs Thatcher, in her heyday, was reported to have told the captains of British industry to get their ducks in a row. Vice Chancellors are quite grateful to get their ducks in the same river! Speaking on behalf of Vice Chancellors is quite a challenging thing, so I thought I'd speak for myself. It's particularly challenging to speak about the student experience and be followed by Wes Streeting - he is a very powerful advocate for students.

The student experience has been the subject of much discussion in recent years and understandably so, because there's a significant cost to the taxpayer, to students and to graduates and that cost has increased. Universities in this country offer excellent value for money according to several reports - HEPI themselves have produced some, there have been reports from the NUS that Wes may well refer to, and there have certainly been reports from UUK as well. I'm delighted that Paul Ramsden's here because he's recently sent a report to the Secretary of State on the student experience which evidenced the United Kingdom's excellent reputation for teaching and the excellent outcomes that we've seen for our graduates and our economy. I don't want to dwell on this because if there are any MPs here, it will only make them more convinced that Vice Chancellors are complacent. I actually wanted to look at some of the things which are driving change rather than looking back, and of those drivers of changes I wanted to pick out just three - the student expectation, technology and diversity.

Fees have certainly changed expectations for full-time home students, just as they did when they were introduced for overseas students and for part-time students. The students have become more demanding. It's not uncommon to be asked as a Vice Chancellor, "What am I getting for my £3,000?" Some students regard themselves as customers, as Bahram has suggested. I don't find that an unhelpful analogy - students are customers in a particular sense, and the analogy which is most commonly used is that of a gym. You pay a subscription to a gym to get fit, but just paying the money doesn't make you fit; you actually have to participate in the activities of the gym.

But more students see themselves as partners in learning than as anything else. Partners in learning will want a say in the curriculum, in how they're taught, and they talk about the return on the investment they are making in their lives by becoming students. They're expecting a high quality student experience with research-informed teachers, committed to excellent teaching. Hence, all universities need to be engaged in research and all universities need to value teaching, and to achieve that we need to have excellent staff development support for our staff.

The second driver I want to draw attention to is technology. ICT these days is all-pervasive. When I was a student, it would have been my dream to go to lectures without getting out of bed! That's now possible with virtual learning environments delivering podcasts over the net to wherever you are. And, of course, universities have with enthusiasm embraced e-learning and e-supported learning, and they have mixed it all up into blended learning, using the best aspects of different learning styles. But the key to success in education remains time on task and, therefore, to be successful these new approaches to learning have to promote engagement and interaction between the student and the medium.

We've also learnt significantly in recent years about the social aspect of learning - unless students have social interaction, then the learning process is much weaker. You'll notice as you go around the country that virtually every university has a major building programme going on. We have one costing £74 million - the new building that we're putting up is a student-centred building with lots of informal learning space in it, because that's what we lacked in the previous style of buildings. It's a major change. A few years ago we would have said, "What's all this wasted space?" Now we know that it's very important to have a lot of informal learning spaces in our buildings.

The third driver is diversity. There's a strong belief that every student is an 18 year old school leaver with three A Levels, and it's necessary occasionally to remind the general public and MPs that the majority of students come from colleges, not from schools; less than half enter via the traditional A Level route (there are over 2000 different qualifications which are now accepted by universities for entrance); and in my own university, for example, 42% of students are aged over 24 before they join us. So we have a very diverse group of students and it's therefore not surprising that they have very diverse learning styles. And the way that students learn is changing very fast. I went to a lecture by Lord Puttnam last night and that was one of his arguments. I would add to that, "... and it's changing in a different way for each student." Some students are digital natives. Some are well-adapted to our multi-media world. Others still learn in a more traditional way. Elsewhere we talk about the 'Every Child Matters' agenda. We need an 'Every Student Matters' agenda, and that's difficult to implement at a time of massification in the higher education sector.

