Increasing student numbers and the scholarship of teaching and learning: exploring connections, impacts, and 'quality'

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This paper is concerned with the impact that significantly increased student numbers has on academics and their ability to engage in scholarly activities. It explores the growth of the knowledge economy in the last few decades, which culminate in Lord Browne's – see - An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (2010) - recent review, and the consequent implications for teaching and learning in higher education (HE). The Browne review places teaching and learning at the heart of ensuring a 'quality' student experience, which will be essential to an institution's survival within a competitive HE market. Reductions in public funding confirm the move to a HE sector based on competition and market values. The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) finds itself central to this as a means for academics to investigate and innovate within their teaching and learning practices, and develop and adapt them to provide an effective student experience. A question emerges though as to the impact that these greater numbers of students may actually have on the abilities of staff to engage in scholarly work. The results of a small-scale investigation conducted around this issue will be presented, with findings suggesting that there are significant tensions emerging related to rising administrative workloads and perceptions of the importance attached to teaching and learning. The paper concludes that further questions need to be asked about the role and nature of teaching and learning in HE, and how these may be changing within the current climate.

Introduction

There are now record numbers of students attending university in the UK. Figures from the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) (now Business, Innovation and Skills – BIS) for example, indicate that in 1999/00 there were 238,000 student entrants (2008a). By 2007 the figure had reached 307,000 accepted applicants and numbers for 2008 suggested that this had risen again by 6% (2008b). Overall, undergraduate enrolments within the UK are suggested to have increased by 25 per cent in the 10 year period from 1998/99 to 2007/08 (Ramsden, 2009).

This paper is concerned with the impact that this has on academics and their ability to engage in scholarly activities. It is not the intention of the paper to suggest that increasing the numbers of students attending university is in any way negative, but rather that attention needs to be focused on how this impacts on the ability of academics to investigate, innovate, develop and progress their teaching and learning activities – or, in other words, to undertake a scholarly approach to their work.

This discussion is necessitated further by Lord Browne's – see - An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding & Student Finance (2010) - recent review (hereafter referred to as the Browne review) which firstly, suggests increasing the number of places at university by 10%, and secondly, emphasises a competitive market place within higher education (HE) in which the 'student experience' becomes a vital way for institutions to demonstrate their 'quality'. The neo-liberal overtones in this review would be worthy of a whole paper themselves, but for now the main point to be made is that teaching and learning are at the heart of this as they are central to providing a successful and 'quality' student experience. The new coalition government's spending cuts reinforce the rise of a competitive HE sector, with a massive 40% reduction in public funding by 2014-15 (Clark, 2010). The way that students are taught and learn at university, therefore, are central to survival within this developing HE market place.

Larger student numbers though will of course necessitate many changes to traditional academic cultures and ways of working to ensure a successful student experience for all. There has previously been much discussion, both in the UK and other countries, of the ways this is taking place and the effects had on academics working lives (e.g. Fowler, 2005; McLaughlin & Sampson, 2007; Paewai et al., 2007; Brennan & Osborne, 2008). Lecturers in a study conducted in Australia, for example, described an overwhelming push to more intensive teaching with larger classes in spaces not designed or suitable for that purpose (Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009). The diversity within the student body, achieved through the widening participation agenda, has also received much attention within the literature (e.g. Davis, 2003; Read et al., 2003; Wingate, 2007; Hockings et al., 2008). MacDonald and Stratta (2001) for example suggest that those once perceived as the minority, non-standard groups of students are now, in effect, becoming the norm. Additionally, the literature demonstrates that the increased diversity of the student population extends through many aspects such as class, ethnicity, maturity, experience, disability, motivation and commitment.

This paper will report on a small research project that was carried out investigating the priority that academic staff within one faculty felt able to give to their teaching and learning activities. Though it was carried out before the Browne review, it highlights tensions and challenges that a larger student population brings that need to be addressed, and which are even more pertinent given the landscape of HE that is beginning to develop. Firstly, though, it will be beneficial to discuss some of the factors that have played a key role in shaping the HE sector we see emerging today.

