

Beyond the consumerist agenda

Teaching quality and the 'student experience' in higher education

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February 2014

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on the status and quality of teaching and learning in post-16 education. This debate has been most acute in higher education, where rising tuition fees and increased pressures on academics to publish 'world-class' research have led to accusations that students are being 'short-changed' by universities.¹

In fact, this has become the unofficial mantra of the coalition government and is reflected in the recent decision of the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) to undertake an inquiry into undergraduate education in England.² Increasingly, the approach adopted by governments, particularly in England, is to unleash 'the forces of consumerism with more information for prospective students and funding following their choices' as the 'best way of bringing back traditional academic focus on high-quality teaching.'³

UCU believes that this consumerist analysis is flawed. Instead, our policy⁴ – backed up by a recent HE members' survey – supports the conclusions of an important ESRC project on 'Pedagogic quality and inequality in university first degrees'. The ESRC project raised questions about 'how appropriate it is to portray students primarily as consumers of higher education when they are engaged in a process of personal transformation.' The researchers also found that the related emphasis on 'assuring quality through competition for students obscures a quality enhancement approach that emphasises teacher development and student engagement, which our findings suggest are more likely to result in high quality learning outcomes.'⁵

In contradistinction to a consumerist, marketised approach, UCU believes that the best way to ensure high-quality teaching and learning in higher education is through good, committed, professional practice in an adequately funded system.⁶

This requires changes to the way that higher education institutions are currently organised and funded. The following paper outlines the building blocks of an alternative UCU position, which includes:

This alternative position paper reflects longstanding Congress/HESC policy on a range of issues such as the National Student Survey, teaching and research careers and the terms and conditions of hourly-paid staff. It is also underpinned by existing UCU publications on issues such as student evaluation of teaching and workload protection.

- a policy of 'student engagement' based on students as partners in the learning process, including revised student feedback mechanisms and proper collective student representation (pp 2-6)
- a staff entitlement to high quality training, support and professional development (pp 6-9)
- a promotion system that genuinely recognises and rewards good teaching (pp 9-10)
- a research assessment system that values research on the scholarship of teaching as well as subject-specific journal articles (p 10)
- a sector-wide conversion of hourly-paid teaching posts on to full-time or part-time, fractional contracts (pp 10-11)
- a demand for smaller class sizes in higher education (pp 11-12).

This alternative position paper reflects longstanding Congress/HESC policy on a range of issues such as the National Student Survey,⁷ teaching and research careers⁸ and the terms and conditions of hourly-paid staff.⁹ It is also underpinned by existing UCU publications on issues such as student evaluation of teaching,¹⁰ workload protection,¹¹ performance management¹² and the 2013 UCU discussion paper on professionalism.¹³

The paper is also informed by the results of a recent UCU survey on teaching in higher education. Sent out in November 2013, nearly 6000 members responded to an electronic survey, covering issues such as the student experience, teaching and research roles and training and professional development. Some of the key findings are referred to in the text below.

Finally, although the paper focuses on higher education, it is influenced by the current struggles of UCU members working in *further* education. For example, it is UCU members in FE who are continuing to push for mandatory teaching qualifications for all newly appointed staff¹⁴ and for the proper recognition of 'scholarly activity' for those staff teaching HE in a FE college.¹⁵ Both of these 'professional' issues have become important elements in UCU's campaign to achieve better pay and terms and conditions for FE lecturers.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE: A SHIFT FROM 'SATISFACTION' TO 'ENGAGEMENT'?

Over the last decade supporting and enhancing the 'student experience' has become one of the key features of UK higher education policy. While the student experience encompasses all aspects of student life (ie academic, social, welfare and support), the most contentious issue for UCU is the nature and scope of student evaluation of teaching (SET).

Of course, SET has been a feature of UK higher education for many years, particularly through the use of anonymous module questionnaires. Anonymous module questionnaires can be a good way of providing valuable *formative feedback* to lecturers on their teaching practice. However, such questionnaires cannot provide unequivocally valid and precise measures of *teaching effectiveness*. For that reason the questionnaires should be divorced from disciplinary, capability and promotion procedures, particularly as student feedback can occasionally reveal discriminatory attitudes. 16



In addition, UCU believes that if students have concerns about their lecturers, they should go through official channels rather than posting anonymous comments to commercial websites such as Rate My Lecturer.¹⁷

What is wrong with the National Student Survey?