At the University of Bedfordshire we are actively exploring what it means to be a student-centred university. Let me give one example. The University of Bedfordshire Business School a couple of years ago introduced a revolutionary new way of teaching Business via what they inelegantly call the Business Pods. It's actually a simulated work environment. As a chemist, I joke with them that they've finally discovered laboratory work. So you don't see students sat in serried ranks before a lecturer. Their work is project-based and those projects are real projects supplied by local companies pleased to get the free consultancy on their problems of a group of bright, young minds. You'll see students gathered around clusters of computers working in teams. You'll see them in a simulated board room hammering out difficult decisions. You may see them online to the Stock Exchange looking at their virtual investments or brainstorming around an electronic board. The programme is adapted naturally to each student and the lecturers are more facilitators than lecturers. I'm delighted to say that the programme's been a great success. It's led to greater engagement by students in the programme, which has improved grades and improved

retention, and additionally it's generated some great interest from local employers. On the downside for a Vice Chancellor, it's more expensive. It requires a lot more space and more staff time. But I think it's an example of 21st century teaching, a 21st century student experience that exploits technology to meet those diverse student expectations that I was talking about.

For me, when I was a student, my student experience was really life-changing and that's what I would like it to be for the students of today and tomorrow, opening up new horizons of learning and understanding, promoting creativity and enterprise, enhancing social mobility, producing rewarding careers while advancing scientific and cultural awareness. That's the kind of student experience we should be aiming for and I know that the graduates of that experience will not let us down or the nation.

Wes Streeting:

Before I get into what I want to say, I just wanted to flag up the NUS Student Experience Report which is available on our website. It's a report about the full-time student experience, and I'll talk about the part-time student experience later, but, rather than me reeling off all of the stats this morning, you can take a good look for yourselves. It's the first of a three-year project so we'll have another report coming out later this year and a final report the year after, and if we generate more funding then perhaps we can do another set.

In terms of the evolving student experience, there are just a few talking points that I want to generate this morning. One is the impact of massification and diversification on the sector and therefore the student experience itself, what that means for the choices that people are being asked to make before they even apply to university or think about what higher education or gaining higher level skills means, and how that experience is changing and how institutions can think about how they enhance their quality.

I want to pick out at the very beginning two startling statistics from our Student Experience Report which we published last year. The first says that 92% of respondents said that they believed they were given the opportunity to provide feedback on their course, through discussion or dialogue or surveys. But only 51% believed that that feedback was actually acted upon. Secondly, 85% of students want to be involved in shaping their teaching and learning experience and shaping their course to some extent and to some degree, but only 51% say that they are.

So I think the first thing that institutions need to think about is whether they are actually taking on board the feedback that students are providing and listening to it. If they are, why aren't they communicating that effectively to students? Institutions are listening more and more to what students have to say, but not communicating it back. I think that is a bit self-defeating if you want to engage in a real conversation with students. And secondly, there are significant numbers of students who want to be involved to some degree in shaping their own learning experience, but only half of them are. I guess you could say, looking at the glass half full, that 51% of students being involved in shaping their teaching and learning is a good starting point, but it shouldn't be the ceiling of our ambitions, it should be a launch pad to take that work forward. We gave students a sliding scale about the extent to which they wanted to be involved - not every student will want to be a course rep or a Student Union

Sabbatical Officer or want to spend their time poring through Committee papers and Board papers (I can't understand for the life of me why, but there we are). We need to think about not just how we get students involved, but ask students to what extent they wish to be involved and find ways of engaging them in the conversation.

Student representation is very different from student consumerism, but it's not surprising to understand why student consumerism is on the increase. We see it ourselves all the time in the policy discussions we have inside NUS. I won't open up the fees debate, because I think we're going to have a lot of that over the course of the next year or so, but there can be no doubt whatsoever that the nature of the funding system, particularly in England, is breeding a whole new generation of student consumers and increasingly aggressive consumers up and down the country. Not simply students themselves, but also their parents, who are looking at their kids going off to university and getting into significant amounts of debt, and wanting to be absolutely confident that they're getting bang for their buck.

