Developing and Supporting the Curriculum:  
Student perspectives on the changes and developments in higher education

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Introduction
In Part 1, this paper considers the Scottish political agenda and social changes, and how these affect the student population.

In Part 2 we consider the attitudes of students, particularly relating to finances and motivation to study, customer versus partner, and technology.

In Conclusions and discussion, we look at how factors in both of the above need to be considered in developing the curriculum, with a focus on institutional responses to student demographics, flexible journeys, the way we teach, and student engagement.

Part 1: The Scottish political agenda and social changes
The current financial climate is undoubtedly concentrating minds on ‘value for money’ which tends to be defined in terms of political objectives. The Scottish Government’s *Putting Learners at the Centre* paper and other initiatives set out an agenda for higher education that will, alongside social and demographic changes, affect the profile and nature of students studying in our institutions.

Curriculum for Excellence
While the student body is changing, school leavers still make up the majority of the student population in many institutions. However, Curriculum for Excellence may change the nature of these students.

Under this new approach, school leavers will receive a broad, general education, with core skills of literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing embedded in all subject areas. A greater emphasis on interdisciplinary learning should enable them to visualise links between their different subjects, put information in context, and see the application of what they are learning in the workplace and the wider world, as well as promoting responsible citizenship.

Part-time and distance learners
The Scottish Government has indicated that they will bring forward policy proposals in early 2012 relating to expanding support for part-time students, potentially encouraging increased numbers and a more diverse range of such students (Scottish Government, 2011).
More flexible admissions and reforming the 'learner journey'

The Scottish Government is encouraging higher education institutions (HEIs) to recognise a wider range of qualifications for entrants, look at greater use of contextualised admissions, and recognise prior learning. Greater flexibility is also being encouraged, such as increasing direct entry to second year for school leavers encouraged to stay on for a sixth year.

In the Government’s view, the current level of articulation with HNC/HND is unsatisfactory and they may legislate to require these qualifications to be appropriately valued by all HEIs, making articulation more of an entitlement. Currently 90 per cent of articulation happens at five institutions in Scotland (Scottish Funding Council, 2007) and examples of institutions offering full 2+2 degrees are limited.

There is already a growth in the number of students aged between 21 and 29 (Scottish Government, 2011). Recognition of prior learning, growth in part-time provision, and more flexible journeys may further increase admissions from this group. These students are coming to HE after a substantial break and another set of life experiences which will need to be recognised.

Widening access

Scotland currently lags behind the rest of the UK in widening access to students from lower socio-economic groups (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)). The Scottish Government is proposing a range of measures which will require action from universities on widening access, including the prospect of financial penalties where access targets are not achieved.

Scottish Funding Council grants to institutions

The recent budget has addressed some concerns around a university ‘funding gap’ with a significant increase in public investment. However, there will be closer scrutiny of the sector by the Government, and significant expectations from students and wider stakeholders. Maintaining or increasing student numbers and exploring different student markets have long been a factor in institutions’ strategic plans and missions. Going forward, Government imperatives will also require institutions to consider provision overlap, possible specialisation, and collaboration or merger, though not to the extent of the college sector (Scottish Government, 2011).

Population demographics

The number of people aged between 18 and 21 in the population is in decline (Higher Education Policy Institute Report, *Demand for Higher Education to 2020 and beyond*). While this is less pronounced in sectors of the population that students typically come from, pressure to maintain numbers in a competitive environment persists. Responding to this will differ from institution to institution but may affect demographics.

Taught postgraduates (PGT)

These students represent a third of the increase in numbers in the sector over the last decade (Scottish Government, 2011). The majority are international. Financial markets have often driven this recruitment but PGT students now make up a significant level of teaching provision in certain institutions. Changes in Government support for PGT, changes to student visa arrangements, and changes to undergraduate fees may all affect supply of and demand for PGT places in the future.
Equality and diversity

Legislation, changing values, social fairness, societal makeup, and the increasing diversity of the student population are among the drivers that make this an increasingly important part of agenda for HEIs. Considerations include the following.

• Retention: equality and diversity considerations are important within this agenda. For example, students from non-traditional backgrounds are more likely to withdraw from studies before completion (Scottish Funding Council, 2011), therefore delivering on widening access means institutions must identify how these students can be better supported through to graduation.

• Greater proportions of international students, and an increasing need for an international outlook for graduates: an 'internationalised' curriculum is about curriculum content, but it is also about the way in which that content is taught, learned and assessed, and how students are supported within these processes (Caruana, 2011).

