

Managing the student experience in a shifting higher education landscape



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Executive summary

- 1 This research report, prepared between January 2014 and July 2014, assesses how the management of the undergraduate student experience in English higher education (HE) is changing as a result of a more competitive environment, and in particular the impact of the new tuition fee regime introduced in 2012.
- 2 We define the student experience as the totality of a student's interaction with the institution. This study focuses on how institutional management decisions on operational matters are affecting this experience, rather than on teaching and learning activities. We appreciate that many surveys and discussions of the student experience include aspects of teaching and learning, but here we aim to distinguish between the two. We conceptualised our study in terms of 'the student journey', which we divided into these components:
 - *the application experience* – covering the interactions between potential students and the institution, up to the point of arrival;
 - *the academic experience* – students' interactions with the institution associated with their studies, excluding for these purposes teaching and learning processes;
 - *the campus experience* – student life not directly connected with study, which may include activities away from the actual campus (insofar as one exists);
 - *the graduate experience* – the institution's role is assisting students' transition to employment.
- 3 The politically controversial decision to introduce a new tuition fee regime in England from 2012, with the concomitant removal of public funding for undergraduate teaching other than in some high-cost and minority subjects, has almost certainly, most commentators accept, been the largest-scale single change in the financing of higher education ever seen in an advanced country. In the event, effectively all universities opted to charge fees at, or very near, the maximum permitted level of £9,000 per annum, and so did not compete with one another on price in the usual sense. But at the same time, a number of other government policies were having the effect of increasing competitive pressures in an already competitive higher-education environment. Some of these policies were deliberately designed to increase competition (removing the cap on the number of high-achieving A-level students that a university could recruit, for example), while in other instances the competitive impact seemed to be a side-effect of other policy objectives (a more demanding visa regime for international students, for example).
- 4 The management of the student experience is, in institutional terms, at the heart of responses to this new, radically uncertain, environment. Our research shows that, in our case-study institutions, the externally-driven changes outlined above have led to significant changes in structures, policies, and processes, resulting in changed institutional cultures. These changes have occurred in different ways depending on the type of institution.
- 5 Six institutions were selected as case studies on the basis of their teaching/research income mix: two with relatively high proportions of research income relative to total income (our 'R' grouping); two in an intermediary group (our 'X' grouping); and two with research income percentages at or below the median figure (3%) for the sector (our 'T' grouping). The institutions are spread reasonably widely across England. Additionally, a focus group was

conducted, with academic and professional managers working in a wide range of institutional types. The research questions that we specifically addressed were:

- Are changes in the higher-education landscape leading to changed institutional policies and practices which affect the student experience?
- Are there differences according to institutional types?
- Which managerial approaches appear to be the most effective in leading to enhanced student experiences, and why?

- 6 We found that the two research-intensive universities appeared to be responding to the changed environment in different ways to the other four institutions. The X and T cases were responding by, in general, centralising services, standardising procedures and strengthening management controls – and so tending to remove discretion at departmental level. On the other hand, both the ‘R’ institutions were, by and large, seeking to use existing institutional cultures to encourage greater concern for students’ needs on the part of both academic and professional staffs. Although organisational change had happened here also, it usually took the form of changing the reporting lines of student-related services to create more coherent functional groupings, rather than comprehensive reorganisations.
- 7 The post-2012 higher tuition fees affected the character of students’ interactions with their universities everywhere, but the ‘student as customer’ idea was more pronounced in the minds of managers in our X and T cases, and many management decisions here appeared to be strongly affected by what were seen as more assertive student senses of entitlement. Management concerns in the R institutions, while being conscious of student views on fee levels, tended to focus on the results of the National Student Survey (NSS) or other similar surveys, and the need to improve the student experience in areas which were achieving scores below those of peer institutions.
- 8 A cultural shift in the direction of improving the student experience, in several dimensions, was therefore apparent in all our cases, regardless of institutional type. Similarly, all our cases believed themselves to be in a more intense competitive position in terms of student recruitment than hitherto, although the sources of competitive pressures varied by institutional type.
- 9 This cultural shift includes an increased emphasis on employability – again, across all institutional types, but with variations in emphasis between our R, our X, and T cases. This new emphasis includes employment-related curriculum changes and enhanced support for advice and placements. While all our cases were concerned to achieve good results for student employment, there was a sense that the X and T cases were focused – in response, they believed, to student demands – on immediate employment rather than on longer-term career possibilities.
- 10 Competitive pressures and the consequential need to enhance the support given to student life have led to the introduction of measures to enhance the attractiveness and utility of campuses in various ways. These often involve library/learning resources improvements, with extended hours of access, and the creation of social learning spaces.
- 11 The different institutional responses to the changing environment that we have detected support the view that ideas of ‘effectiveness’ are institutionally-determined. What may be

effective in one setting may not be in another. The effects of a more assertive student voice as a result of higher tuition fees, mediated through these different institutional responses, seem to us to be likely to have mixed results. Some management responses to new student requests have led to positive outcomes (more accessible and more coherently structured university services, for instance), whereas others (for example, greater centralisation of decision-making) may in the longer-run reduce organisational flexibility and staff commitment.

- 12 We must emphasise that the number of case studies reported on here was necessarily small, and our findings must be viewed with this limitation in mind. We nevertheless believe that a reasonably clear pattern has emerged from what we have found. An extension of this study, with a larger number of cases would, in our view, be valuable as it would illuminate further the nature of the important cultural changes which we believe to be taking place currently in English universities.