Since 2005 the main SET instrument, however, has been the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS gathers opinions from mostly final year undergraduates on the 'quality' of their courses, with seven different scores published including an 'overall satisfaction' mark.¹⁸

UCU's approach has been to 'to raise public awareness of the detrimental nature of the NSS to university students' education' and to 'strenuously challenge the inappropriate methodology and application of student surveys and their use in league tables.' A critical attitude to the NSS has been strongly reflected in the recent UCU teaching survey:

Table 1

Since 2005 the National Student Survey (NSS) has become the main indicator of the 'student experience' in higher education. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?						
Answer options	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neutral	Response count
The NSS has had a positive impact on the quality of the individual learning experience	2.2%	19.6%	33.8%	22.9%	21.5%	5165
The NSS has had a positive impact on the general learning culture within the institution	2.4%	17.7%	34.5%	27.8%	17.5%	5161
The NSS has had a positive impact on the relationship between staff and students	1.5%	12.6%	35.1%	25.9%	24.9%	5149
The NSS has had a positive impact on the relationship between the institution and staff	1.0%	4.7%	35.5%	40.6%	18.1%	5146
The NSS has had a positive impact on the quality of the wider 'student experience'	2.3%	22.9%	27.6%	23.5%	23.7%	5134
Answered question						5173
Skipped question					818	



UCU's critique of the NSS is based partly on the ways in which the scores are used and abused by managements. For example, disproportionate attention is paid to minor changes in annual NSS 'league tables'. Moreover, we have received reports at UCU Congress and via union surveys of universities using 'poor' NSS scores as a 'bully's charter' to intimidate staff, suspend student recruitment and eventually cut courses.²¹

Our concerns are also based on a critique of the methodological robustness and statistical validity of NSS data. These chime with a number of academic studies on the NSS, which show that:

- NSS data should not really be used for comparative purposes and the construction of university or subject league tables.²²
- Despite it becoming the centre piece of the Key Information Set, there is little evidence to suggest that NSS data is a major factor in determining student choice.²³
- The NSS requires students to focus on particular course level factors often at the expense of considering important wider processes (eg national funding policy or institutional resource allocations).²⁴
- The nature and timing of the NSS provides major opportunities for institutional 'game playing'.²⁵

The NSS is also based on students as passive consumers of education, whereas high quality undergraduate courses are often ones which encourage students to engage with academic knowledge in transformative ways. ²⁶ This belief in the transformative potential of student learning was overwhelmingly shared by UCU members in our teaching survey:

Table 2

To what extent do YOU agree with the following statement:						
Answer options	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neutral	Response count
Undergraduate students are individuals engaged in a process of personal transformation	50.6%	40.2%	3.1%	1.0%	5.3%	5156

Moreover, students can sometimes be at the forefront of campaigns to enhance the academic curriculum. For example, economics students at Manchester University have proposed the overhaul of orthodox neo-liberal teachings to embrace alternative economic theories.²⁷

Recommendations

- UCU will continue to challenge the use of NSS scores as a means to discipline staff and cut course provision
- UCU will continue to highlight the methodological and pedagogical deficiencies with 'student satisfaction' surveys such as the NSS.



We should respond to the review of the NSS and in line with UCU policy in support of a 'meaningful and effective student feedback proves that will enhance educational provision', we should call for the survey to shift towards measuring student engagement rather than satisfaction.

Towards a student engagement and participation agenda

In addition to opposing the NSS as currently constituted, our policy is 'to campaign with the NUS for tools which can give genuine representation to students' experiences and opinions' 28 and 'to initiate liaison with the NUS to produce a meaningful and effective student feedback process that will enhance educational provision'. 29

One of the difficulties for UCU is that the NUS have traditionally been supportive of the National Student Survey, particularly the ways in which the NSS has forced institutions to pay much greater attention to certain teaching issues. For example, NSS scores have driven the student-led campaign to revise institutional and departmental procedures on assessment and feedback (eg return dates, students' perceptions of assessment etc).

