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Perceptions of learning and teaching quality in Higher Education: developing a culture of co-creation of value

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Wendy Tabrizi, Anna-Lena Ackfeldt
Aston University, Birmingham, UK

This paper contributes to the learning, teaching and assessment domain by proposing the development of a value co-creation culture (CCV) for improved learning and teaching quality involving all Higher Education (HE) stakeholders. Much of the literature on measuring the quality of the learning and teaching experience in HEIs has for many years focussed on the application of market principles. Sines and Duckworth (1994) observe that HE providers must face the fact: they are in a “competitive battle for students” and students are their customers. Jones (2010) suggests that engaging with students as customers is a challenge for HEIs, as they aim to meet their students’ expectations. This concept of students as customers is derived from the adoption of marketing principles; the needs and wants of the target market(s) must be determined, and the desired level of service then delivered (Shim and Morgan, 1990). The concept of quality is used to imply some form of value judgement made about the service received (Zeithaml, 1988).

However, Svensson and Wood (2007) state the use of such metaphors is inappropriate in the HE sector, because the relationship should not be a customer-supplier one. In market relationships, “customers” expect to receive outcomes, or “results”, in exchange for payment. Perceptions of value in an educational service for students should be based upon the level of personal development achieved, job utility and their implications for the learning and teaching process. If students are encouraged to see themselves as customers, this will bring with it expectations about the predictability and consistency of the “service” provided and perceptions that they are in a position to judge that quality.

The concept of teaching quality remains difficult to accurately define. As Diaz-Mendez and Gummesson (2012) posit, the value students expect and obtain from their university experience is not based solely upon the quality of teaching received but also their ability to learn, based on their own capabilities. Teaching quality remains a vague and controversial construct, with no consensus reached, it seems to mean different things to different groups (Cheng and Tam, 1997; Harvey and Green, 1993). Cheng and Tam (1997) suggest some emphasize quality of inputs, whilst others emphasize process or output quality. Consequently, measuring teaching quality is complex and requires “significant efforts beyond simple indicators” (Diaz-Mendez and Gummesson, 2012, p 574). Swail (2011) suggests that teaching is only important as a function of learning, and HEIs should assess learning to indicate teaching quality. Learning quality is a function of students’ inputs in

terms of attributes, skills and abilities. However, this aspect is not really considered in depth in the literature (Diaz-Mendez and Gummesson, 2012).

Knight (1993) suggests some approaches to the measurement of activities related to teaching and learning quality: use of documentary sources, innovation in teaching and learning, curriculum development, classroom observation, student satisfaction surveys and self-assessments. However, there is a problem with the approaches: taken together these are costly and time consuming for HEIs to complete. Universities therefore tend to rely solely upon student surveys to provide them with feedback (e.g. NSS results provide data for university league table rankings), which have important implications for HEIs. However, such surveys are predominantly measures of student satisfaction rather than a true reflection of aspects relevant to measures of teaching and learning quality (Bedggood and Donovan, 2011).

Hearn (2008) suggests a fundamental shift in thinking is needed, away from this concept of students as customers to that of students as co-creators of value. After all, students play a significant role in their learning experience; it is not a one-sided affair. The value students expect, and obtain, from HE results from not only from the quality of teaching inputs, but from also their own learning capabilities and resources. Vargo and Lusch (2008) argue that value is a self-perception; it is not located in within the actual service itself. It implies that the HEI does not provide value to individuals; they actively participate in a joint process of creation. The CCV approach offers something radically different because it focuses on the value that is derived from constantly creative and reinforced collaborative efforts (Schumann, Peters and Olsen, 2013). According to the Service Dominant Logic paradigm, CCV occurs when potential resources become specific benefits for its actors (Lusch et al, 2008). Hence, a CCV relationship is characterised not only by the resources each party contributes, but also how they interact with one another (Barile and Polese, 2010).

Diaz-Mendez and Gummesson (2012) argue that both student and lecturer resources need to be of the right quality in order for a culture of co-creation of learning to take place. Student resources include: intelligence, study habits, sense of responsibility, personality and critical thinking. Lecturer resources include those of knowledge, teaching ability, social ability and personality. In a CCV process a true partnership must be nurtured (McWilliam 2008).

This paper proposes a study to take place at ABS to develop a culture of learning and teaching built on the aforementioned CCV principles. The participants of the study will include all first year business students enrolled on Introduction to Marketing and other stakeholders involved in either teaching or supporting the module, including external partners. It is proposed that the following CCV activities (Schumann, Peters and Olsen, 2013) will be implemented: on-going formative feedback and feed forward with students including interviews with student representatives, use of discussion boards through the VLE, end of session feedback collected from students using post-it notes, individual reflective journals,

peer reviews, all staff meetings for informal feedback and culture checks, integration of staff and student teams, mentoring within the group, and opportunities for open dialogue.

The global aim of the proposed change in learning and teaching culture is that it will contribute to move student perceptions away from seeing themselves as customers who are passive recipients in the teaching and learning process, to one where students take responsibility for their own learning experience, explored and acted upon in partnership with lecturers and other stakeholders. The short-term impact results of the interventions outlined will be made available in 2014.

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