I. Background to the study

- I.1. This research project, undertaken between January and July 2014, is one of several commissioned by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) to examine how current shifts in the landscape of UK higher education (HE) are affecting teaching and learning. The project aims to assess how the shifting landscape of English¹ higher education is affecting, and is likely to affect, the undergraduate student experience. The research questions developed for the study were:
- Are changes in the higher education landscape leading to changed institutional policies and practices which affect the student experience?
 - Are there differences according to institutional types?
 - Which managerial approaches appear to be the most effective in leading to enhanced student experiences, and why?
- I.2. It should be noted that this study focuses on how institutional management decisions are affecting the student experience, rather than on teaching and learning activities. We appreciate that many discussions and accounts of the student experience include aspects of teaching and learning (the *Times Higher Education* student experience survey, for example, Grove 2014), but we consider it helpful to distinguish the two. Of course, any student's learning will be in some way affected by their broader experience of higher education – that is essentially why it is a matter of interest – and teaching is affected by a range of institutional policies and practices, not simply by the decisions made by teachers individually or in course teams. This study will give examples of these connections working in practice. The boundaries between our definition of the student experience and student teaching and learning are therefore necessarily imprecise. Because many of our discussions in the universities involved the 2012 tuition fee regime, the focus of the study tended towards UK/EU undergraduates – those affected by the new fees – rather than international students. Naturally, though, international students are equally affected by the changes discussed in this report. We also focussed primarily on the experiences of full-time rather than part-time undergraduates.
- I.3. We conceptualised our study in terms of 'the student journey', which we divided into these four components (described in more detail later in the report):
- the application experience;
 - the academic experience;
 - the campus experience;
 - the graduate experience.

Just as our distinction between what we regard here as the student experience and teaching and learning is imprecise, so the boundaries between our student journey categories must be blurred: aspects of 'the campus experience' – student social life, a good standard of accommodation, say – will affect a student's 'academic experience', as will the organisational issues surrounding study (library and IT support, academic administration) in which we are interested here. Our student journey conceptualisation also allows us to draw on a number

¹ There are significant differences between the component entities of the United Kingdom in matters of higher education provision; this study deals exclusively with the position in England.

of theoretical underpinnings – human capital theory in relation to the academic experience, social capital theory in relation to the campus experience, and economic capital in relation to the graduate experience.

- I.4. The research team discussed with HEA officers a list of potential case study institutions, which were checked with the HEA Partnerships team to avoid possible duplicative approaches involving other HEA work. Six English institutions were to be selected on the basis of criteria set out in the research proposal: namely, two from the group of institutions where dual support research income constitutes 20% or more of total income (21 institutions) – our R cases; the median group of 42 institutions, where research income is below 20% and above 3% of total income (taking all institutions, 3% is the median figure) – our X cases; and those where research income is 3% or less of total income – our T cases. The university financial data were obtained from Higher Education Statistics Agency's (HESA's) Higher Education Information Database for Institutions (HEIDI) database. After a period of negotiations, two institutions in each of these categories agreed to take part, and the HEA and the research team are grateful to them, and in particular to the members of their staffs who agreed to be interviewed. Categories of staff interviewed are set out in the appendix to this report. The institutions are spread reasonably widely across England. The fieldwork was carried out between March 2014 and May 2014.
- I.5. Additionally, a focus group was conducted, with 15 academic and professional managers with various specialisms and levels of seniority, drawn from 14 institutions, at which the project's research questions were discussed. The institutional split for the group was 43% R, 14% X, and 43% T. The R-type institutions were therefore over-represented in the group compared with the national picture. Useful data emerged (reported in section 3), which largely confirmed the findings emerging from the case studies.
- I.6. Ethics approval for the research was received through the Institute of Education's (IoE's) process. The case-study institutions are anonymised in this report, as are the individual informants. Informants were told that their comments would not be passed on in any attributable form to their institutional managements.
- I.7. A steering group was formed by the HEA to oversee the study. Andrew West, from the University of Sheffield, served as an external member, and we are grateful to him for his contribution.

2. The changing English higher education landscape

- 2.1. The idea of the student experience, as a distinct set of linked activities to be managed institutionally, is a relatively recent one. The term has multiple meanings, and the list of what it might include is almost endless. It is important to acknowledge that each student's set of experiences will be unique to that person: there is a risk that references to "the student experience" will suggest a degree of uniformity that cannot exist in practice. However, in this study we focus on institutionally-intended patterns of the student experience, in areas over which institutions can have some influence. We reflect on aggregated impressions of the student (non-learning) experience, as perceived by university managers, not (in general) by the students themselves.
- 2.2. Although there is plenty of literature over several decades on "the experiences of students" in different respects, mostly in terms of teaching and learning for particular classes of students (part-time, mature, international, and so on), thinking about the student experience in a more holistic sense, as something to be viewed and managed as a totality, effectively dates back only to the 1990s. Haselgrove's edited book, *The Student Experience* (1994), was also a pioneer work in tracking what would now be called the student journey, presented in the book in sections headed "getting in", "being there", and "moving on". A more recent book (Morgan 2012) breaks down the student journey into smaller elements:

- first contact and admissions;
- pre-arrival;
- arrival and orientation;
- induction;
- reorientation and reintroduction to study (for continuing students);
- outduction – preparing to leave, graduation and beyond.

Our approach was to consider the student journey in four categories, noted above. Our fieldwork experience suggests that this fitted reasonably well with how university staffs approached the issue.

- 2.3. A key chapter in Haselgrove's book describes a student satisfaction methodology developed at what was then the University of Central England, which identified a set of indicators of satisfaction proposed by students themselves through a process of group discussion (Green et al. 1994). The issues identified were:

- travel to the university;
- access to facilities (libraries, computing, refectories);
- student support;
- teaching and learning;
- social life and self-development;
- finance.

It is worth noting that the student respondents apparently saw "teaching and learning" as being embedded in a wider group of factors which collectively supported the satisfaction they derived from their experiences as students. A questionnaire was then administered to a sample of students, who were asked to rate the importance of these factors, and their

satisfaction with them, leading to “a set of priorities on which management attention can be focused” (p. 103). These topics cover certainly most of what would be regarded as the student experience today.