More recently, the NUS have become increasingly critical of aspects of the National Student Survey. In their response to the review of the NSS, they suggest 'the current survey unhelpfully promotes a consumerist, transactional view of education that does not fully encompass the participatory nature of HE' and is 'also of limited use in providing information to aid student choice'. The NUS response also says 'Whatever the new survey looks like, it should not be used for staff performance management but instead the data should be shared with staff and students and explore areas of improvement in partnership. The NUS response also says 'Whatever the new survey looks like, it should not be used for staff performance management but instead the data should be shared with staff and students and explore areas of improvement in partnership.

Moreover, the NUS have expressed willingness to work with UCU on student engagement issues and that, in line with policy, we should take up that opportunity.

In this context, so-called 'student engagement' surveys – for example the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in North America and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) – may provide a better alternative to one based on measuring 'student satisfaction'. This is because the survey methodology is based on the conception of students as 'active learners' and covers areas such as 'academic challenge', 'student and staff interactions' and 'civic engagement'. Both institutional participation in the NSSE and publication of the survey results remains voluntary. Consequently, it has made it much more difficult to construct NSSE league tables.

In addition, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) of Australia have been able to use the AUSSE as a means to call for increased funding and reduced casualisation. This, in turn, has been reflected in official AUSSE publications. For example, a recent AUSSE briefing on the importance of staff/student interactions concluded:

'As student numbers increase, it is essential that universities employ sufficient academic teaching staff – the blowout in staff-student ratios which has characterised Australian universities in recent years demonstrates that this is not taking place.'32

Of course, the NSSE is not without its own methodological weaknesses. For example, Stephen Porter³³ has challenged the validity of a number of the survey questions, while others have criticised attempts by some US colleges to use the data to 'compare' themselves against other institutions.³⁴ Because of statistical limitations with all forms of student survey data we would support the call (made by Professor John Holmwood from the Campaign for the Public University) for HEIs to sign up to some form code of practice not to use statements of rank order position in their claims about their own institution and courses.³⁵



It is important to remember that surveys are only one of the tools to provide 'student voice'. We share the analysis of the NUS that 'Atomised student feedback could never substitute for serious student representation, which is why students' unions are so necessary and important to partnership.

Whatever its limitations, the US National Survey of Student Engagement suggests that, contrary to official UK government rhetoric, there are alternative ways of seeking students' input into their learning. In the words of Duna Sabri:

'Whilst the NSSE has its critics... as an example it suggests that things can be other than they are. The construction of students as customers and the enshrinement of the NSS as a measure of their satisfaction is not a given, even in the post-Browne world of UK higher education'.³⁶

The UK National Student Survey is scheduled to continue in its current form until 2015. During the current year there will be a review of the NSS and which may usher in changes to the existing format. We should respond to the review of the NSS and in line with UCU policy in support of a 'meaningful and effective student feedback proves that will enhance educational provision', we should **call** for the survey to shift towards measuring student engagement rather than satisfaction.³⁷ A revised survey should also be underpinned by a national code of practice on the use of the data. Above all, we believe that the survey data should be used primarily for internal developmental purposes rather than for the construction of external league tables.

Finally, it is important to remember that surveys are only one of the tools to provide 'student voice'. We share the analysis of the NUS that 'Atomised student feedback could never substitute for serious student representation, which is why students' unions are so necessary and important to partnership.'38

Strong students' unions need to be accompanied by proper student and staff representation on governing bodies and an effective student course reps structure. UCU will continue to work with the NUS in ensuring that the collective representation of students is pursued as vigorously as individual forms of student feedback. For example, we are working closely with NUS in their project on Democratic Universities, which seeks to ensure that 'student engagement' is developed in a way which leads to more student participation in university decision-making.³⁹

Recommendations

- in the review of the NSS, to call for a student engagement questionnaire to replace the current satisfaction survey
- campaign for an enforceable code of practice on the use of survey data in the public arena
- To call for a strengthened student course reps structure
- To continue to campaign for better student and staff representation on governing bodies.⁴⁰