The way in which the current fee system is sold to students is very much on the consumerist model. Government has said historically - it'll be interesting to see over the course of the recession how the language changes, particularly given the current budget and employment situation - that the current funding system is a 'buy now, pay later' scheme. It's almost like going to buy a cinema surround sound system from Comet or Currys. University is also sold as an investment that will pay dividends in the course of your career later on. So higher education is essentially a certificate, a piece of paper that you can cash in for greater financial reward in the jobs market later on. Of course, we also know that the financial reward varies enormously depending on who you are, which course you studied on, which institution you studied at. But, nonetheless, that is the way that higher education is being sold to students and so it's unsurprising that students are becoming more savvy consumers as a result.

What I think needs to be an aspect of the forthcoming fees review is this. In 2006 the level of student contribution per year trebled, but can any institution in the country put their hand on their heart and tell us that the quality of the student experience has improved threefold, or even improved significantly? Can we see the tangible and demonstrable impact of an increase in fees on the student experience? I don't believe we can and I very much endorse and welcome what David Willetts, the Shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills has said on behalf of the Conservative Party, which is that Vice Chancellors have certainly not yet made the case - they may yet, but I'd be surprised - for an increase in student fees on the basis of improving the student experience.

Nonetheless, student consumerism in and of itself is actually reductive to what higher education is all about. We know it's not simply a process of a lecturer transmitting information to students; it's a process of learning and self-discovery, learning about yourself, learning about the course which you embarked upon. As a result, I prefer to see students as co-producers of their education rather than consumers. In fact there seems to be, in public policy terms, an obsession with citizens more generally as consumers. We get so much about consumerism in public service delivery and how all of our public services need to deliver to the people as consumers of those services, but in fact a report published by the think tank Reform in conjunction with Ipsos MORI looking at my generation, the iPod generation, said that as much as people want more

value for money from public services, my generation does not like having a relationship with public services as consumers. They want to do it as citizens, and I think that is absolutely true for higher education as well. And I think it's worth saying off the back of our Student Experience Report that the quality of the student experience in the UK is high and I don't want to knock that. I think I've been accused, or will be accused at least, by some people in the Innovation, Universities and Skills Select Committee of being a bit soft on universities during their recent Inquiry. We were grilled and almost prodded and prompted to bash universities as hard as we could. The blog that the Select Committee has set up would seem to suggest there are lots of disgruntled students out there who have had some pretty appalling experiences. I'm sure that's the case, but looking at the student experience in the broadest terms (the full-time student experience at least) our evidence suggests that the quality of UK higher education is high and students are overwhelmingly satisfied. Whilst of course there are problems in some areas and room for improvement, I think it is self-defeating for student unions to knock institutions just because we think we should, rather than because the evidence backs it up, and so we'll continue to take an evidenced approach, even if the Select Committee chooses to do otherwise.

I want to talk now about some of the things that are having a direct impact on improving the conversation and the experience. The National Student Survey has had a remarkable impact on the student experience and on the mentality of institutions. Some cynics could refer to it as a tool of student consumerism and I understand why people might say that. Some people criticised the National Student Survey from the outset on methodological grounds. I hold my hands up and say that I am long-since converted to the National Student Survey for a number of reasons, not least because as I go around visiting student unions across the country and talking to institutional leaders and staff who are engaged in quality insurance and enhancement, I find that people are absolutely obsessed with the National Student Survey. Even those Vice Chancellors who hate the National Student Survey I think love to hate the National Student Survey - because they know it keeps them on their toes. Why is it that, when the National Student Survey is published, teaching and learning departments across the country start poring through the results and trying to pull out information? It's because they know that, certainly in the broadest terms, it gives us a picture of what's going on. It doesn't give us a detailed picture, but nonetheless it gives us the flashpoints to begin a deeper investigation into what's going on in institutions. And for that reason you can visit hordes of institutions across the country who will tell you what they've been doing on things like feedback and assessment directly as a result of the National Student Surveys. It's been a very welcome innovation and NUS is proud to play a very forthright and firm part in its promotion. Thanks to funding from HEFCE, we are now also looking at the results ourselves and working with student unions to see how they can use that information to enhance the quality of their representation and the quality of the experience.