- 2.4. Green *et al.* (1994) noted that the relationship between student satisfaction – which is what they were attempting to measure – and educational quality is far from straightforward, not least because student expectations are “variable and unpredictable” (p. 105), and because it is not obvious that students are always the best judges of whatever is defined as “quality”, particularly where academic judgement is involved. This debate continues to this day. Staddon and Standish (2012) have challenged the idea of “student-as-customer” on the grounds that it “puts students in a relation to their learning that is very different to what has traditionally been the case ... authority is now being ceded to the novice – to those who might once have been thought of as standing in need of induction and, hence, as unable to understand well ... the nature of this [educational] good.” They go on to argue that “to see student choice as the arbiter of quality is an abnegation of responsibility on the part of providers of higher education. Standards are not being raised but abandoned.” Furthermore, it has been observed that evidence is lacking as to whether there is any causal relationship between good student satisfaction scores – suggesting satisfied ‘customers’ – and educational quality as assessed by measures such as student performance and learning gain (Gibbs 2012, p. 14).
- 2.5. The “customer satisfaction vs quality” argument is in a tradition (as Staddon and Standish 2012 acknowledge) sometimes associated with Allan Bloom’s book *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). Here, in a wide-ranging critique of US university education in the 1970s and 1980s, the author regrets that:

The university now offers no distinctive visage to the young person ... there is no vision, nor is there a set of competing visions, of what an educated human being is ... The student gets no intimation that great mysteries might be revealed to him [sic], that new and higher motives of action might be discovered ... that a different and more human way of life can be harmoniously constructed by what he is going to learn. (Bloom 1987, p. 337)

These remarks are about the purpose of the university, about curriculum content, about how it should be taught and assessed, and other matters directly concerned with the intellectual project that any particular university programme is addressing, and the extent to which the engagement of students in these matters makes sense in terms of the broadest objectives of liberal higher education.

- 2.6. The argument that student views on what is being provided to them have limited value is less persuasive when applied to various kinds of support services. These services include libraries and IT facilities which are closely associated with teaching and learning activities, and where academic priorities tend to be bound up with institutional requirements about efficiency and effectiveness. Generally in our case-study universities services, such as catering and accommodation, are operated on what might be considered to be straightforward supply and demand-based commercial principles: students are indeed the customers of these services. Other student-facing services such as admissions, academic administration, student advice and support, and careers guidance, are not operated on commercial principles in the usual sense of the term, but clearly provide services to student (and potential and former student) users, even if those users are not customers in the strictest sense. This is because, unlike with catering or student accommodation, there is not an alternative university registry to which

students can turn if dissatisfied with the service on offer. Nor are direct payments from users practicable for most of these services. It might be argued here that student views or “voice” should form an important indicator of the effectiveness of these services (and they are certainly widely sought), but not necessarily the decisive one.

- 2.7. The increasing salience of the idea of the student experience in the literature and in professional debates is associated with the introduction, first, of ‘upfront’ undergraduate means-tested tuition fees in 1998, and with the later loan-based fee regimes introduced in 2006 and in altered form in 2012. These fee regimes were in turn associated with the appearance of various student surveys (sometimes about ‘satisfaction’), predating the appearance of the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2005, which has operated annually since then. The NSS results may now be compared with the findings of the annual Higher Education Policy Institute and Higher Education Academy (HEPI–HEA) Student Academic Experience Survey (most recently, HEPI–HEA 2014). The HEPI–HEA survey does not produce institution-level data, and is probably best known for its findings on student contact hours and workloads, though unlike the NSS, which surveys final-year undergraduates, it also surveys first and second year students. NSS results can also be compared with the annual *Times Higher Education* Student Experience Survey (most recently, Grove 2014), which *does* publish institution-level data (though not subject-level data) on student views about the quality of teaching but with a strong emphasis on student social life, the campus environment, accommodation, and other non-academic matters. These developments, along with other government higher education policies – set out in the *White Paper Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011) – aimed at creating market-like mechanisms and increased competition between institutions in England. One such policy, allowing universities to recruit uncapped numbers of high-achieving A-level students, and thereby stimulating competition among universities to attract such students, helped to crystallise the idea of the student experience as it is now understood (Baird and Gordon 2009). Certainly, in the UK, more detailed information than ever is now available on the views of students at both undergraduate and postgraduate (e.g. through the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey) levels, and on all aspects of their academic and broader experiences as students. Market-related changes in other higher education systems, for example, in Australia (Meek and Wood 1997), but also elsewhere in Europe (e.g. Sarrico and Rosa 2014; Vuori 2013), have led to parallel thinking about the student experience as a relatively distinct higher-education management function. Reflecting this focus of concern, probably all UK higher education institutions now have a second-tier post (pro-vice-chancellor or similar) with student experience responsibilities.
- 2.8. Research published in 2008 on the student experience in Russell Group and other UK universities found few significant differences: “regardless of their socio-economic background or type of university attended ... students tend to have similar preferences for teaching method and approach their studies in similar ways” (Ainley and Weyers 2008, p. 150). However, this research was carried out before the current fee regime was introduced, and, unlike the present study, focused on the teaching and learning process (e.g. the extent to which students engaged in “deep” or “surface” learning, and how academically demanding students found their courses) rather than on management activities. The methodology of Ainley and Weyers’ study might be criticised because of its implied view that the Russell/non-Russell binary divide is significant here: there are, in fact, a considerable number of non-Russell Group universities which are practically indistinguishable in most respects from the less research-intensive members of the Russell Group. So, it is not clear that any differences that might be reported do reflect the proposed institutional division between “the top

universities [which are] selecting and researching universities ahead of the ... recruiting and teaching” institutions. It is, however, the case that the HEPI–HEA survey shows that there are only minor differences in students’ satisfaction with their courses when different types of universities are compared (HEPI–HEA 2014, p. 20).

