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Peter Scott in his book, 'The Meaning of Mass Higher Education' suggests that "The erosion of British Exceptionalism is an incomplete process - traits of an elite system remains in its (the systems) private instincts and residues of a donnish culture" Scott goes on to say that, whilst we might be mass in scale and quantity (and here's where modularity comes in - more later) we remain elite in 'feel' and qualitative terms. There is little doubt however that the UK is catching up (with, for example, the United States) and, certainly, the notion of the Collegial University governed by the academic guild assisted by a low profile administration has been succeeded by the managerial University dominated by an expert cadre of senior managers.

With this in mind, are we actually talking about:

'the ascendancy of the administrator in a mass higher education system'

or, are we simply talking about a creative and professional deployment of resources? Let's see.

Clearly, the move to mass HE has been handled differently in different organisations. My own University expanded dramatically from circa 11,000 - 24,000 students between 1987 - 1992. In others, quantitative expansion has been more modest but, philosophically, change (massification) has been no less challenging.

Continuing education too has felt more than a draught. The move to credit-rate and assess such provision has, for some, dealt a blow to the very raison d'être of such provision.

But, in this brave new world, what do students expect?

A high standard learning experience which is enjoyable, applicable and usable;

Access to academics and a readily available counselling service;

Car parking;

Definitive timetable;

Ease of access to academics;

Good communication between the University and Students;

Reliable information;

Resources - eg library and IT.

What, in reality though, can students actually expect?

Academics not to be available;

Administrative service stops at 5.00 pm;

Car park full;

Lack of rooms, no timetables;

Out of date information;

Saturation of irrelevant information;

To have to wait.

Now, clearly I'm generalising but a number of these issues reinforce, albeit implicitly, the academic/administrative divide which I think is a deeply uncreative way of seeing the world and so is worthy of a pause here. Why do we have such a gap (or even a gulf)? What purpose does it serve? Is it historical, cultural or simply plain prejudice?

Let's return to Scott for a moment and this 'expert cadre of senior managers' - does mass Higher Education blur the boundaries?

Increasingly, jobs are being viewed as hybrid - eg having academic labels but administrative conditions of service. What we need to dispel is the notion of administrators as peripheral, performing roles that are not central to institutional mission or purpose. Roles which make it difficult to gain acceptance, certainly strategic acceptance despite their institutional centrality. Clearly, there is a difference at the chalk-face but, as one progresses through a mass HE structure then careers, both academic and administrative, begin to coincide. Academic staff do less and less teaching as they progress and both senior academics and senior administrators do more and more managing. In times of financial constraint, organisations must deploy their resources creatively. Where then are these boundaries blurred? Let's look again at student expectations. In these expectations (a by no means exhaustive list) access to academics is a theme - why? What students really need (I would suggest) is access to authoritative (expert) advice eg, at induction or in terms of programme advice and guidance.

Surely this type of need can be met by professional administrative staff who are not 'burdened' by the classroom - no? At Wolverhampton, this is the approach we have taken and I will describe it briefly later. For now, let's leave it hanging.

Even now, that is still not quite enough preamble since I think we must talk a little about modularity as that is, in truth, at the centre of this session. I believe that modularity and mass higher education go hand in hand - hence a little exploration of the latter. Let's consider then modularity and what it means.

In 1995, HEQC published guidelines on the quality assurance of credit-based learning and, in so doing, identified four types of modularity viz:

Some single subject or professional programmes are modular (ie, constructed of units) but the facility for student choice and the negotiation of individual programmes is limited (eg, within a 12 module academic year, 11 or 12 of these modules may be prescribed as core).

Some academic programmes are modular but inter-disciplinary in nature which allows students to sample a variety of disciplinary cultures. Again, however, the scope and choice within such models may be quite limited. The requirement for an integration of discipline from the subject perspective is often seen as central.

Some institutions have created credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) schemes within a faculty or school system (eg, within a faculty of science). Such schemes can adopt a modular approach and/or can be credit-based using credit-bearing units of different sizes. Student choice and flexibility is evident across provision within the faculty, but not beyond.

