

Wonkhe Secret Lives of Students Conference 2023

Key Insights

- Data showing correlations between students' perceptions of **assessment fairness** and **feeling part of a community** of staff and students = importance of academic and social fit and belonging.
- Students are socialising less due to cost-of-living crisis - significant impact nationally and locally.
- Multiple mentions of institutions doing **pre-arrival surveys** to establish baseline understanding of prior experiences, assumptions about university + potential barriers for new students.
- OfS "would rather **a decent evaluation of a credible intervention that shows it doesn't work** rather than seeing the numbers go right direction but not knowing why".

Introduction: Time to get real

1. Speaker: Jim Dickinson (Wonkhe). Key points summarised:
2. NSS data table shows correlations between students' perceptions of **assessment fairness** and **feeling part of a community** of staff and students. [Strong links to academic and social fit theory];
3. Launch of **Belong**, Wonkhe and Cibyl's new **student experience research platform**; to feature monthly pulse surveys, qualitative and quantitative research, national comparison data and ability to analyse relationships, including characteristics. **Free for Wonkhe SUs subscribers.**

		I feel part of a community of students and staff			
		Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
How fair has the marking and assessment been on your course?	Very fair	46% ↑	21% ↓	15% ↓	10% ↓
	Fair	49% ↓	67% ↑	61%	52%
	Not very fair	5% ↓	11%	20% ↑	22% ↑
	Not at all fair	0% ↓	1% ↓	5% ↑	16% ↑

Belonging in a cost-of-living crisis

4. Speakers: Mady Baugh (NUSU); Amy Creighton (York SU); Andrew Wilson (Derby SU). Key points summarised:
5. 4 foundations of belonging: **Connections, Support, Autonomy, Inclusion**. Mental Health at the centre. Foundations threatened by cost of living crisis e.g. 47% of students surveyed had reduced social activity due to cost of living [Sutton Trust 2023]. Insights from each SU:

6. York: Survey found **71%** of respondents said **socialising had been impacted by money worries**. Students living off campus reported feeling less connected. Low student awareness of Activities Access Grant. [Equivalent to NCL's Participation Bursaries]
7. Newcastle: Government lobbying to challenge lack of student support on CoL. Wrote paper on hidden course costs, led to 33% uplift for Fine Arts student materials budget. Survey found **2 in 5 students have considered dropping out** (Russell Group survey was 1 in 5).
8. Derby: Reasonable adjustments for disabled students often overlooked, **hinders sense of belonging**.

Cracking the code

9. Speakers: Charles Knight (AdvanceHE); Nicola Watchman-Smith (Teesside University). Key points summarised:
10. NSS data and responses focus. Impact on scores from: Domicile (UK/EU/International), responses to consistency, belonging/community (significant impact) + organisation and management questions (major impact);
11. Learning resources negative scores almost all related to availability (cost, space, sharing);
12. Need consultation with students on making data visible and **using data for action** - particularly data in-year to create action in-year. Many data sources have long data lags so students have left (e.g. NSS, TEF, GO) so important to find ways to make change that is visible to the student. Example: Teesside do a **pre-arrival survey** to capture student voice. Aim is to better understand cohort and their perceived barriers, to tailor induction offer;
13. Learner analytics and student data could be used by personal tutors to guide discussion and **use engagement data as a springboard** - but requires training for tutors.

In conversation with John Blake

14. Speaker: John Blake (Office for Students). Key points summarised:
15. Equality of opportunity needs to be considered across the student lifecycle with acknowledgement that **barriers can start earlier in life** e.g. in school;
16. Sector has challenge with implementation of APP-related activities due to lack of evidence of what works => **evaluation key priority in APP** to begin to tackle this;
17. Suggestion of lack of consistency across sector due to seeing other universities doing strong work in an area and feeling that their university then doesn't need to do work;
18. EORR won't go into subject equality issues in this round, citing lack of quality evidence. Suggests providers should be looking at their own diversity balance across courses and ensuring universal accessibility, but the EORR won't pursue that this time;
19. Move to viewing **gaps** (e.g. Black awarding gap) as **manifestations of risks**, with a focus on addressing the risk factors. Not clear why Black attainment gap has had fluctuations over recent years = need for evaluation to understand reasons for change, not only tracking it;

20. OfS will stand behind providers who commit to evaluation and finds that an intervention is not working - "would **rather a decent evaluation of a credible intervention that shows it doesn't work** rather than seeing the numbers go right direction but not knowing why";
21. For new APP, providers should include activity already underway, but "better constructed and evaluated well" and expects a mixture of innovation and business as usual;
22. Evaluation of APP interventions should show us whether our interventions are working to tackle equality of opportunity risks - or not. Learning from evaluation => changes to funding/activities;
23. OfS **considering the use of pre-arrival surveys** to improve understanding of prior learning experiences and establish baseline challenges. Unsure if this would be a more formal requirement or a suggestion for providers to design and implement themselves;
24. OfS expects **all evaluations to be published**, if something is shown to not work, providers and OfS will need to work through this and any risks to reputation etc that may arise.