- 2.9. So far as the undergraduate experience is concerned, our respondents considered the introduction of the new fee regime in England in 2012 to be the single event having the greatest impact on the present higher education landscape. In the R universities studied, however, while the increased fees have had an effect on relationships between students and the university, the effect seems much less pronounced than in our X and T cases. Management changes to the student experience in the R cases (usually) seem to have been driven by concerns around specific NSS findings, or from other survey data, which might have reputational consequences. All the universities we studied had set the maximum allowable undergraduate fee of £9,000 per annum, and although they were not competing on price – as nearly all other universities had set the same fee, or one very near it – competitive pressures had nevertheless increased: not least because of the cap set by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on student numbers and the demographic downturn leading to a national fall in UK undergraduate numbers.
- 2.10. There have been other significant changes in the higher education landscape. The latest higher education White Paper, *Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system* (BIS 2011), identified improving the student experiences as one of three challenges the Government’s reforms sought to tackle (the others were financial sustainability and social mobility). It declared that “institutions must deliver a better student experience; improving teaching, assessment, feedback and preparation for the world of work.” (BIS 2011, p. 4). The White Paper also called for greater employer engagement in higher education in order to enhance student employability. In addition, it indicated the Government’s wish further to increase competition by encouraging higher education work in further education (FE) colleges (‘HE in FE’) and in private providers – both for-profit and non-profit – and also by making it easier for smaller institutions, without significant research profiles and with limited subject ranges, to gain a university title. This must have increased competitive pressures for some institutions, although it is hard to gauge by how much. The “core and margin” approach for the allocation of student numbers, intended to increase competition for students by reducing “core” allocations to institutions, further increased competitive pressures. The results of the 2014 Research Excellence Framework exercise (REF) are not yet known, but it is likely – because of pressure on national research budgets – that they will be used to continue the policy of research selectivity, that is, the concentration of research work in a smaller number of institutions. This will in turn affect universities’ positions in the various published rankings, with consequential effects on UK/EU and international student recruitment, so increasing competitive pressures still further.
- 2.11. These changes add up to create a higher education landscape which is both fluid and unpredictable, with major challenges for institutional leaderships and managements and their academic and professional staffs.

3. Our findings

3.1. Introduction

- 3.1.1. The two universities that we studied where research income as a percentage of total turnover was 3% or below we refer to as 'T1' and 'T2'; the two in our middle category we refer to as 'X1' and 'X2'; and the two in our research-intensive category, where research income as a percentage of total turnover was 20% or above, as 'R1' and 'R2'. Members of our focus group were drawn from six universities in our R group, two in our X group, and six in our T group.
- 3.1.2. We assured institutional managements, when seeking their co-operation, and later the individual respondents, that they would not be identifiable from our report. This means that we are severely constrained over the amount of contextual information that we can give about them, without making the identities of institutions – and, therefore, in some cases the identities of informants – reasonably apparent to an informed reader. We can however say that R1 and R2 are long-established, major research universities with global reputations, located in large English cities. X1 and X2 each have different twentieth-century institutional origins, and are located on the edges of major conurbations. T1 and T2 are both former polytechnics, one in a northern English city and one in the south.
- 3.1.3 We present our findings in terms of the elements of the student journey that we put forward in our research proposal:
- *the application experience* – covering the interactions between potential students and the institution, up to the point of arrival;
 - *the academic experience* – students' interactions with the institution associated with their studies, excluding for these purposes teaching and learning processes;
 - *the campus experience* – student life not directly connected with study, which may include activities away from the actual campus (insofar as one exists);
 - *the graduate experience* – the institution's role is assisting students' transition to employment.

3.2. The application experience

- 3.2.1. As with many aspects of contemporary university operations, the undergraduate recruitment and admissions process has become more competitive between institutions, and more closely managed within them, in all our cases. Centralisation of the process, moving direct responsibility away from academic departments, had taken place to varying extents in all our cases, a trend broadly confirmed by our focus group participants. The head of admissions at X1 noted that the whole process was utterly changed compared with ten years ago. Student recruitment there, as elsewhere, is a key university management focus, measured through key performance indicators (KPIs), and operated jointly with the schools outreach operation and the international office. Responsibility for student recruitment and admissions in our cases typically comes within the management structure covering student experience matters, although the marketing department (typically reporting separately) is also involved – through market intelligence work, website and prospectus preparation, for example. (At R2, though, the role of the marketing department does not include student recruitment work.)

3.2.2. Our case study universities were following generally the system-wide trend of increasing their spending on recruitment marketing (Clarke 2014). This meant, as one senior central manager in T1 noted, that T1 and all its competitor universities “in a crowded marketplace” were devoting more management time and spending more money in efforts simply to maintain their market share (given that total UK/EU student numbers are currently capped). R1 and R2, in a different market segment, were in a similar position, as some of their competitor research universities were becoming slightly less demanding over admissions qualifications and therefore more attractive to some applicants. The effectively standard £9,000 fee level made the marketing job harder in universities such as T1, as it was hard to avoid the implicit claim that, in effect, that they were of a comparable academic standard to internationally-famous research universities. Rather similarly, at X2, it was thought that students found it hard to understand why what is essentially a “recruiting” University charges the maximum permissible fees. In contrast, at R1 the fee level was not considered to be an issue of over-riding significance: students appeared to take it for granted; however, the recruitment process was just as competitive as at T1 and X2, albeit that R1, like R2, was competing for a different pool of students, and both were concerned to improve application-to-admission conversion rates. At R2, as elsewhere, it was suggested that students responded to the higher fees in terms of expecting better “value for money”, particularly more accessible services, while not adopting a consumer mentality, as such.

3.2.3. All the universities found open days to be valuable recruitment exercises: T1 obtained a 60% conversion rate from open day visitors to applications. T2 had made recent major investments in physical facilities, and this was believed to be having a positive effect in turning visitors – who were pleasantly surprised at the quality of facilities – into applicants. X2 invited applicants to the University for a day to give them a taste of university life and to help in managing their expectations. Potential students frequently used social media sites to obtain more information about universities and courses, ignoring (it was widely believed) official sources of information. (A senior central manager at T2 wondered if the intended audience for official information such as the NSS had any understanding of what the data meant.) As a result, at T1, a paid graduate intern, managed by the central marketing department, was placed in each academic department with the task of fielding Facebook and Twitter queries from potential and current students. The picture was similar at R1, where paid graduate interns were also used. Social media figured largely in R1’s strategy for communications with students, which ran in parallel with the administrative processes going through from application to graduation. At X2, senior managers considered communication with prospective students as a crucial stage in the student journey that “sets the context” for later experiences. Effective communication may reduce the number of students who drop-out in their first year. This often happens, it is thought, because students come with mistaken expectations that might have been corrected through more effective communications. It was noted, generally, that students using these technologies expected instant responses. (Other recent research confirms the emphasis that institutions now place on appropriate channels to communicate with their students (see BIS 2014, p. 58).)

