Practice Papers

The potential benefits and challenges of personalising UK higher education

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The aim of personalisation is to "promote personal development through self-realisation, self-enhancement and self-development" in the learner (Leadbeater, 2004, p. 16). The aim of this study was to investigate personalisation in UK higher education from the perspectives of both academics and students in two universities that offered hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism (HLST) degrees. The findings identified potential benefits such as enhanced student motivation, satisfaction and achievement. However, it also identified a number of challenges, including the attitudes of staff and students, which must be overcome if potential benefits are to be achieved.

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1. Introduction

Widening participation initiatives within the UK have resulted in increased student numbers and greater student diversity in many higher education institutions (HEIs) (JM Consulting, 2008; Knox & Wyper, 2008). As a result, HEIs are faced with the challenge of dealing with large heterogeneous cohorts of students with fewer resources. In response, many institutions have implemented standardised and centralised policies in order to ensure that accountability and efficiency targets are met.

Against this background, the National Student Forum (NSF) Annual Report (2009) revealed that students expect to be an "active partner" in the design and management of their education and have their learning 'personalised' to their needs. Furthermore, Little, Locke, Scesa, and Williams (2009, p. 3) reported that the UK government is also seeking "to amplify the student voice" in higher education (HE), thus personalisation is becoming an increasingly important part of the HE agenda.

Personalised education in the UK is "… part of the wider government agenda to put more power in the hands of the consumer" (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011a). The recently published White Paper, *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, stated that "The overall goal is higher education that is more responsive to student choice, that provides a better student experience and that helps improve social mobility" (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011b, p. 8).

Whilst there has been considerable activity and research regarding personalisation within schools and further education, empirical research is limited within HE. One of the few published studies identifies academic perceptions of the benefits and challenges to personalisation within Scottish HE (Knox & Wyper, 2008). Given the potential importance of this area of investigation, it is argued that future research is warranted. This paper reports the findings of research supported by the HLST Network that built upon the Scottish study by investigating academic and student perceptions of the benefits and challenges of personalisation within hospitality, leisure, sport, and tourism (HLST) degrees. After a brief

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introduction to the definition of personalisation, the design of the study is discussed and the research findings and implications presented.

2. Personalisation: definitions, benefits and challenges

2.1. Personalisation defined

The concept of personalised learning within education had its origins in the United States and has been common parlance there for quite some time. In contrast within Europe personalisation of education, and in HE specifically is still in its infancy (Knox & Wyper, 2008). In the UK personalisation in education is part of a vision for public sector reform that aims that services will become more responsive and tailored to the needs of individuals (Merton, 2006). A key element of such reform is that service users are considered to be co-designers and co-producers and so have more say in how the services are designed and delivered (Leadbeater, 2004).

In 2005 the UK Government House of Commons Education and Skills Committee Paper on education in schools, *Higher Standards—Better Choice for All*, stated that personalisation "… means a tailored education for every child and young person, that gives them strength in the basics, stretches their aspirations, and builds their life chances. It will create opportunity for every child, regardless of their background" (2005, p. 45). Similarly, the then Department for Education and Skills in their consultation on personalising further education stated that personalisation '… brings together a range of hitherto disparate practices into a single, unified and powerful approach' and that this approach has the potential to 'become more than the sum of the parts' (DfES, 2006, p. 7). The DfES (2006) reported that personalisation could yield benefits to individuals, including improved student retention rates and achievement, and to society through a more highly skilled workforce, more expert independent learners, greater social inclusion and economic productivity.

Despite various policy initiatives there is still debate around what is meant by personalisation in education (Bird, 2006). The National Student Forum (2009) reported that students now expect to have their learning personalised to their needs, where assessment and feedback is used to aid learning, and courses are flexible. The National Union of Students (NUS, 2006) defines personalisation as "working in partnership with the learner – to tailor their learning experience in pathways, according to their needs and personal objectives – in a way which delivers success" (p. 2). The NUS (2006) recommended that personalisation should respond to the needs of the whole learner, raise their ambitions, and encourage them to take responsibility to become independent and effective learners and citizens. In other words, personalisation efforts go beyond 'choice and voice', and should consider the scale of support provided to students and the degree of student interactivity and self-expression. Ward and Richardson (2007) advised that personalised learning should therefore provide a means for "purposeful dialogue between the tutor and the learner" (p. 1).

Research was undertaken to investigate academics' perceptions of the meaning of personalisation and its relevance to the first year experience of HE students in Scotland (Knox & Wyper, 2008). The findings suggested that academics considered the focus of personalisation to be "… on the student as an individual, as a person, and as a member of a learning community" (p. 11). However, some respondents were adamant that within HE, personalisation could not be achieved on a one-to-one basis and that more resource efficient approaches were required.

2.2. The benefits of personalisation

The potential benefits of personalisation are reported to be wide reaching. Leadbeater (2004) contended that it is a powerful tool for promoting learning. Ward and Richardson (2007) explained that the process of personalised learning has the potential to enhance students' motivation and confidence and enable them to have a sense of ownership of their learning and improve their decision-making skills.

Knox and Wyper (2008) reported that academics believed that personalisation helped to:

- engage and empower students;
- take account of individual learning styles;
- manage their transition into HE;
- counter the effects of large class sizes;
- exploit new technologies;
- maximise the benefits of personal development planning.

Research undertaken on student engagement indicates that students' perception of time spent with tutors on a personal level increasingly underpins their engagement, retention and satisfaction (DeShields, Kara, & Kaynak, 2005; Rowley, 2003). Helgesen and Nesset (2007) identified a positive relationship between student satisfaction and student loyalty. The researchers also suggested that loyal students positively influence teaching quality through active participation and thus they are more engaged. Furthermore, loyal students are reported to become good advocates who make positive recommendations to future students (Dawson, Burnett, & O'Donohue, 2006) and therefore effectively contribute to recruitment efforts. Loyal students are also more likely to return to HEIs for professional development