We have also established a cross-sector group on student engagement, which is chaired by the NUS Chief Executive, Matt Hyde, and brings together a whole host of agencies from across the sector. In fact it started off as a much smaller group and people have been knocking at the door asking to come in! That bodes well for two reasons: the conversation that is able to take place about how we can work together, but also the willingness and enthusiasm of agencies across the sector to have that

conversation and look at the student experience. I think that is very encouraging and points to a sector that's taking the issue very seriously.

The Quality Assurance Agency has been much maligned and it really does annoy me that the Quality Assurance Agency gets such a hard time at the moment, but I think it has been doing remarkable work to push forward the agenda of student representation. It asks critical questions on behalf of the public about both public investment in higher education and also what students are getting for their money. They're taking it seriously, as we can see, by introducing student members on institutional audit panels, which is something really welcome and brings an entirely different perspective to the audit process. I hope it aids institutions in asking critical questions about themselves.

I don't want to point fingers at the sector and say 'This is what you need to do and this is how you need to take the experience forward'. Student unions need to raise their game as well, and we are. Through the Student Union Evaluation Initiative for which we got significant funding from the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, we essentially have our own quality assurance process for student unions. This is where I become a bit self-critical about the organisations I represent. As higher education has diversified, that brings with it significant challenges. The majority of NUS's members are mature, significant numbers of them are part-time, the majority of them are actually in further not higher education, but as the educational landscape changes and as students themselves begin to change, many of the people who are coming into higher education are the very people who are hardest to reach in terms of having a conversation about their teaching and learning. Student unions have been in the past quite complacent or behind the times about this, but we're certainly pulling up our socks on this issue. SUEI helps us to do that by making sure that student representation is at the heart of what student unions do, and that we are reaching out to diverse groups of students. It's also reflected in democratic changes that have taken place inside NUS. Our new National Executive Council - the elections are almost over - will involve more international students, post-graduate students, part-time students, mature students than ever before. We are also merging with the National Post-Graduate Committee which I hope will improve the quality of both of our organisations' work on that particular area.

The Student Experience Research Report is an example of how we're trying to aid the sector by producing high quality research. We'll be looking at the results of the Future Track Survey, looking at the experience of part-time students when it's published and we'll be embedding that in the work across student unions. Thanks to funding from the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education, we published a strategic framework and evaluation tool kit for student unions to ask questions about the extent to which they are internationalising their own work and involving the diversity of international students in their representation. And later this month in this place we'll be launching a report looking at the experience of students with children - people who are often very much overlooked. In the past we've overlooked part-time students in particular, to our detriment and to theirs, and the fees debate is a great example of this.

In 2004 all of us had an enormous row about what happened to full-time students, but completely ignored the fact that part-time students still pay up-front fees, and the student support system for part-time students is, frankly, a mess, and can't be allowed

to continue any longer. The challenge for me in my last year as NUS President will be to look at how the role of student unions is fundamentally changing. In the 1980s and 1990s, student unions made an awful lot of money off the back of providing student services. It was a great boom in beer and shops and bars across the country, and we did all of that because the profits aided our core business, student representation. Since then the commercial outlook has changed dramatically. Beer consumption in student unions has declined significantly, in spite of what the press may tell you, and student unions are in a hard financial time, as many Vice Chancellors will know from the annual block grant rows. We're looking at this as an opportunity to fundamentally re-work the role of student unions and return to what they were originally about. Student representation first and foremost - and not just the activists who shout the loudest, but the diversity of students who come onto our campuses, or even those who don't come onto our campuses, to make sure that every student voice and experience is listened to. As we ask institutions to provide a more personalised service, we need to make sure that student unions are having personalised interaction with the diversity of their members.