3.2.4. The higher fee level seemed to have led to more churn in the system at T1: more people were not responding to offers, perhaps, because they were considering non-higher education options such as apprenticeships or other work-related options. Senior staff at T2 thought that students now often asked themselves, “Do I want to come into higher education? Will it be value for money?” At X2, changing controls on student numbers were a concern, making planning in this area difficult. Changing Government policy on immigration issues was mentioned at R2, a university with a large number of international students. The University

employed a full-time member of staff simply to ensure compliance with immigration regulations. Parental involvement seemed (to T1's admissions staff) to have increased following the fee increases, with parents often apparently more concerned than their children about student debt. A similar view emerged at X1, with parents being more in evidence in the registration process, and if complaints arose. R2 produced an applicants' newsletter aimed at parents in an effort to manage expectations about what the University could and could not do, and to encourage the early disclosure of any health problems in applicants. Generally, increased parental involvement in the student experience was noted across all institutions. It was thought at R1 that parents now played a greater role in the choice of a university – hence R1's emphasis (in its marketing) on its international reputation and its reputation with employers, something thought to be more significant in the eyes of parents than of prospective students.

3.2.5. T1, T2, and X2 had developed induction programmes to help new students settle in quickly – particularly, to understand the different expectations between university and school, to create a sense of belonging, and to help them make friends. R1 devoted the first week of term to welcoming new students, involving as many staff as possible, from the Vice-Chancellor downward.

3.2.6. The management task for the student admissions experience now involves greater emphasis on the presentation of the university, both before and during visits by potential students and their parents; more effort given to the induction of students and the management of their expectations; and a need to respond rapidly (preferably, instantly) to digital queries. All this applies equally to R universities, but in some cases in a different sense: one of our focus group respondents referred to presentation being about the “global positioning” of the University, rather than a wish to attract more applicants (admittedly, this was an institution in the topmost segment of UK universities).

3.2.7. The shifting landscape appears to have affected the admissions aspect of the student journey, causing it to be managed even more closely in all our cases, usually involving organisational change, and centralisation, of some kind. Our respondents generally considered that the various admissions-related measures introduced had proved to be effective – at least to the extent of broadly maintaining each institution's position in the marketplace.

3.3. The academic experience

3.3.1. The changing landscape, often in relation to the new fee regime, has caused reviews and subsequent restructuring of academic and related services to be undertaken in all our case-study institutions, although other factors (the economic recession from 2008 was mentioned at X2, and increased competitiveness was mentioned widely) also played a part. There is a widespread view that, in order to remain competitive, universities must respond effectively to student views on a wide variety of academically-related issues. At R1 and R2, this was driven by powerful concerns about their NSS scores being below those of comparator institutions: here, student recruitment was considered to be strongly affected by the league table positions of the two universities, which in turn were affected by NSS results. At R1, a wide-ranging restructuring of student experience-related functions, covering recruitment, admissions, academic administration, student support, accommodation services and careers services had been undertaken in 2010 to address this concern, and appeared to be bearing fruit in terms of improved student survey results. This had involved simplifying lines of control and improving communications, rather than, for example, merging functions into larger groupings. These changes were also believed to have sent an important signal internally, that

the student experience was regarded as a key issue by the University's top management. Restructuring of student services had also taken place very recently in R2, where there was similar concern about poor NSS scores, especially around feedback. Although the director concerned was not responsible for such a wide range of functions as at R1 – admissions and careers, for example, were handled separately.

- 3.3.2. Academic staff in all our cases were being required to respond to increased student expectations – with, at T1, guaranteed times for the return of written work, for example – which had led to tensions in places. At R1, academic staff were being encouraged to help improve the student experience through the highlighting examples of good practice in other departments – “They can get better NSS scores by changing their practice, why can't you?” The institutional culture here would not, it was believed, support a more dirigiste approach – which in any case was considered unnecessary: the dynamics of collegial volition seemed to work well. Better academic/management relations were stressed at T2 as a way of making academic staff more aware of student experience issues by, for example, ensuring that the library was aware of changing course requirements. What is apparent in our X and T cases is that respondents reported that students do not in general see the new fee levels simply as a development of the previous fee regime, but as qualitatively different, putting them in a new position *vis-a-vis* the university: “Every single thing comes back to the money question” (i.e. fee levels), said a students' union officer at T2. This concern with fee levels did not feature in such a pronounced way at R1 and R2 in terms of student relations with academic and professional staff, although fee levels certainly appeared to be a concern to most students. A students' union officer at R2 had, however, detected a change in culture as a result of fee levels and marketisation more generally: he believed that students seeing themselves as customers with rights was unhelpful.
- 3.3.3. In many cases, reviews of administrative services have resulted in greater centralisation of decision-making which, arguably, may not always be in the best interests of the students it was designed to serve. At T1, faculty staff complained that a standard figure for class contact hours per module had been imposed centrally, in response to student complaints, even though some modules (in the view of faculty academic staff) required more hours, while others required fewer. At XI, a wide-ranging centralisation of professional services had recently taken place, which had severely reduced professional staff numbers in the faculties. The enlarged, centralised student support department now had some 350 staff. A key benefit of this was the more consistent application of policies and provision of information to students, but at the price of loss of immediate personal contact and detailed knowledge of faculty business: “efficiency at the price of effectiveness” was a comment about a similar move at T1. This centralisation was seen as causing an important cultural change, which, some respondents believed, had created a new sense of enthusiasm. Others were less positive about its effects. Similar changes had taken place at R1, although here all central services were required to have a student experience “champion” and an action plan, the implementation of which was monitored, but not directed, by the head of student experience. There had been some centralisation from faculty level at R1, but more emphasis was placed on developing cross-cutting themes (e.g. student communications) which could be pursued collaboratively in different service departments across the (very large) University. A similar approach, based on action plans at departmental level rather than widespread reorganisation, was being pursued at R2.
- 3.3.4. All of our case study institutions have placed greater emphasis on enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, a process usually begun before 2012, but given added emphasis since

