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Metrification of learning as a risk factor to innovative practice

Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference, 2019

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About Bucks New University



Famous alumni...



A changing landscape...

- “Something has changed in the [British] academy. Many academics are exhausted, stressed, overloaded, suffering from insomnia, feeling anxious, hurt, guilt, and ‘out-of-placeness’. One can observe it all around: a deep, affective, somatic crisis threatens to overwhelm us [...] We know this; yet somehow we feel unable to reassert ourselves [...]. In our brave new world, it seems that a single final criterion of value is recognized: a quantitative, economic criterion. All else is no more than a means. And there is a single method for ensuring that this criterion is satisfied: quantified control (Burrows, 2012)

Increased metrification

- TEF
- Subject-level TEF
- HESA and the Graduate Outcomes Survey
- Retention
- NSS
- League tables

- For what purpose?
 - Arguably, TEF is a tool to determine tuition fee rises and inform market decisions
 - The use of quantitative data to capture and convey performance
 - The role of the student as consumer, not just as learner
(Gunn, 2018)

Live briefs and learning gain

- Part of HEFCE-funded Catalyst Fund Programme Strand A (Gordon and McKenna, 2018)
- Exploring student perceptions of learning gain in relation to innovative cross-disciplinary learning experiences
- Live brief projects with external clients, involving Level 5 and Level 6 students from computing, graphic design and creative advertising
- Two cohorts of students (n=83) undertook collaborative development work and assessments

The Heritage Trail Project

- Collaboration with Wycombe District Council
- Develop a location-sensitive Heritage Trail app to interpret key World War I sites around Wycombe town centre



- Research used observational data, post-delivery focus groups with staff and students (separately) and review of course documentation
- Thematic analysis of focus groups compared with intended learning outcomes in course documentation

- Compared to previous years, student performance in terms of marks was essentially the same...
- ...but students and staff reported high levels of valuable learning beyond the expected outcomes
- A marked disparity between the learning of subject-specific content as enshrined in the intended learning outcomes and the learning of soft skills, such as communication, team working and time management

- Both staff and students believed that an accurate measurement of learning is difficult to capture, but that any measurement would have to be primarily qualitative
- Grades in assessments are seen to focus efforts and valued for pragmatic reasons, but are not considered an accurate measure of learning, which is acknowledged to be a complex and internal process that defies quantification

What the students said...

- *[I] think the grade is very... It's not as broad as if you'd, say, everything you've learned from the stuff you've done. I think it's only one number and it's not saying anything about what we've learned or what we've done, because we might have learned completely different stuff from someone else but have the same grade. So I don't think it shows what we've learned [...] I think it shows our outcome more than what we've learned.*
- *... you can't mark what happened inside us. So, for example, we improved our communication skills, we improved our time managing skills, and I think you can't check it, you can't mark it.*

- In terms of measurable impact, the both the more traditional and innovative approaches had comparable results
- Undeniably, the live brief approach had a powerful impact on learning beyond the measurable, but it was highly resource-intensive, time-consuming and risky
- Involving students in curriculum design requires time, resources and space to be able develop thinking and activity. It means slowing down and even breaking long held institutional processes without a guarantee of success which can feel quite risky and uncomfortable for some within the university (Gordon and McKenna, 2018, p.6)

A final question...

- If 'safer', less pedagogically intensive strategies achieve similar results in terms of achieving outcomes, there is a risk that these will be preferred on the basis of expediency (Gordon and McKenna, 2018).
- In an increasingly metrified higher education environment in which resources are limited, might we be in danger of privileging the measurable at the expense of the valuable?

References

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