• Attainment gaps: on undergraduate degree courses a higher proportion of men achieve first-class honours degrees, but a higher proportion of women achieve upper-second honours degrees. A lower proportion of black students achieve first-class honours than non-black students. Disabled students are also less likely to attain first-class honours than those who have not declared a disability (highlighted in Equality Challenge Unit Report, 2010).

It is interesting to note that there are significant ethnicity differences in student satisfaction data; in particular, the number of students reporting to have 'received sufficient advice and support' for their studies (National Student Survey (NSS)).
Part 2: The attitudes of students

Student finance and motivation

The increasing costs of higher education, whether this is increased fees for students in the rest of the UK or international students, or the rising living costs of all students, coupled with increases in both youth and graduate unemployment, will impact on students’ motivations and behaviours. Students are also increasingly working part-time during term time to finance their studies.

A recent survey by the National Union of Students (NUS) (NUS Student Experience Report 2010-11) found that:

- 76 per cent of final year students said they planned to get paid employment after finishing study. 33 per cent planned to do further study; a decrease from last year’s 38 per cent
- 70 per cent of final year students were concerned about the economic climate, an increase from 66 per cent
- 64 per cent of final year students thought that university had enhanced their career prospects, but just 43 per cent felt their studies equipped them with the skills to enter the labour market
- Students’ main reasons for wanting to go to university were: to gain qualifications (71 per cent); to improve chances of getting a job (42 per cent); or to improve earning potential (39 per cent)
- Just 34 per cent said they wanted to go ‘for the experience’, and 28 per cent wanted ‘to learn more about interesting subjects’. Those from lower socio-economic groups were also more likely to be motivated by improving earning potential and less likely to be motivated by ‘the experience’.¹

Students as customers or students as partners

All students, not just those paying fees, will be looking for ‘value for money’ from their education, requiring a focus of resources on the ‘student experience’. A number of initiatives aimed at measuring HEI performance including NSS and Key Information Sets (KIS), allied with the student funding regime and the increasing importance of league tables, are encouraging students to see themselves as customers. Government policy actively supports this approach in England.

In Scotland we have developed the role of students as partners through an emphasis on student engagement in our quality processes and sector level support from student participation in quality scotland (sparqs). We also wish to engage them in their subject and learning at a departmental level.

Technology and teaching

Technology presents a constant challenge. Not using information and communications technology (ICT) as part of teaching is not an option; familiarity with ICT is also a vital transferable skill and vital to employability. But students are not impressed at present. NUS carried out some research for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and highlighted the following trends:

- students prefer a choice in how they learn - ICT is seen as one of many possibilities, alongside part-time and traditional full-time learning, and face-to-face teaching

¹ See also Centre for Economics and Business Research (2011) ‘Degrees of Doubt: Is university worth the investment?’.
students are concerned about the ICT competency of lecturers and academic staff - there are varying levels of ICT competence on the part of lecturers and staff and, while some are clearly skilled or at least able to function in an IT setting, others lack even the most rudimentary IT skills; 21 per cent of students thought their lecturers needed additional training

opinions are fundamentally divided over e-learning, especially taking into consideration course type and exposure to ICT. Significant advantages and disadvantages were raised in all of the qualitative research with the students

appropriateness of technology varies significantly from course to course - students value the incorporation of ICT into their learning experience, but the demand in terms of the degree to which this occurs varies depending on the course and the type of study and assessment.

Other research (NUS Student Experience Report 2010-11), shows that ICT is extensively used by students but only 20 per cent of students are positive about gaining more from sessions when ICT is integrated in teaching, and only 10 per cent want more teaching presented online. This seems to suggest that ICT is not being used all that well by the lecturers and also that there is an underlying fear that ICT will replace face-to-face contact with staff, which students value very highly.

Technology and learning

Researchers are starting to ask to what extent the way young people think is influenced by new technology. It is an important question: many students arriving in HEIs from school will have had a computer in their homes throughout their entire lives and will have experience of interactive video technologies - and virtually all will have had extensive experience of working with computers from primary school onwards. Almost all students coming direct from secondary school - and indeed most other entrants - will be aware of Google and Wikipedia, and the vast amount of information available to them. However, critically, information is not the same as knowledge and understanding. There are many differences across generations, but the shift to digital technologies has been a substantial one.

Some USA researchers conclude:

Having been raised in an age of media saturation and convenient access to digital technologies, the net generation have distinctive ways of thinking, communicating, and learning. [They] tend toward independence and autonomy in their learning styles, which impacts a broad range of educational choices and behaviours, from 'what kind of education they buy' to 'what, where, and how they learn' (Barnes et al, 2007).

