

# KÉPZÉS ÉS GYAKORLAT

DOI: 10.17165/TP.2016.1-2.8

JANE BENISTON<sup>1</sup> – DEBBIE HARRIS<sup>2</sup>

## Discussion paper: The Changing Face of the HE student

*This discussion paper explores the current drivers of change in Higher Education institutions in England. It presents models of students and asks you to consider your own institution and student engagement within it. It will then offer detail of a current research project that Newman University have begun.*

This paper seeks to highlight the key drivers of change in Higher Education in England. It will then consider three models of student engagement and student engagement from an historical perspective. It will then present an introduction to a national research project called REACT that Newman University has just become involved in.

Years ago only a small number of people achieved the accolade of going to a university to study. It was an elite group of young people. In the current climate there are a greater number of people attending university to study. This ‘massification’ of higher education is a major driver for change in post compulsory education. Up until the early 1980's we had a very traditional and elite higher educational system. There were some 38 Universities in England and these catered for about 14% of the 18–21 age cohorts, in other words about 1 in 7 young people went into University on leaving school (Maitlis, 1998). Currently in 2015, this percentage has raised to 49% participation rates in higher education (HESA, 2015). Not only do we see an increase in numbers of students but a more diverse cohort of students. We are now experiencing a diversity of age, socio economic background, widening participation and students with a variety of differing experiences. This is clearly demonstrated within Newman’s intake data with two thirds of students being white and a third of students from other ethnic origins (Newman Internal Statistic report 2015). We also have greater numbers of students coming through non traditional entry routes such as Btec, access courses and foundation degrees with top up, to study at university. Higher education institutions need to

---

<sup>1</sup> Senior lecturer, Early Childhood Education and Care, Newman University, England, [j.e.beniston@newman.ac.uk](mailto:j.e.beniston@newman.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Senior lecturer, Early Childhood Education and Care, Newman University, England, [d.harris@newman.ac.uk](mailto:d.harris@newman.ac.uk)

understand this ‘massification’ and be ready to meet the needs of this diverse population increase.

The second major driver of change in higher education is that of globalisation and the global market. UK higher institutions are no longer just competing amongst themselves. We have seen an increase in the number of international students and much more global choice. There is a rise of universities in all parts of the world, indeed even in England there are now 106 universities (British Council, 2015) compared to 38 in the 1980’s. Yelland (2016) states that, *“if higher education were an industry, it would be one of the worlds biggest and most dynamic!”* He goes on to claim that, *“The total revenue earned by universities amounted to £23.4 billion in 2007/08, according to a report by Universities UK. This was comparable in gross output terms to the printing and publishing industry and considerably larger than the pharmaceuticals industry”* Yelland (2016). OECD data shows that the number of students attending institutions outside their country of origin tripled between 1985 and 2008. This globalisation has also led to issues of increased competitiveness of institutions and the need to maintain the reputation and appeal of the ‘UK’ brand. This links closely with Newman’s identity of its *“distinctiveness by name and by nature”* (Newman Strategic plan 2014–2020). This reputation and distinctiveness of Newman is crucial to its survival in the global market place.

Leading on from this, the third driver of change is funding issues in Higher Education. The recession funding cuts of 2008 had a huge impact due to the simultaneous increase in student numbers. Levels of public spending on education in the UK reached new record levels, in real terms, between the dates of 1996–97. However, education budget cuts in Darling’s 2008 budget caused concerns with quality issues according to Coleman et al (2013) and have most impact upon the low income students. The Universities UK (2013) document states that, *“public sources of funding are significantly constrained in their ability to support an increased number of students. The department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) may have to make cuts of between 15% and 30% 2014–15 and 2017–18 based on the current fiscal outlook”*. Tuition fees of an upfront £1,000 per student were introduced in 1998, with top up fees of £3,000 introduced in 2004. This led to a cap on tuition fees fixed in 2010 as £9,000 per year. What is the impact of these fees on the student perceptions of themselves? Do they now see themselves as buying an education?

The final driver for consideration is the impact of market philosophies and consumer models that have been penetrating the public sector since the 1980’s (Needham, 2003). This idea of the ‘marketisation’ of higher education impacts on an institution in different ways.

There is now a consideration of market forces rather than government funding due to these tuition fees. There is a specific evaluation of financial costs versus future employment gains and the idea of the student as a ‘consumer’. Universities have often reacted to events within their institutions in a ‘knee jerk’ manner rather than having a strategic plan. Newman’s strategic plan clearly outlines our key aims and philosophies which make an attempt to guard against the greater impact of these market forces, including our aims for widening participation. However, some areas of Newman feel the full force of market forces and are more governed by market philosophies. This can be seen in some universities in the student’s perceptions of their entitlements.

If we consider three differing models of students and their engagement with their institutions, we can begin to redefine these relationships and explore the changes.

### **Students as ‘consumers’**

This model sees students as engaging in a consumer mentality with service expectations (Featherstone, 2007). This may lead to a passive approach to learning and the value of the HE experience may gradually be eroded. Replications of patterns of choice and power found in the private economy can be seen. There may be a push to maximise ‘customer satisfaction’ and considerations of ‘value for money’. We confirm that students should be able to challenge the quality of the learning environment (McCulloch, 2009) but full market principles in an HE context could be damaging. Consideration of the gym membership analogy is useful here. We may pay for a year’s membership to a gym but we have to actually go and do some exercise to get fit! Students are not buying a degree!