IMPROVED TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As mentioned above the policy of the UCU in FE is to support mandatory teaching qualifications for newly-appointed lecturers. In HE the union's position on teaching qualifications is different. While we have supported moves to ensure that all staff new to teaching participate in accredited in-house programmes (often leading to recognised qualifications such as a PG Cert) we have not pushed for teaching qualifications to become a mandatory requirement. The recent UCU teaching survey



in higher education revealed a plurality in favour of the current position, although amongst members who have been working in HE for less than 10 years, there was a narrow plurality in support of a 'requirement to have a professional qualification in teaching'. At the same time, the UCU survey found majority member support for the requirement to undertake some form of accredited teacher training:

Table 3

Do you believe that it should be compulsory for lecturers in higher education to undertake some form of accredited teacher training?						
Answer options Response percent		Response count				
Yes	58.1%	3095				
No	31.7%	1687				
Don't know	10.2%	543				
Answered question	5325					
Skipped question 666						

Opposition to mandatory HE teaching qualifications stems from the fact that many academics engage in both teaching and research; it also reflects doubts about the value of these qualifications. In the past some of the concerns raised by HE members have included:

- the content and suitability of teaching courses for different subject areas
- the weak relationship between HE teaching qualifications and career progression
- the heavy workload pressures facing newly appointed academics
- the difficulties faced by hourly-paid staff in accessing courses and qualifications.

The results of the UCU teaching survey suggest a more positive evaluation of teaching courses by newly appointed lecturers, particularly regarding the workload and effectiveness of the course. For example, of those who had undertaken an in-house teaching course as newly appointed lecturer within the last three years, the survey results were as shown in *Table 4* overleaf:

Members' perceptions of continuing professional development are also more positive that previous anecdotal reports have suggested. However, as with teaching courses for new staff, there is scepticism about the impact on career progression.

In the area of teaching qualifications, national and institutional policy appears to be driven by a 'box ticking' approach, in particular, the expectation that HESA data on teaching qualifications will form part of a revised Key Information Set (KIS). This has led some universities to make sure that all lecturers become Fellows of the Higher Education Academy (HEA).⁴¹ UCU believes that the process of achieving mass HEA fellowships should be driven by pedagogical reasons (ie to enable colleagues to develop their teaching practice) and not by performance indicators. Moreover, we believe that greater effort should be attached to improving the relevance and usefulness of teaching courses and qualifications for a successful academic career.



Table 4

count	Neutral	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Answer options
% 924	6.1%	14.0%	19.4%	49.1%	11.5%	The course workload was appropriate
922	8.8%	17.7%	26.0%	36.9%	10.6%	The course content was relevant to my academic field of study
0% 924	11.0%	16.9%	17.9%	37.8%	16.5%	The course has helped me to become a better lecturer/teacher
7% 922	16.7%	18.9%	22.5%	32.0%	10.0%	The course has helped me in my academic career
% 922	9.2%	5.0%	11.1%	36.4%	38.3%	331.31.31.33.33.33.11.13.1
929						Answered question
						considered essential by my employer Answered question Skipped question

Table 5

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements						
Answer options	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neutral	Response count
The workload of the CPD was appropriate	13.8%	64.1%	6.9%	3.4%	11.9%	2065
The content of the CPD was relevant to my academic field of study	12.8%	55.6%	14.9%	5.7%	11.0%	2062
The CPD has helped me to become a better lecturer	10.5%	45.2%	18.1%	7.5%	18.6%	2059
The CPD has helped me in my career	6.3%	24.1%	31.2%	14.45	24.0%	2049
Answered question						2075
Skipped question						3916



A positive agenda for professional development requires a renewed effort on the part of HEIs to ensure that good teaching is recognised and rewarded by academic promotion procedures.