The real risks to equality of opportunity

25. Speakers: John Blake (Office for Students); Omar Khan (TASO); Sally Burtonshaw (Public First); John McKendrick (Commissioner for Fair Access in Scotland). Key points summarised:
26. Need to acknowledge that some risks to opportunity can develop over time + not be present at entry, so need to be **responsive and agile** to changing needs + risk factors
27. Schools not often asked by universities about the support they want for access = siloed;
28. Omar: More support is needed for doing evaluation in-house, TASO aims to support in designing evaluations. Universities need to invest more in evaluation = upskilling existing practitioners to understand why evaluation is important + have team of expert evaluators;
29. TASO evaluation of summer schools found that **90% of students who went to summer schools were already 'highly likely' to attend HE**. Evaluation questions whether summer schools are not actually tackling deeper inequalities and just targeting likely entrants? Need to rethink the objectives of summer schools and what positive outcomes may be e.g. value in holding summer schools for fostering sense of belonging, rather than assuming they improve access (when this evaluation suggests they don't really);
30. Idea of **recruiting student panels from underrepresented groups** to contribute to APP;
31. Universities should act as anchor institutions in their local community - **bring community into the university**, encourage diversity in university + local community;
32. **John Blake**: Purpose of APP accessible summary is to make it clear what universities have committed to doing, needs to be more straightforward to hold providers accountable. Need to make connections between what you've said you're doing and what you're actually doing.

How to (re)calibrate the needle of trust

33. Speakers: Tracey Horton (Cardiff Met); Elizabeth Nixon (University of Nottingham); Phil Newton (Swansea). Key points summarised:
34. Presentations relating to academic regulations, integrity and trust between staff and students;
35. Tracy: **More supportive regs doest not equal compromising academic standards** e.g. removing marks cap on resit assessments led to more students doing resits but a higher proportion passed
36. Elizabeth: Essay mills research - framing them as a form of **help-seeking behaviour**. A less desirable version of peer exchange, tutoring or asking for help from family members.

Survey found 2 in 5 students have considered dropping out (Russell Group survey equivalent found 1 in 5).

NUSU survey, 2023

Preconceptions about the 'ideal student' need to be undone by the university and curriculum by managing expectations and avoiding assumptions which lead to inequalities.

How to become a perfect student

TASO evaluation of summer schools found that 90% of students who went to summer schools were already 'highly likely' to attend HE.

TASO, 2023

37. Phil: Creating cultures of integrity and trust is wider than HE. Have to make it easy for students to do the right thing and hard to do the wrong thing. Research on cheating in online exams. Significant increases in students admitting **cheating** during covid compared to pre-covid. When asked why, most students said **because they can**. Students questioned trust in the university and the value of assessment when it became very easy to cheat.

How to become a perfect student

38. Speakers: Michelle Morgan (East London University); Tiffany Chiu (Imperial); Billy Wong (Reading). Key points summarised:
39. **Pressure of understanding 'hidden curriculum'** to be the 'ideal student';
40. Students can feel judged by learner analytics/engagement metrics which don't always show the context behind engagement indicators e.g. lack of library use could mean the student is accessing textbooks in another way or studying in another location;
41. **Preconceptions about the 'ideal student' need to be undone** by the university and curriculum by managing expectations and avoiding assumptions which lead to inequalities;
42. Imperial co-developed materials to develop sense of belonging e.g. student guide, discussing imposter syndrome, microaggressions, multiculturalism etc;
43. Student perceptions of their own ability is important to consider and mitigate - students begin to question capability compared to their peers early on.

Secrets of the student experience

44. Speakers: Nic Beech (Middlesex University & UUK Drugs Taskforce); Amy Norton (Office for Students). Key points summarised:
45. Discussion of student drug use and student experiences of sexual violence + how to support;
46. Evidence found that some students were experiencing **negative responses from their university when disclosing SV**, OfS new recommendations trying to improve experience;
47. Trust often not with the institution, it's with individual members of staff or peers;
48. Students need to know they will be taken seriously and supported;
49. **Humanising universities** is important so students don't feel they need to present a perfect legal case to get help;
50. Reputational concerns can drive universities away from being human.

Why are students so left wing?

51. Speakers: Eric Kaufmann (Birkbeck); Elizabeth Simon (Queen Mary's University London). Key points summarised:
52. Elizabeth: PhD researcher in the link between higher education and liberal values.
53. Research found that graduates are more socially liberal than non-graduates - but are slightly more economically conservative than non-graduates;
54. Lack of data => overestimation of HE's direct effect on attitudes. Doesn't account for family socialisation and pre-entry experiences;
55. No evidence on HE direct causal effect on economic attitudes;
56. HE appears to have a **very subtle direct causal effect on social attitudes**;
57. Students are more left wing than the general population because **left wing people disproportionately select to enrol in HE**.

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