then. Other recent research confirms this trend (BIS 2014, p. 18). This emphasis applies also to the R institutions, which have become more prescriptive about teaching and learning matters, aiming to reduce the discretion available to individual academics in matters such as assessment and feedback, but usually by issuing guidelines, rather than instructions (“Using the big stick won’t work here” was a comment at R1). R1 has a Pro-Vice-Chancellor-level (PVC-level) post for teaching and learning, the holder of which works closely with the head of student experience (although there is no formal reporting line). Focus group members from R-type universities presented similar views. X1 had created internal knowledge-exchange networks on different aspects of teaching and learning, and had a scheme to reward staff financially for outstanding work in this area. At T1, while its research profile was modest, there was increasing recognition that research could affect teaching positively and this provided another reason for encouraging research work. Turnover of academic staff at T1 had increased, when it became apparent that some members of staff were unable to adjust to a higher level of performance, now considered to be demanded by students. At X1, there was a view that the centralisation of the University administration (with the large central department noted in 3.3.3) had created a “them and us” feeling so far as academic staff were concerned.

3.3.5. Library and learning resource units had usually seen changes in student attitudes towards their services. “We’re paying £9k, why haven’t I got access to the resources I need, why am I still being asked to buy certain books?” was a view reported by a senior librarian at X1. Even at R1, where the impact of increased fees was generally felt to be slight, a more assertive student attitude had been noted. The higher fee levels had produced student objections to paying library fines at T1, and there had been examples of student resistance to disciplinary action over inappropriate behaviour in the library, on the grounds that “customers” could do as they wished. At X1, there were concerns about “extreme behaviour” (unspecified) sometimes encountered on the campus, although it was not clear how far this was associated with the higher education landscape rather than the wider social landscape. The new fee level had led T1 to provide mandatory equipment (e.g. safety glasses) free, where previously it had been charged for: it has become widely accepted that the higher fee has to be seen as buying more than the old fees did.

3.3.6. 24/7 library opening had been adopted universally, at least for some library buildings, in some cases pre-dating the fee changes. This had the benefit of helping NSS scores on access to learning materials – “a quick win” was how it was described at R2, along with installing Wi-Fi in student residences and providing a laptop loan scheme through the library. The importance of improving NSS scores was mentioned widely at all institutions, although (as noted) only at R1 and R2 was it considered a greater driver of change than increased fees. Students’ expectations of IT facilities were increasing continually as technology advanced, and they were quick to be critical of any perceived failings in this area. Investment in digital technologies at T1 had, the central teaching and learning managers believed, enhanced the student learning experience, despite some reluctance from “traditionally-minded” academic staff to embrace these new opportunities. A T1 faculty view, by contrast, was that student reliance on material from the VLE could lead to non-attendance at lectures, disengagement, and eventual dropping-out. Simply responding to student demands for constant upgrades of technologies was not necessarily the correct approach, it was suggested. More generally, the view at R1 was that it was important for students to appreciate that the University was listening, that it cared – even if it did not accede to every request. At R2, the plan was to develop more tailored information for students, so that they would be automatically provided with

information on their available optional modules and so on. This was seen as using IT intelligently with students' needs at the centre.

3.3.7. Substantial organisational changes had taken place at all our case study institutions – some directly driven by the need to respond to raised student expectations as a result of the new fee regime, others (in the R institutions) aimed at improving the student experience with NSS scores in mind, although here too changed student expectations had an effect. Most of these changes have only taken place in the last two or three years, and so it is hard to judge their effectiveness, although some positive results are reported (improved NSS scores at R1, for example). The institutional cultures at the two R universities seem to have affected the type of changes and the way in which they are being implemented, being less top-down and directive than in the T and X institutions.

3.4. The campus experience

3.4.1. There had been efforts both to improve the campus experience in terms of physical facilities and also to help improve the possibilities for social interaction. T2 had made major capital investment in centralising previously scattered facilities on one campus, and although this predated the current fee regime it did allow the University to point to a benefit of studying there: “the experience outside the classroom has been stepped up”, said a student union officer. X1 was pursuing a similar strategy of concentrating resources on its main campus to provide improved facilities and also to encourage the mixing of students in different academic fields. R1 was also pursuing an estates strategy to create more of a unified campus – to enhance a “sense of belonging” – in its inner-city location, including having achieved agreement to pedestrianise a main road separating university buildings.

3.4.2. At T1, the head of estates had not seen any changes in student expectations specifically in response to the new fee regime: it had always been the University's aim to provide a clean, attractive, safe campus environment. A regular University satisfaction survey provided a check on the extent to which cleaning, catering and other services were meeting needs. Efforts had been made to provide more social spaces, turning the refectory into more of a flexible space for shared learning, for example. Similar developments were being pursued at X1, to create “breakout” spaces where students could work and socialise between classes. At R1, a 24-hour “learning commons” had been created, allowing students to work in groups and individually with high levels of IT facilities (“a popular place to sleep”, was one observation about its use by students). While R2 was limited physically in its ability to create new learning spaces, the University had undertaken a review of room utilisation and allocation, and was seeking to determine module provision earlier so that the most appropriate rooms could be allocated. Improvements to library and related facilities were found to have occurred widely in the last two years according to other recent research (BIS 2014, p. 51).

3.4.3. At X2, campus services (catering, residential accommodation, sports facilities and so on) were operated by a central directorate aimed at providing high-quality services to students. This was a recent response to increasing student demands for improved services, linked to the new fee levels. There was also an emphasis at X2 on developing links between the campus and the local community, with a view to widening the student experience by offering more interactions with organisations beyond the University. At R1, all these activities came under the student experience directorate.

3.4.4. More attention seems to be being given by managements to their university as a physical entity, with the realisation at all our cases that the look and feel of the place affect both

recruitment and the development of a coherent university community – with benefits for student learning. Some of the changes, planned and undertaken, are long-term and involve major capital investment, but others are more modest in scale – the creation of more welcoming social spaces, and creating multi-functional areas in what were previously specialist areas, for example.

