Why would going to university change anyone? The challenges of capturing the transformative power of undergraduate degrees in comparisons of quality

Paul Ashwin
p.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk
@paulashwin

RETHINKING LEARNING AND TEACHING TOGETHER
Principal's Teaching Award Scheme Forum 2016
Wednesday 15 June 2016
Introduction

Arguments for the value of undergraduate higher education often rest on claims that it is a transformational experience.

Watson (2012) argues this raises several questions:
- how and why this transformation takes place,
- whether it is a planned transformation,
- whether higher education is a necessary and/or sufficient condition for such transformations
- whether all forms of higher education result in this transformation
Yerevan Communiqué: May 2015

By 2020 we are determined to achieve an EHEA (European Higher Education Area) where:
our common goals are implemented in all member countries to ensure trust in each other’s higher education systems; where automatic recognition of qualifications becomes a reality so that students and graduates can move easily throughout it; where higher education is contributing effectively to build inclusive societies, founded on democratic values and human rights and where educational opportunities provide the competences and skills required for European citizenship, innovation and employment...

Enhancing the quality and relevance of teaching and learning is the main mission of the EHEA
A Key Tension in the Yerevan Communiqué

Comparability of undergraduate degrees

Transformational potential of undergraduate degrees
Student success as transformation

From *Pedagogic Quality and Inequality Project*:

- The transformational nature of undergraduate degrees lies in changes in students’ sense of self through their engagement with disciplinary knowledge;
- Students relating their personal projects to their disciplines and the world and seeing themselves implicated in knowledge;
- Does not always happen – requires students to be intellectually engaged with their courses and to see it as an educational experience. This is dependent on both students and the quality of their educational experience.
There is no destination with this discipline... There is always something further and there is no point where you can stop and say ‘I understood, I am a sociologist’. ... The thing is sociology makes you aware of every decision you make: how that would impact on my life and how it could impact on someone else. And it makes the decision harder to make (Esther, Selective, Year 3, Pedagogic Quality and Inequality Project).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Studies</th>
<th>Least inclusive Account</th>
<th>‘Watershed’ account</th>
<th>Most Inclusive account</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Wood et al. 2012</td>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td>Models</td>
<td>Approach to life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountancy</td>
<td>Sin et al. 2012</td>
<td>Routine work</td>
<td>Meaningful work</td>
<td>Moral work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Reid et al. 2006</td>
<td>Content</td>
<td>System</td>
<td>Extension of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Reid 2001</td>
<td>Instrument</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>Communicating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Bradbeer et al. 2004</td>
<td>General world</td>
<td>Structured into parts</td>
<td>Interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoscience</td>
<td>Stokes 2011</td>
<td>Composition of earth – the earth</td>
<td>Processes – interacting systems</td>
<td>Relations earth and society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
[I am a] totally different person. Even dress sense. Everything has changed, everything. I would go to a lecture in a tracksuit before, now I would not get caught dead in one ... I think the older I grow the more I realise that first impressions count ... You never know who you are going to meet. You never know what network event may come up in the evening. You can’t go looking like a tramp. You’ve just got to be a lot more aware of different aspects of yourself and be more confident.

(Faith, Year 3, Prestige – Pedagogic Quality and Inequality Project)
So why would going to university change anyone?

Knowledge

Self ↔ World
A Key Tension in the Yerevan Communiqué

Comparability of undergraduate degrees

Transformational potential of undergraduate degrees
Comparability 1: Rankings

- National and international higher education rankings are a dominant way of comparing institutions’ contributions to student success.
- They travel across a number of contexts and audiences;
- They tend to involve unrelated and incomparable measures;
- Their stability reinforces privilege: higher status institutions tend to enrol a much greater proportion of privileged students;
- They tell us nothing about students’ personal transformation
Comparability 2: AHELO

- OECD’s Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project seeks to compare the quality of what students learn in different institutions and countries.
- Focused on Economics and Engineering - what would it look like in literature or history?
- Generic skills tests for disciplines that are not easily comparable - examine skills that ‘should be desired by students in any discipline’.
- But are skilful performances shaped by generic skills or students’ understanding of a particular task and their interactions with other people and things?
- What if AHELO succeeded?
A Key Tension for HE Practitioners

- The legitimacy of the need for comparisons
- The distorting tendencies of comparisons
Questions

- How can we generate comparisons of student success that are less distorting?
- How can we make comparisons that reflect higher education’s role in helping students to gain access to transformative knowledge?
Key characteristics of valid metrics of teaching quality

We need ways of assessing teaching quality that:

- are measures of the quality of teaching offered by institutions rather than measures of institutional prestige;
- require improvements in teaching practices in order to improve performance on the measures;
- as a whole form a coherent set of metrics rather than a set of disparate measures;
- are based on established research evidence about high quality teaching and learning in higher education;
- reflect the purposes of higher education.
TEF Year 2 Metrics: English White Paper & Technical Consultation

- Students’ views of teaching, assessment and academic support from the National Student Survey;
- Non-completion rates;
- Rates of employment and further study from the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DHLE) with possible ‘highly skilled job metric’;
- Over a three-year period;
- Will take account of the differences in student intake;
- Commitment to flag statistically significant differences;
- Used to identify ‘Meets Requirement’; ‘Excellent’; ‘Outstanding’ provision.
Key characteristics of a valid metric of teaching quality

We need ways of assessing teaching quality that:

- are measures of the quality of teaching offered by institutions rather than measures of institutional prestige;
- require improvements in teaching practices in order to improve performance on the measure;
- as a whole form a coherent set of metrics rather than a set of disparate measures;
- are based on the established research evidence about what leads to high quality teaching and learning in higher education;
- reflect the purposes of HE.
Issues with the Year 2 TEF metrics

Issues as metrics:

➤ How and why selected?

Issues related to their use:

➤ Differences between institutions’ scores on the selected metrics tend to be small and not significant (Office for National Statistics).

➤ Not robust enough to support a future subject level TEF (ONS).

➤ Back to peer review?
Issues with TEF Future Metrics

- Identified Future metrics – ‘Longitudinal Education Outcomes data set’; ‘teaching intensity’;
- No mechanism outlined for a sector-wide discussion of the development of future metrics.
- Expert teaching?
- Students relations to knowledge?
- 1st year experience?
The challenge of measuring teaching quality through metrics

- Teaching as a local achievement;
- Involves helping particular students to engage with particular bodies of knowledge in particular settings;
- This makes it very difficult to capture a valid measure of teaching quality through metrics.
- However, if we don’t try we allow distorting measures, which reinforce inequalities, to dominate.