Given the increasing importance of teaching qualifications and professional development in higher education it is important that the UCU develops a clearer line on these issues. Based on existing policy and members' views as expressed in the survey we **call** for accredited teacher training courses and qualifications:

- to be accessible to all members of academic staff, including hourly-paid colleagues
- to be flexible enough to reflect major disciplinary differences within higher education⁴²
- to encourage effective links between teaching, scholarship and research
- to include agreed procedures to deal with any difficulties that staff may experience in completing such qualifications.

In addition, we **recommend** a wider union agenda on professional development based on:

- overall increases in staff development budgets,⁴³ including the option of greater devolution to the departmental/faculty level
- identified time and budget for training and development activities
- identified time and budget for activities to support newly appointed staff, including hourly-paid colleagues (eg mentoring)
- the preservation of time for research and scholarship
- the protection and revitalisation of the link between academic and related staff and to ensure a common approach for career development⁴⁴
- union involvement in determining staff priorities for formal training (including content and delivery).⁴⁵

Finally, a positive agenda for professional development requires a renewed effort on the part of HEIs to ensure that good teaching is recognised and rewarded by academic promotion procedures. This is the subject of the next section.

CHANGING RECOGNITION AND REWARD SYSTEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Over the last decade or so there has been an increased drive to ensure that teaching and learning activities, rather than simply subject-specific research, is valued in higher education. In general, UCU has supported these initiatives, particularly the demand that 'teaching and research roles should have parity in earning capacity and promotion opportunities'. For UCU this agenda is particularly important. Table 6 of our survey on teaching shows that, irrespective of contract type, ⁴⁷ significant numbers of members are engaged either exclusively or mostly in teaching-related activities.

However, research by the HEA has shown that despite recent progress there remain 'several barriers to effective reward and recognition of teaching' in UK higher education. In particular, the authors found that:

- Promotion systems, particularly for senior appointments, are still largely based on 'research excellence'.
- While clear routes for promotion on the basis of teaching and learning are now more widespread than in the past, implementation remains patchy.



UCU believes there is a need for greater transparency in the application of agreed promotion criteria and that such criteria should be based on the national academic role profiles or locally agreed variants thereof.

Table 6

Irrespective of your formal role which of the following best describes your typical workload					
Answer options	Response percent	Response count			
Exclusively teaching	14.0%	763			
Mostly teaching	44.1%	2399			
Balance between research and teaching	34.3%	1866			
Mostly research	7.2%	390			
Exclusively research	0.4%	22			
Answered question	5440				
Skipped question		551			

 There is a continuing lack of consensus about what constitutes acceptable evidence for measuring 'teaching excellence'.⁴⁸

UCU believes there is a need for greater transparency in the application of agreed promotion criteria and that such criteria should be based on the national academic role profiles or locally agreed variants thereof. UCU branches may have a key role to play here in requesting information on the implementation of promotion criteria. In addition, our campaign might be bolstered by changes to external quality assurance processes. For example, we might support the call for an analysis of promotion criteria to become 'an essential component of institutional quality review' undertaken by the QAA.

Another recurring problem is the dominance of research assessment procedures, particularly the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), in determining funding and prestige in higher education. The UCU's Education Committee is looking at this issue in more detail as part of its 'alternatives to REF' work. However, one of the core principles of a reformed research assessment system must to be to strengthen the links between research and teaching. For example, in the 2014 REF it is absurd that the effect of research on higher education teaching is excluded from the impact statements and case studies. In the future it will also be important to ensure better recognition of pedagogical research (eg on medical or engineering education) in the research assessment process.

Recommendations for bargaining

 HEC should continue with the development of a bargaining strategy to support the proper reward of teaching and which utilises the evidence gathered in this paper to make the case.

Recommendations for policy

- An assessment of the implementation of teaching-related promotion criteria should become a component in QAA institutional reviews.
- Research assessment mechanisms should be changed in order to recognise the positive impact of research on teaching in higher education.