3.5. The graduate experience

3.5.1. Employability figured largely in the thinking of many of our respondents. It was often uppermost in the minds of applicants: for many, “getting a good job was part of a good student experience”, said a senior manager at T2; yet a careers adviser at T1 found “mixed views” among students on the question. Some students showed a lack of interest in preparing for work, seemingly on the grounds that they had “bought their degree” with their fees, and that a job somehow came attached. At R1, students were encouraged to think more broadly about their “future” rather than employment as such, although achieving a high proportion of graduates working in professional jobs soon after graduation was an important performance indicator (PI) for the student experience directorate (which included the careers service). Similarly, at R2 the emphasis on student employment was relatively recent, and had led to an expanded careers service with employer engagement and placement staff now attached to faculties. There were concerns among careers staff about the use made of HESA’s Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education data in league tables and as a performance indicator.

3.5.2. At R1, X1 and X2 it was thought that students’ emphasis on employability, which had been on the rise for ten or so years, was related more to the labour market generally than to the fee regime. The universities had responded typically by bringing together the previously separate functions of finding students part-time work; student placements; volunteering; and final-year careers advice into a single operation. All of our case study universities placed emphasis on providing students with the skills that it was considered they would need in the labour market. However, at both X1 and T1 there was some concern expressed by academic managers that this emphasis on employability was (as a senior member of staff at T1 put it) at the cost of some of the “wider ideals of the university”. Surprisingly, perhaps, R1 and R2 appeared to have been able to integrate employment-related topics into academic curricula, in at least some instances, and seemingly without tensions arising.

3.5.3. Recognising the international student experience was stressed as an important issue (X2 and T2). It was crucial to acknowledge that international students may have different sets of priorities and specific requirements (language problems, culture shock, communication issues and so on). Therefore, they may need to have additional, or different, support to enhance their experiences. International students’ integration into the campus (and community) life has been considered as a key targets (e.g. X2 started to hold multicultural events in the campus). International student experience is also important for the University’s long-term policies (e.g. alumni networks across the world can contribute to recruitment rates, as well as to international placements and work experience opportunities).

4. Conclusions

For over a hundred and fifty years, it has been acceptable to talk of ‘the idea of the university’. Now, that phrasing, with its implication that there is or could be simply a single idea of the university, is problematic ... given the complexity of modern society, there will be many ideas as to what it is to be a university. (Barnett 2011, page 1)

- 4.1. We have found that our non-research intensive universities have all responded in similar ways to the changed higher education landscape of the last few years. Our research-intensive universities have also responded, but in noticeably different ways. Even allowing for the very small sample size with which we have been working, it appears clear that what has been traditionally referred to as ‘the sector’ is splitting into two distinct groupings, at least with regards to our areas of focus here. More work is required to confirm this finding holds more generally, and to determine more precisely where the point of fracture lies.
- 4.2. In our four non-research intensive universities – T1, T2, X1 and X2 – a change in institutional cultures appears to have taken place in the last few years. This is primarily, but not exclusively, as a result of the new fee regime, and the decisions taken by these institutions to charge the maximum fee currently allowable, £9,000 a year. The crucial point is that the new fee regime was introduced at a time when “recruiting” institutions (as the four listed here are) were already engaged in intense competition. This was the result of:
 - firstly, a slowing in the rate of increase in the demand for higher education, followed by a slight absolute fall;
 - secondly, the growth in the number of institutions with the title ‘university’, making it easier for them to compete with established universities – there were 10 new university designations in 2010 alone (Temple 2013, p. 166) – as well as other higher education providers; and
 - thirdly, targeted relaxations in student number controls, allowing “selecting” universities to admit more high-achieving A-level students at the expense of less prestigious universities.

All these factors have intensified since 2012, creating even more competition among institutions. Other factors, such as the more restrictive visa regime for international students, have added to these pressures.

- 4.3. The high fees appear to have changed the way in which many students in our X and T cases relate to the university services on offer, with a definite trend towards more assertive consumer – if not always customer – attitudes: at least, this is how it appears to many of the staff and to student representatives. This in turn has driven universities to make wide-ranging changes in order to at least maintain each university’s competitive position – which seem to have had the effect of reinforcing the view among students that they should indeed be treated as paying customers, with the rights that go with that status. We have only limited data here, but it seems plausible to hypothesise a mutually-reinforcing spiral of expectations.
- 4.4. There are positive and negative effects here. Cultural changes are believed by members of staff in the T and X cases to have taken place in their universities, driven by the need to make

student-facing activities, of all kinds, more coherent and effective from the standpoint of students. This is arguably an overdue change, and the present government might reasonably claim that their policies have had, to this extent, the effect of putting “students at the heart of the system”. This new culture in our T and X cases places more demands on both professional and academic staffs, and, for a variety of reasons, is not to the liking of some of those involved. Service improvements in recent years in other public organisations have followed similar trajectories: local authority one-stop-shops, involving extensive organisational change, where residents can have immediate access to all the council’s services, are a parallel.

- 4.5. The positions at R1 and R2 show both similarities and differences compared with the T and X universities. There have been extensive internal restructurings to bring together previously disparate student-facing services, particularly at R1, together with a greater emphasis on enhanced teaching and learning so far as academic staff are concerned: a similar picture emerged at R2. There are, then, clear similarities with the T and X cases in these respects. However, while in the T and X cases there was a widespread sense of culture change in the universities imposed from the top down in order to respond to new student demands, the sense at R1 and R2 was one of working within a strong existing institutional culture while seeking incremental improvements to practice – perhaps amounting to a cultural shift by stealth, as it were. The usual method of doing this at R1 was to identify an area of good practice and to hold this up as an example for emulation – occasionally supported by “naming and shaming”, when exhortation seemed to be insufficient. The strength of the existing collegial culture in R1 meant that this was usually effective. The positions of R1 and R2 and their staffs in relation to students also seemed to differ from the T and X cases: the universities did not see themselves as responding to sharp consumer-type pressures from students, but rather seeking to enhance what they already regarded as a good student experience by seeking improvements in a number of areas. R1, for example, sought to have “adult conversations” with its students about what could and could not be offered, rather than responding to customer demands. R2’s approach was similar.
- 4.6. The clear trend towards administrative centralisation seen in T1, T2, X1 and X2, believed to be necessary in order to provide improved and consistent levels of service to students, can create difficulties in the large organisations which all our case study universities are. T1’s removal of discretion at faculty level over contact hours in different modules is an example of a policy introduced to deal with student complaints but which may not be in the best interests of individual students. The distancing of administrative processes from day-to-day academic work may tend to create a “them and us” culture, with unfortunate implications for effective and harmonious working relationships. R1 has approached the matter rather differently, with some reorganisation of services but with probably more emphasis on ensuring that all functional areas planned to provide an improved student experience – by the use of “student experience champions” for example.
- 4.7. These changes are clearly associated with the idea of the “student as customer” – now a relationship largely taken for granted by senior management and professional staff in T1, T2, X1 and X2, even if some academic staff in those universities resist its implications so far as teaching and learning is concerned. We noted earlier that while there are some areas of university activity where the student *as customer*, or client, is appropriate, it is difficult in a university to separate clearly academic and many non-academic activities: there seems to be a tendency for customer-related changes in non-academic areas to bleed across into academic areas.

