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Editorial

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Reputation, Reputation, Reputation

Welcome to this edition of JOHLSTE which contains six academic papers and five practice papers.

In the practice papers section Marion Stuart-Hoyle offers helpful insights into Foundation Degrees both in terms of course design, issues of support, employer-relations and recruitment. This kind of paper is very important for education for it offers a considered look, reflection and some pointers for debate and feedback at the point of translation of policy into action. Foundation Degrees were naturally trumpeted by the UK government as a means of challenging narrow access, of improving employability and boosting participation rates in Higher Education. Many UK Higher Education Institutions have put considerable effort into developing Foundation Degrees yet one important lesson which emerges from this study is that a crucial aspect – that of incentivising employers to participate in the scheme – has been overlooked. The other four practice papers investigate different aspects of learning including intercultural communications, learning styles, virtual learning and the promotion of reflection in learning. The practice section of JOHLSTE continues to flourish and its emphasis on students, the classroom (in its broadest sense), the practitioner and reflection on topical aspects of education-in-action makes a distinctive and significant contribution to JOHLSTE.

The academic papers in this issue bring analysis to the Bologna process, study approaches, and two different aspects of employment. But it is the paper by Pereda, Airey and Bennett titled *Service Quality in Higher Education: The Experience of Overseas Students* that prompts the interest of this editorial. Pereda, Airey and Bennett point to the increasing numbers of full fee paying “foreign” (i.e. outside of the EU) students who are entering UK higher education. But their research also highlighted the fact that overseas students are often less satisfied with their courses than other students hence the interest of their paper in investigating service quality as perceived by this student group. The results of their research highlighted four important factors of service quality: recognition, quality of instruction and interaction with faculty, sufficiency of resources, and aspects of physical quality and it is argued by the authors that the most significant finding is the importance that overseas students attach to an institution’s reputation.

My particular interest in this paper and the issues it raises was prompted by the fact that I have recently returned from an overseas recruitment fair for UK universities organised by the British Council. This is the first time I have attended such an event and I was struck by how deeply Higher Education has become commodified and sold in a similar way to many other goods and services. Being an “insider” and thinking about reputation I had a fairly well informed view about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the institutions and specific courses on display at this fair. But I was also aware of how difficult it might be for visitors – the prospective students – to come to an informed view on institutions’ reputations and arrive at a rational choice. For institutional teams were armed with an array of seductive sales aids – glossy brochures, free pens (even teddy bear mascots) videos, scholarships, and colourful banners. In one case the image of double glazing sales came to mind as representatives of a university urged students to fill out application forms on the spot. Every institution seemed to have found at least one aspect of their provision which put them near the top of some league table. Proximity to London was a popular selling point and so was tradition. Here I noted with interest how some institutions that I think of as being fairly recent arrivals managed to trace archaeologies that spoke of long histories.

There is an old marketing technique that asks people to think of different brands in terms of cars, supermarkets and the like. As I looked a round the recruitment fair it was relatively easy to spot the BMW, the Ford Mondeo and the (pre-VW ownership) Skoda type of institution. But here was another puzzle. Whereas a BMW is about twice the price of a Skoda and a Mondeo falls somewhere between the two, all the universities on show were charging around the same price for postgraduate courses – about £10000. So two important questions arose from this trip. First how are students to choose between institutions or courses and second how are they to judge value for money?

UK students face an easier situation in making such choices. They are likely to benefit from local knowledge and this local knowledge is likely to come from careers teachers, teachers, parents, siblings, friends and relatives. It seems to me that overseas students (and maybe even some UK students who do not come from families rich in this type of cultural capital) face a particular problem in making this choice. They are therefore more likely to make decisions on more spurious grounds than those with better knowledge and they are therefore less likely to get value for money and more likely to be dissatisfied with their experience.

The UK is without doubt one of the leading countries providing university education for a worldwide market. Within the overall brand of Universities UK there are many areas where its provision is leading the world class but there are some pockets where it is lagging. Students will rarely be disappointed where they pay the top market price for the former. But the overall brand of Universities UK will suffer gradual erosion if overseas students unwittingly pay a top market price for the latter.