Manageable student numbers are a pre-requisite for a quality learning process and we recommend that UCU branches work closely with student unions on campaigns to reduce class size

IMPROVING CAREER PROSPECTS FOR TEACHING-FOCUSED AND CASUALISED STAFF

In recent years a number of higher education institutions have developed new career tracks and positions for 'teaching-focussed' staff. For example, the 2004 HE Framework Agreement resulted in the development of a new family of Teaching and Scholarship role profiles and UCU's policy since then has been to push for a proper career path for academics in that job family.⁵¹

It has been claimed that 'teaching focused' roles have been brought in response to demands for increased student-centred learning, including improved contact with lecturers. At the same time, there is strong evidence to suggest that 'teaching-focused career tracks and positions are treated as second-class options, which are pursued by those that have failed at research'.⁵²

The second class status of teaching-focused staff is magnified by the scandal of casualisation. According to the HESA staff data (2011/12) 60.3% of 'teaching only' staff are on fixed term contracts, and these figures exclude the tens of thousands of HE workers on 'atypical' contracts. ⁵³ In addition, UCU estimates that the number of zero-hour teaching contracts in universities equates to 47% of the total number of 'teaching-only' posts that institutions report annually to HESA. ⁵⁴

In a summary of the academic literature Paul Ashwin and colleagues point out that:

'Good teaching involves lecturers having the opportunity to think and talk with others about how to help students understand disciplinary knowledge through design of curricula, teaching and learning activities and assessment (Entwistle, 2009; Gibbs, 2010). This can be a time-consuming and challenging process for lecturers'.⁵⁵

Without proper time off and resources for scholarship and professional development, lecturers on zero hour contracts and hourly-paid positions can find this a particularly challenging process.

As part of a campaign to recognise the value of teaching we **call** on the employers to prioritise the conversion of hourly-paid posts to full-time or part-time, fractional positions. For the thousands of postgraduate students who are engaged in teaching, we also **call** on institutions to sign up to the UCU/NUS postgraduate employment charter. Amongst other things the charter **calls** for fair access to employment opportunities, a letter of appointment, job description and terms and conditions, full induction training, and pay for all hours worked.⁵⁶

REDUCING CLASS SIZE

For UCU the ratio of students to teachers provides an indication of workload for teaching staff in higher education. It can also be viewed as an important indicator of the quality of education provided for students and learners on the basis that the more teaching and support staff per learner, the better the learner's educational experience is likely to be. However, the student:staff ratio in higher education is not the same as class size. For example in HEIs, the size of teaching groups can range from a 1:1 tutorial to lectures with more than 100 students.

In his influential report, Dimensions of quality, Professor Graham Gibbs identified 'class size' as one of the key elements in affecting student outcomes in higher education. In general, the international research suggests that large classes



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(for example in relation to seminars, tutorials or discussion groups) have negative effects on academic outcomes.⁵⁷

In a number of universities students' unions are pushing for smaller class sizes as one of the demands for an improved academic experience. Manageable student numbers are a pre-requisite for a quality learning process and we **recommend** that UCU branches work closely with student unions on campaigns to reduce class size (eg limits on overall seminar size). For UCU one of the key tasks will be to ensure that any additional academic staff are employed on open-ended contracts that enable proper time off for scholarship and/or research.

Local initiatives on class size can build on the national campaign on workload that we have developed in conjunction with the NUS. At the heart of that campaign is an attempt to reframe workload as both an educational and an employment issue. Strategic partnerships with students on issues such as workloads, class size and the employment conditions of postgraduates can help to strengthen the campaign for quality higher education.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper represents an attempt to develop an alternative union agenda on the 'student experience' in higher education, with the strategic aim of trying to shift the debate away from conceiving students as consumers of education towards one based on partnership and active engagement. It has also sought to re-establish the importance of higher education as a transformative experience for students. Working with the NUS on this agenda and inputting into the current review of the National Student Survey should be priority actions in 2014.

In addition, the paper has put forward a number of proposals to strengthen the value and recognition of teaching in higher education. This covers issues such as professional development, academic promotion criteria, research assessment procedures, contractual changes and class size. A bargaining agenda on the recognition of teaching and campaign toolkits for branches on smaller class size and on professional development are some of the specific recommendations that we might want to take forward.

Overall, we hope the Education Committee finds the paper to be a useful tool to challenge the ideological basis of the government's consumerist agenda in post-school education and as a means to help to protect our members' terms and conditions of employment.



NOTES

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