- 4.8. Although the new fee regime has not led to the competition on price between universities as the government had once hoped, senior staff in all our case study universities were in no doubt that the overall higher-education environment had become more competitive in recent years, though for different reasons in our T and X cases compared with the R cases. All the universities were accordingly making efforts to distinguish themselves, to stand out from the crowd. The emphasis that we found everywhere on NSS results, internal satisfaction surveys, league table positions and marketing activity is a reflection of this. Intense involvement with social media, in various ways, is another symptom of this need for prominence in (particularly) the communication channels favoured by young people. Subsequent management actions place further pressure on professional and academic staff, as noted above. Staff turnover in some of our case study universities had increased significantly as a result. There is a real danger, it seems to us, of disaffection among academic staff in our T and X universities becoming endemic: there are now rival versions of how universities and their staffs should stand in relation to students.
- 4.9. We found a new emphasis on employability, with all the case study universities wishing to produce graduates who meet employers' needs. Our respondents were clear that this is in direct response to student demands. This was to be achieved through curriculum change, emphasising current employer demands, as well as through advice services and placements. We found this focus in our T and X cases on *immediate* employer needs – the skills needed to do a specific job immediately on graduation – rather surprising, considering that a widespread view of higher education's function in this regard is to prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist (Crossick 2010). There is also considerable evidence that many employers (to put it no higher) seek to recruit graduates with what might be regarded as the traditional graduate attributes of critical thinking, the ability to present coherent arguments, to master new material, and a range of “soft” skills, although relevant work experience gained through placements is also valued (Archer and Davison 2008). As the development of human capital was one of the theoretical underpinnings of the study, we question whether the “landscape” changes which have driven this new emphasis on employability will prove to be in the best long-term interests of students, and indeed employers. It is notable that R1 encourages its undergraduates to think about their future in more general terms – although its careers service is equally focused on employment outcomes for its graduating students.
- 4.10. The campus as a physical entity appeared to be of variable interest to our respondents, although there was a sense in several places that the appearance of the campus was important in marketing terms (for recruitment on open days in particular). Several of our cases were implementing long-term strategies to develop more cohesive urban campuses, with more of a sense of place. There was an emphasis on providing high-quality informal social spaces, breaking down distinctions between what was learning and what was socialising. Wi-Fi, and the ubiquity of laptops and tablets, allowed more intensive use of these shared spaces than would have been plausible in even the recent past. In terms of one of our other theoretical ideas, social capital, it is probably true to say that new, or different, opportunities are being provided here.
- 4.11. One of our research aims was to determine “which managerial approaches appear to be the most effective in leading to enhanced student experiences, and why?” A general difficulty in determining the effectiveness of structures and processes in higher education is that what appears to work well in one type of institution may not do so in another type. Hence there are different approaches to governance, academic organisation, internal resource allocation, and other matters, even in what appear at first sight to be rather similar institutions. What

we believe we have shown in the present study is that a range of managerial approaches developed in our T and X cases' responses to the changing landscape – notably greater centralisation of administrative services, more central oversight of teaching and learning activities, and increased reliance on metrics in decision-making – are not being applied to the same extent, and in the same ways, in our R cases. All our cases would argue, we think, that they are applying effective managerial approaches in response to new circumstances, but that “effective”, however it is measured, has different meanings in different types of institution.

We would like to conclude our report with this extract: we suggest that our findings provide some empirical validation for what is argued here:

It is possible that, although a failure in terms of detailed policies, the reform of English higher education [following the 2011 White Paper] may achieve its overall objective: to change the culture of the system. The cumulative effect of these measures is likely to have an important impact on both institutional priorities and organizational cultures. Resources could well be diverted from 'front line' teaching and research into marketing and 'customer care'. In future, academic leadership may be valued less highly than the 'business planning' skills needed to manage the new fees and funding environment ... Collegially determined (and largely self-policing norms), rooted in trust, could be replaced by performance measures and management targets ... Two points deserve to be emphasized in this respect. The first is that the drift towards such behaviours is already well established. Policy insiders and institutional managers are perhaps less aware of it – partly because they derive advantages from it and partly because they have become routinized by its effects through daily exposure – than [various external] critics. The second point is that such corporate behaviours can flourish in the absence of true markets, just as collegial and mutualist behaviours can flourish in commercial environments. The reform of English higher education may not be successful in producing the market university, but it is certainly likely to provide a powerful stimulus to the development of the managerial university. (Callender and Scott 2013, p. 217).

Appendix: Summary of respondent categories by institution

Respondent (may be more than one individual interviewed in each category)	T1	T2	X1	X2	R1	R2
PVC/Director with overall student exp responsibilities		✓			✓	✓
Post below PVC/Director with similar responsibilities	✓	✓	✓			
Head of academic administration or similar		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Student (non-academic) support services managers	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Marketing director or similar	✓			✓		
Admissions managers	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Careers/employability managers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Library/learning resources managers	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Estates and commercial services managers	✓			✓	✓	
Student union elected officer		✓				✓
Other relevant staff, including academic managers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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