Economic developments and HE

Universities, throughout their history, have been continually shaped by the advancements and changes occurring within society as a whole (Scott, 1995). The success with which they have adapted to these changes may be a contested point (see for example Varnava-Marouchou, 2004) but there can be no denying that societal developments, and more specifically those occurring within the economy, impact greatly upon the role of higher education and the teaching and learning that takes place within it. This is demonstrated by the move towards a globalised knowledge based economy, which emerged as a result of technological advancements being made and increases in outsourcing of labour to developing countries. Knowledge, and the transfer of it, was seen as key to the country

achieving economic success: 'In the global marketplace, knowledge, skills and creativity are needed above all to give the UK a competitive edge…They are essential to creating high-value products and services and to improving business products' (Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) 1998, cited in Hartley, 2003, p.8). This quote illustrates that the most vital assets to the economy shifted from land, labour and capital, to the development, creation, cultivation and transfer of knowledge. Being a strong competitor within this knowledge driven economy was now central to economic survival, and this message has been continually reinforced during the current economic downturn (e.g. Smith, 2010).

An economy based on knowledge, though, clearly has different needs to one which is driven by labour. One main difference occurring is the role of higher education. In this type of economy educational attainment beyond the compulsory sector becomes linked more directly to economic prospects (Jupp *et al.*, 2001). Supporting this, government literature states that '…a strategy of investing in high level skills, and increasing the proportion of adults with a degree, has the potential to deliver a high economic benefit' (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2006, p.3).

This strategy of investing in HE for success within the knowledge economy had been cemented almost ten years earlier. The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) report in 1997 identified that in this 'global marketplace' competition was increasing from the developing economies committed to education and training. National economies, it stated:

> are more dependent on higher education's development of people with high level skills, knowledge and understanding, and on its contribution to research. The UK will need to invest more in education and training to meet the international challenge.

Just investing more however would not be enough without increasing the number of people with these higher level skills: 'The UK must plan to match the participation rates of other advanced nations: not to do so would weaken the basis of national competitiveness.' The discussion at the beginning of this paper demonstrates the achievements made in increasing these participation rates.

The scholarship of teaching and learning

As discussed above, the focus of this paper is the impact of increasing student numbers on the scholarly activities of academics. It is necessary, therefore, to briefly discuss the concept that is underpinning this – the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL).

As with any term, the definition of SoTL differs to degrees and complexities. It is Huber's view that perhaps captures the common element within all accounts of it that it 'involves inquiry into learning' which 'is made public in a way that can be critiqued, reviewed, built upon and improved' (cited in Badley, 2003, p.305). In 1997, around the time the widening participation agenda was growing in impetus, the NCIHE report was also commenting on the importance of scholarship for informing and enhancing teaching:

> We believe that this form of scholarly investigation, together with research, is a distinctive feature of higher education: they enliven staff, they ensure that teaching and curriculum development is up-to-date, and, more generally, they invigorate higher level learning in our universities and colleges.

A few years later *The Future of Higher Education* White Paper stated that it 'is clear that good scholarship, in the sense of remaining aware of the latest research and thinking within a subject, is essential for good teaching…' (DfES, 2003). However, the requirements of the global knowledge economy move SoTL beyond the realms of this fairly limited concept to a much higher level. Not only does this economy demand a larger workforce with higher level skills, but this workforce must also be equipped to apply their knowledge creatively and innovatively. Innovation becomes seen as the key skill needed to ensure competitive economic and social growth:

> Innovation – the successful exploitation of new ideas – is one of the main engines of long-term economic growth. It can result in new technologies, new products and processes, as well as novel services and means of delivery (DTI 2003).

The DTI had already, three years earlier, identified universities as a central component of this engine of growth:

> Our universities are not just creators of knowledge, trainers of minds and transmitters of culture, but can also be major agents of economic growth, responding to the influences of globalisation and new technologies, and the need to interact with businesses. The *challenge* for them is to stimulate and facilitate the increased transfer of knowledge to business and society, across all sectors of the economy, while *improving the quality* of teaching and research (2000, italics my emphasis).

Though the DTI do not mention SoTL in the above passage, the implications for it run throughout. The requirement to 'stimulate' knowledge transfer at the same time as improving the quality of teaching by its very nature necessitates scholarly inquiry into both teaching and learning. Encouraging innovative application of knowledge by the workforce also, it would seem, requires a rethinking of the way that knowledge is originally obtained. The traditional didactic method of teaching, relying heavily on the lecture style of delivery, does not convey to learners the view of knowledge as a malleable entity which is something that can be creatively approached, reconfigured and deconstructed. To apply it innovatively may depend, in large part, to learning about it in innovative ways first. Again this demands of teachers the need for inquiry into new and effective methods of teaching to ensure a workforce equipped and ready to work with knowledge in creative and innovative ways.