This is an emerging issue and more research will be forthcoming over the next few years. It is not an area that can be ignored in curriculum design (see Donald Clark, Plan B). The need to develop the ability to appraise 'information' critically will be fundamental. Smartphones, for example, give access to the internet anywhere and the information it contains, so students may attach little importance to learning facts. Research at Columbia University has also found this may have had an impact on the way our memory works (Sparrow, 2011). What the internet does not give access to however is knowledge - the ability to use facts and, as the internet often throws up contradictory information, the skills to discern what is right.


3 Ibid, p 41.
Conclusions and discussion

Institutional responses to student demographics

Changes in student demographics have been a constant topic for discussion for many years. To date, trends at a national level (see Scottish Government tables) have been addressed differently by institutions, with some creating specialist niches around particular groups of students. While there are many examples of good practice within institutions, we have not addressed the issue of diversification at a strategic level across the sector.

While institutional responses governed by mission and strategy will continue, there are current political and social agendas that might serve to expand provision across the board for particular groups of students. In particular, there is an impetus to link the funding settlement and introduction of fees for the rest of the UK with widening access agreements; and a range of government initiatives on articulation, widening access and so on will require institutions to adapt accordingly.

Flexible journeys

Greater articulation, increasing part-time, distance, and mature students, and recognition of prior learning could all serve to further challenge our idea of a traditional four-year degree. Technology could push the boundaries even further while supporting innovation.

Do we still fundamentally operate around a model which typically encourages students in the first two years to develop academic and intellectual skills as well as consolidate knowledge, before moving on to more advanced programmes of study? How do we deal with multiple student entry and exit points while still achieving good rates of retention? What about induction, the student experience, and ‘graduateness’? Do we truly have the capacity and the vision to develop a curriculum that supports students to choose what they study (at a detailed module level and across academic disciplines), when and at what pace they study, and how they study and are assessed (on-campus/off-campus/blended)? Can we meet the needs of students wanting specific modules rather than degree programmes as part of a lifelong learning agenda?

Will demand for taught postgraduate courses increase and if so, will it become necessary for more institutions to expand in the delivery of PGT? If more students start to study specialist postgraduate courses, should their undergraduate degrees be more diverse and less subject-based, as is common in the USA? What can we do to maximise the quality of experience for these students and ensure that they have input into their education?

The way we teach

Despite many studies (for example Deslauriers, Schelew and Wieman, 2011) questioning their pedagogy, lectures continue to be a mainstay of university education. Through Enhancement Themes and professional activity we have encouraged innovation in approaches to learning and teaching, but many struggle with how to share practice and roll out innovation.

Technology offers huge potential, but we struggle to seize it strategically. At one end of the scale students regard technology as a basic tool, while at the other end they appear wary of our use of it. How do we ensure our staff can utilise the potential of virtual learning environments and mobile technologies in a way that works for students?
Does Curriculum for Excellence provide potential to offer learning in a different way? Will school leavers be more successful learners, demanding more interactive and innovative learning experiences? Will universities have to raise the bar in meeting these expectations? How do we introduce more innovative forms of teaching when they can often demand more of the learner? If students see themselves as consumers, will that affect their openness to a richer learning experience; will they be too focused on the end product?

Curriculum for Excellence aims to raise standards of learning to have pupils leave school as successful learners, responsible citizens, confident individuals, and effective contributors. Can we build on this?

How do we change the curriculum to be learner-focused, especially considering the needs of learners against a background of widening access and equality and diversity? How do we address the inequalities in retention? Can that learner focus lead to true flexibility? How do we harness the experiences a changing student population brings to the classroom?

With a student focus on employability, how do we harness the outcomes from Graduates for the 21st Century into curriculum reform? Can we go further in breaking down traditional concepts of knowledge and skills to ensure our graduates can operate in an ever-changing workplace?

**Student engagement and educational aspiration**

We must acknowledge the changing attitudes of our learners to university. Students should be able to expect quality of provision and institutional responses to maximise their chance of good outputs. Yet we also want our students to be engaged in learning and our academic disciplines. Can we do both? How do we continue to promote the importance of the learner voice in institutional strategies as well as in shaping individual learning experiences?

What about the wider aspirations of universities beyond the economic success of learners and the nation as a whole? Can we also incorporate wider aspirations of citizenship and wider societal value?
References


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