Some institutions have created CAT schemes which embrace the full range of provision within that institution. Student flexibility and choice is widespread and not necessarily subject to restrictions imposed by traditional discipline or faculty boundaries. Students may be admitted at points which reflect their qualifications and learning from experience and may thus be given credit for learning undertaken externally. Equally, students are able to exit the programme of learning and/or the institution at a point which reflects their achievement to date (ie, a series of staged awards is offered, not simply the traditional honours degree).

We can see therefore that the term modularity conjures up a wide spectrum of interpretations, but flexibility (a la Continuing Education) is at the core.

It would be remiss of me however, in a semi-academic paper not to offer a few pros and cons of modular systems. Once again, these are developed largely from Scott, but this time from his pamphlet 'the Challenge of Credit'.

Pros

Modularity questions the organisational culture. Even if existing structures are reaffirmed, the process is inevitably useful;

It leads to an outcomes-led curriculum with students able to avoid repetition and replication and determine coherence for themselves;

It allows students to take greater responsibility for their learning - programmes become owned by students as much as by their teachers;

It provides a stimulus to rethinking curriculum and management processes. An opportunity to freshen things up in a proactive manner;

It introduces more 'interdisciplinarity/sharing. More student-centred approaches are possible (and maybe inevitable);

It allows the award of credit for achievement and begins to break down the unhelpful UK-focus on failure.

From this list of pros flow a number of attributes and outcomes eg:

Attributes

Entry to and exit from programmes at appropriate points to match individual student requirements;

Flexibility in pace, mode and level of an individual's programme of study;

Stimulates students to select modules outside their specialist areas therefore developing a range of additional skills;

Sequence of awards which adequately reflects the content and level of the students chosen study programme.

Outcomes

An increase in the range (and quality) of students applying to and successfully entering HE in particular, mature students, women and ethnic minorities;

Delivery of a border range of learning programmes relevant to individual aspirations regarding knowledge, competence and for employment;

Closer collaboration between HE and the in-house company training programmes of local employers.

Cons

Modularity leads to a lack of coherence from an academic perspective - the quality of the experience is, theoretically, compromised;

Academic conservatism still limits flexibility (from both a staff and a student perspective). Students still cluster around popular routes and the use of pre and co-requisites re-invents linear programmes;

Professional bodies feel compromised and are consequently unhelpful;

There are significant managerial and administrative implications;

It challenges academic values and the role of the teacher. Who, precisely, is in control?;

It compromises those disciplines which rely on a linear structure with regard to the acquisition and development of knowledge;

It encourages mechanical or passive learning. Passing becomes everything, learning nothing.

In sum, Scott characterises courses and credit.

Courses:

provide integrity

encourage rigour

provide a fixed identity for students

provide employers with something they understand

Credit:

eases access

reduces the risk/stigma of failure

enhances student choice

enhances interdisciplinarity

This, then is modularity, is mass Higher Education, is opportunity for all regardless of aims and objectives, Wolverhampton is a University with such a tradition. To manage it, and mass higher

education, we have tried to, overtly, separate all student administration from the delivery of academic programmes.

We have enunciated a set of principles which have formed our vision:

The need to provide a high quality experience for students - a supportive, secure environment which is efficiently managed;

The need for clarity, order and simplicity;

The need for consistency whilst recognising local requirements;

The need to develop and adhere to threshold service levels.

What we have done is take administration away from academics - they can't do it anyway! If that role is about research, teaching and scholarship then why bundle administrative requirements into that equation? Why can't professional administrators manage student induction, why can't they advise on programme construction and why can't they admit? At Wolverhampton, we believe they can and, what's more, if the UK is serious about massification, then we must all believe that they can.

We could also say that continuing education is at the centre of these changes. The issue for you is to make these changes, stop admiring problems and analysing them but show you can solve them. If you do, your future will be secure.

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