The student experience isn't just about teaching and learning. It's about the broader experience as well. It is about the sports clubs and societies, it is about the interactions and the conversations, it is about meeting people from entirely different backgrounds and circumstances to yourself, finding out something new about them and about their background and, in doing so, finding out something new about yourself. That's why I think the framework for higher education which will be published by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills later this year will be a really important juncture in the debate surrounding higher education. Of course, it will be the end of a conversation that has led to the production of the framework itself, but I think the framework has to be the conversation about how higher education goes forward, to set the terms around how our higher education is funded, but also to set out what and who it's for. Particularly in the hardest of economic times, Government Ministers, and certainly Treasury Ministers, will be looking very critically at where they are investing, and they will want to make sure that every investment they put in aids our economic recovery and boosts the quality of life for people across the UK.

We pursue higher education as an economic driver to our detriment and to the detriment of our society as a whole. The emphasis on a higher level of skills isn't just important for the economy, it's important for students themselves as well. Of course they want jobs, of course they want to make sure that their earning capacity is improved and they want to make sure that they have power and control over their own lives.

We do need to think about what impact increased part-time learning, increased work-based learning and higher education within a university setting is doing to the student experience itself and the quality of the student experience. I don't want to make instant judgments and suggest that the full-time experience is the only valid experience or the only valuable experience, but I also want to make sure that we're not embarking too far down this route of work-based learning and the part-time experience without asking fundamental questions first - 'Are there people who may lose out as a result?' and 'Are we maintaining the high quality, gold standard higher education experience in the UK that makes us internationally valued and recognised?'

The expansion of higher education, and certainly the provision of higher education in more innovative and flexible forms, is welcome because, without that, we would never have got so many people into higher education and we would never have opened opportunities to people with potential who might not have had the chance before. But we do need to ask whether this experience meets students' expectations, so that's something maybe for us to talk about.

I'll end by talking about contact time. I think this is where we really annoyed some of the Select Committee. Through the work of HEPI and certainly the work of journalists, contact hours have been right at the centre of public debate, promoting a level of public concern and interest in higher education that we have previously only seen in primary and secondary education. Our report showed that, on average, students had 15 hours of contact time a week and undertook 16 hours of private study per week. But is it simply about the number of hours clocked up, or is it about what happens inside those hours? There is no doubt whatsoever that, on a number of courses at a number of institutions, some students are absolutely aghast at the number of hours they get without even getting a chance to think about the quality, but elsewhere students are having lots of interaction with teaching and learning staff at their institution which is just not the quality they want. Something that comes out in our report is that students want more direct face-to-face time with their lecturers and teaching staff, in smaller groups. Now, if I asked Vice Chancellors to go away and get that done, they would rightly come back and say it is not possible – they have increasing financial pressures and aren't looking to recruit many staff at the moment, and staff trade unions already say their members are overworked. All of those things are fair. I think we need a radical rethink of teaching and learning in higher education. Why on earth is it that we're still delivering teaching and learning as we were when higher education was an elite pursuit and lecturers were talking to lecture theatres no bigger than this room? The numbers of students on our campuses have changed, who they are has changed, so why has teaching and learning stayed so similar? Many people across the sector are already thinking about this - it certainly came out as a theme in the work that Paul Ramsden did for the Secretary of State and I know it's something that the Higher Education Academy is well-placed to think about. We also need to look at the variance of quality time across identical subjects in different institutions and make sure that there isn't some corner-cutting taking place.

To sum up, higher education is larger and more diverse than ever before. That's a good thing. It's clear that the drive towards higher level skills will see an expansion of Level 4 provision, and before that happens, we need to ask these questions about the experience. When students are making a choice about what to study, where to study or whether they even study at all, institutions need to be very, very careful about how they market what's on offer - not just trying to sell up the experience, but also to identify your USP (to use marketing terminology). A student from a background with very little or no tradition of higher education will have a level of cultural capital and information, advice and guidance far below that of someone whose family has got university experience and goes to a school which has a tradition of sending students to the elite institutions. So we all have a job, as student unions, institutions, schools and everyone playing a part in the IAG framework, to explain exactly what is on offer in UK higher education, what factors people need to be taking into account when making their decision, and where people will get the most value for themselves from their student experience.