### **Students as ‘co-producers’**

This model sees students as essential partners engaging with their institution, with a responsibility for some work towards their degree. Students are not passive recipients of a service (Kotzé, du Plessis, 2003). This model includes areas of co-learning, co-designing and co-developing. However, many students may not wish to be co-producers, they do not see themselves as experts so there is a major power differential in play. How can students be involved in curriculum design of the subject programme if ‘they do not know what they do not know’! It seems that the market forces have influenced the definitions here as the only

alternative to being a consumer is seen to be a producer! We need to look within the educational not the consumer field to find alternative ways of working here.

### **Students as members of ‘Communities of practice’**

Coffield (2008) from the learning and skills network presents a community of practice model. This is focused on a participation approach based upon the work of Wenger’s (2011) community of practice. This considers the building of a community as the goal and becoming a participant impacting on the learning process. The lecturer and the student have interchangeable roles of expert and apprentice depending on the context. Students and lecturers work together, sometimes within these roles and sometimes as partners to develop the aspect of practice or the ‘knowledge’. The act of knowing is closely linked to the act of belonging. Is it this act of belonging that we need to develop with Newman? Do students here feel like Newman students?

So what is the future in terms of student engagement at Newman?

#### *React*

The react project hopes to make a significant impact on student engagement and the student experience in the higher education sector over the next two years.

It is a collaborative project working with the University of Winchester, Exeter and London Metropolitan University who are the lead institutions of the project alongside another 10 universities in England and Scotland.

The broad aims of the project are;

- To enable a thorough investigation of student engagement in the case of ‘hard to reach’ students, looking at key areas such as retention and attainment
- To gain understanding of what works, and how and why, through quantitative and qualitative research ,with staff and student voices and in-depth case studies
- To ensure a variety of outcomes that improve practice and benefit student, academics, student unions, academic developers and institutions as a whole
- To share best practice nationally and enable institutions to learn with and from each other, by developing and sharing open resources and highlighting strategies, tools and frameworks and acting as a supportive community of practice.

In general, student engagement is considered a key driver of student achievement, persistence and satisfaction at university. Students who fall under the categories of so called ‘hard to

reach' have been shown to struggle to participate fully in university life. Hence, initiatives that will help such students are needed in order to reduce dissatisfaction and poor attainment and to ensure that all students have a fulfilling experience (React 2015. p. 3).

### **What is Newman's role the project?**

Our part in the project is to undertake research at Newman focussing on how we can increase student engagement. In order to do this, we have designed three questions to focus on;

1. What is meant by student engagement at Newman?
2. How do we identify and engage 'hard to reach' students?
3. How do we make student engagement more visible at Newman?

We aim to begin our study by exploring staff and students understanding of student engagement through questionnaires. The react team, which currently comprises of four third year students in ECEC, John, Debbie and Jane, will be approaching as many subject areas as possible within Newman to ask if we can administer questionnaires to academic staff and trying to ascertain if there is a dominant discourse around student engagement at Newman. We will also be inviting students from as many subject areas as possible to undertake a questionnaire around their perceptions of what is meant by student engagement and reflecting on the extent of their own engagement in terms of in the classroom, at a Governance level or at a more holistic level of 'belonging'.

The second task is to investigate students who do not engage, the so called 'hard to reach' students. We aim to try and identify these students and explore patterns within Newman and explore how we can capture the voices of these students. As part of this work we will also consider how to engage such students and see if we can identify the main barriers to engagement.

The final task is to make student engagement more accessible and visible to students within Newman in the first instance and then to prospective students.

We feel this is a real opportunity to explore student engagement in depth at Newman. In June or July this year react are offering a free consultancy day at Newman, the focus of which will be decided by the data collected, but subject leads and other interested parties from across the institution will be invited to attend so that we can further develop practice in this area based on a common understanding of student engagement and the Newman student.

Consider these questions within your own institutes. We would be very interested to hear your thoughts via email and begin a conversation.

- How do these drivers of change affect you and your work?
- How do you ‘see’ students and their relationship to your institution?
- What is the future for your institution in terms of student engagement?

#### REFERENCES

- Coffield, F. (2008) *What if teaching and learning really were the priority?* London: LSN
- Coughlan, S. (2015). *Students as consumers*, *Tribalgroup.com* 2nd December: available at <http://blog.tribalgroup.com/2015/12/02/students-as-consumers-by-education-journalist-sean-coughlan/> accessed 18.1.16
- Featherstone, M. (2007). *Consumer culture and postmodernism*. London: Sage
- Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014). *Partnership Learning Communities: A conceptual model for students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*
- Kotzé, T.J. and du Plessis, P.J. (2003). "Students as “co-producers” of education: a proposed model of student socialisation and participation at tertiary institutions", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 11 Iss: 4, pp. 186–201. doi: [10.1108/09684880310501377](https://doi.org/10.1108/09684880310501377)
- McCulloch, A. (2009). The student as co-producer: learning from public administration about the student university relationship, *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol 34, no 2, pp.171–183. doi: [10.1080/03075070802562857](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802562857)
- Needham, C. (2003). *Citizen consumers: New Labour’s marketplace democracy*. London: Catalyst working paper
- Streeting, W. and Wise, G. (2009). *Rethinking the values of higher education – consumer, partnership, community?* NUS QAA
- Wenger, E. (2011). *Communities of practice: A brief introduction* US: National Science Foundation