The growth of the global knowledge economy therefore, and its effect on student numbers and the skills required of future workers, has placed a much greater emphasis on the need for developments within the area of teaching and learning in HE. Successful learning in this sector has become inextricably linked to the nation's survival in a global economic competition:

> Britain can only succeed in a rapidly changing world if we develop the skills of our people to the fullest possible extent, *carry out world class research and scholarship*, and apply both knowledge and skills to create an innovative and competitive economy. (DIUS, 2008c, p.6 – italics my emphasis).

Student numbers and SoTL

The above discussion demonstrates that the increasing student body and the growing emphasis on the need for SoTL have risen together and emerged out of the same global economic developments. It is perhaps a logical occurrence for these two aspects to develop together given that larger student numbers, regardless of the needs of the economy, will require rethinking of methods and approaches used if effective learning opportunities are to take place. However, it is important to note that an emphasis on SoTL is now being made explicit and is presented as an activity that all academic staff should be engaged in. There is much literature, though, to suggest that the changing HE context, which encourages an increasingly larger and more diversified student body, has significantly raised the workloads of lecturers within universities in order to meet its growing needs and requirements (e.g. Kinman & Jones, 2003; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Barrett & Barrett, 2007; Paewai *et al.*, 2007). The question that emerges then is whether academic staff feel they actually have the opportunity to engage effectively in this kind of scholarly work.

The research project

In light of both the increasing emphasis on the need to engage in scholarly activities and the increasing evidence of rising workloads due to student numbers, a small study was carried out in a faculty in one HE institution that investigated the priority staff feel able to give to teaching and learning beyond their day-to-day activities. The institution is a post-1992 university and, whilst SoTL has been an under-developed activity within it, efforts are now being directed more explicitly to encourage staff to engage with it. As many of the staff have not previously been engaged with SoTL in any kind of formal way, a first step to building their capacity for it may be to encourage them to focus in greater depth on their own teaching and learning activity. The aim of this study therefore was to identify the factors that staff feel may help or hinder this focus to be taken.

The study was conducted using an anonymous on-line survey that staff accessed via a specific URL address. They were asked to identify the level of priority that they feel able to give to teaching and learning, and to comment on the factors they consider to have contributed to that. A definition of teaching and learning was given as 'that purposeful activity that seeks to enhance effectiveness of facilitating student learning through practice, policy or enquiry'. In total, 99 responses were received which gave the survey a response rate of approximately 30%.

Results

Investigating the effect of increasing student numbers on scholarly inquiries was not the original intention of the study. The initial aim, as stated above, was to understand about the priority that staff generally perceive they are able to give to teaching and learning. Accordingly, staff were asked:

- whether they perceive that their own priority had increased, decreased or stayed the same over the preceding two years.

- to describe the factors that have contributed to this.

The majority (53%) felt that their priority had not changed over this time frame. However, a sizable minority (nearly 10%) perceived their own priority to have

decreased during this time and increased student numbers was felt to be the main contributing reason.

Student numbers as a hindrance to a teaching and learning focus

The effect of a growing student population was seen to run through all of the responses received from staff who felt that they are only able to give a low priority to teaching and learning beyond their day-to-day activities and teaching duties. Respondents commented on the substantial growth of their administrative workload arising from the move to a more consumerist and market-driven HE framework that focuses primarily on gaining more 'customers' and therefore more incoming revenue. Staff described the increasing paperwork and administration required as leading to information and documentation overload. Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) support this by remarking that a consumerist framework shifts time and energy to 'second order functions', such as accounting for professional activity, rather than to 'first order functions', such as researching and developing practice. Attention from management was also perceived to be being directed largely towards these budgetary and revenue generation concerns. This was all felt to occur at the expense of teaching and learning issues, and to significantly impact upon the available time staff felt they had to focus on their own activity. There was also a perception from a minority of respondents that increasing student numbers was gaining more attention from management levels for the greater amounts of funding this would bring. It was suggested this then leads to a pragmatic focus on simply coping with larger class sizes.   This again may have a negative impact on the time available to staff to concentrate on teaching and learning in more scholarly terms, for example through projects to develop their own practice or by activities such as attending conferences, keeping up-to-date with research or engaging in debates and discussions about new or existing practices.

These respondents perceived therefore that it is the reasons for trying to attract larger student numbers and the consequences occurring from this that generate the negative impacts on their focus to teaching and learning concerns. As one respondent commented, it becomes more like 'a game of numbers than ensuring that the students are actually engaging in learning'.

Discussion

The responses above provide some interesting food for thought given the current context of HE. As discussed above, the sector is moving into an increasingly competitive framework in which attracting students will be of central financial importance to the institution. Though this places teaching and learning at the heart in order to provide a successful and effective student experience that 'wins' student choice, the academics in this study suggest that it is precisely this situation that focuses their attention *away* from their teaching and learning activities. The greatest impact appears to come from the increased levels of administrative work that have risen along with numbers of students attending. There is no mention of this within the Browne review (2010) however, which may suggest that the implication is that academics will continue to pick up this extra workload. This then raises further questions about the identity of academics as teachers or educators, and how they

may construct this when their teaching role becomes increasingly difficult to engage in on a scholarly level.

A further key point relates to the perception academics have about the importance attached to teaching and learning at senior and management levels within the university. A negative perception may filter through to the academics day to day activities, and lead to less individual importance attached too. This suggests that another set of questions may also need to be asked about the role and nature of teaching and learning at HE. Though the Browne review (2010) places it at the centre for delivering a quality student experience, what conception of teaching and learning is being presented? Are academics becoming subservient to students within their teaching? If students are 'consumers', does this mean they then direct what takes place in the classroom? Will academics become hostage to the satisfaction surveys, which may limit and constrain their teaching practices? There are many tensions – political, economic and social, within the ways in which teaching and learning are currently being discussed. This small study also identifies tensions in how academics experience the current context, which then affects their scholarly activities.

The increase in student numbers undoubtedly means there are more opportunities for people to enhance their life and career prospects. Importantly though, it also offers a timely opportunity to explore the tensions emerging and ask some critical and in-depth questions like those discussed above. It may be that the student experience is not the best 'quality' that it could be until this happens.

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A reflection on Dobbins' the scholarship of teaching and learning, by Dr Rachel Higdon

Kerry Dobbins' article (2010) was written seven years ago, after the Browne Review (2010), which further entrenched neoliberal ideologies of free markets and competition into higher education (HE). A reduction in public funds underpinned government-led, austerity strategies designed to compensate for a perceived deficit in sector-wide resources. The Browne Review (ibid), with its recommendation to lift the cap on tuition fees, catalysed a process of teaching and learning innovation focused upon new education/industry curricula to meet employers' skills needs. These were designed to offer choice and unique selling points for universities to attract students. The Review advocated putting students at the 'heart of the system' (Browne 2010:6) by developing the quality of the student experience and value for money, though paradoxically it posited these proposals without consulting any students. Student voices about the student experience were remarkably absent from the heart of the review.

Dobbins' paper (2010) investigates the impact on academics in meeting these challenges, while trying to increase their capability to engage in scholarly practice. In responding to the Brown Review, she argues that government strategy (first under Labour at the outset of the review and then under the Conservative/Liberal Democrats Coalition after its publication) propels teaching and learning to the centre of the student experience as a way to engage and retain high levels of student numbers. Enquiry and reflection are paramount in the success of this strategy. Academics need scholarly space to find ways to remould, evolve for sustainability, and find ways to survive in the HE sector. Dobbins' research demonstrates that academics working to meet the diverse needs of increased student numbers and to satisfy all in the student experience, find their scholarly activities are subjugated.

In the passing of seven years, we can evaluate the trajectory of Browne's (2010) concerns to the contemporary, English HE context. In 2017, the Teaching Excellence Framework (Department for Education (DfE), 2017) brings additional metrics to bear on HE markets and league tables, in addition to a re-vamped Research Excellence Framework (REF 2017). The importance of high percentages for both student satisfaction surveys and graduate jobs six months after graduation, and a focus on longitudinal education outcomes, steer academics' focus and increasingly influence their practices. Marketisation can damage quality, lower standards and create grade inflation. Moreover, it diverts resources away from teaching and learning to marketing, enrolment and administration (Brown with Carasso 2013; Collini 2013; McGettigan 2013). In the current climate, academics have to deliver on both TEF and REF outcomes. As a result, their capacity for scholarship around teaching and learning, in order to rethink student engagement, is likely to be further squeezed. Regrettably, looking back over the last seven years, many academics' capacity for these important, scholarly activities may well have significantly diminished.

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