Introduction

One of the major consequences of the introduction of variable fees has been the radical increase in visibility which the Higher Education sector is now enjoying. It is hard to recall a time when universities so frequently and consistently occupied the headlines of all areas of the print and broadcast media, albeit perhaps as a consequence of party politics rather than a genuine concern for the future of higher education in the UK. Nonetheless, HE has become a major political domestic issue and according to Roderick Floud (2004) will doubtless attract much greater public scrutiny. Allied to this, Floud argues, the political context has also changed as increasing participation, from around 12% in the 1960s to the present almost 50%, increases the numbers of peers, family members and friends connected to and aware of university life.

Within the sector itself, the issue of fees is just one of many imperatives which are impacting on the culture of a long-standing and in many ways, highly traditional profession. The increasing numbers of students, reducing resources, greater range of administrative responsibilities and increased pressure to produce high-quality research are now the common currency of discussions at departmental meetings. Managers seeking to meet accountability requirements of funding structures and added public scrutiny consequent upon the ‘audit culture’ (Jary, 2002) will exacerbate this. It is perhaps no great surprise that last year’s Times Higher essay competition was entitled ‘what is University for?’

For many working in the HE sector and for many of its observers, the central question emerging from a combination of these concerns is focused specifically on the undergraduate experience – what is it that we are trying to do for students?

The Dearing review (1997) stressed the need to produce a skilled labour force that can effectively contribute in an increasingly competitive global economic environment. Students themselves appear to echo this instrumentalist view of higher education (Marr and Leach, 2005) suggesting that they are for the most part looking for a means to differentiate themselves within the labour market. But the current rhetoric is little different from that which accompanied the introduction of the polytechnic system and the Robbins report over 40 years ago (Robinson, 1968). Nonetheless there is evidence of what might be termed a cultural shift within HE, particularly with reference to teaching and learning, in which the term the ‘new student’ appears to represent many of the key concerns.

The notion of the ‘new student’ has been particularly associated with the widening participation agenda as increasing numbers of students in classrooms has highlighted issues of retention, progression and attainment. The ‘new student’ is variously thought to be from a lower socio-economic group, probably from a non white ethnic group, may be mature, will have non-standard entry qualifications and will lack the preparedness for undergraduate study that academics have come to expect in both the new and old components of the sector. They are deemed to require additional support for learning, increased pastoral intervention, new ways of teaching and assessing. More insidiously, they are frequently supposed to be the reason for a perceived reduction in standards generally, seemingly evidenced by the range of new ‘Mickey Mouse’ degrees which it is claimed are emerging predominantly within the post-92 sector.

The aim of this article is to generate debate around the concept of the ‘new student’ by exploring some of the changes the sector is currently undergoing. I will consider the ‘new student’ as something of a chimera, constituted by a combination of government policies, changes in the overall educational context, the shift towards the audit culture and the increasing pressures placed on academics to be all things to all people. The first part of the article will explore some of the most oft-cited reasons for the existence of the new student, such as the massification of HE, the WP agenda and the gradual integration of vocationalism in the education sector generally. I will then go on to discuss some of the more neglected factors contributing to change in HE: the changes in school curricula in the last ten years, the cultural shift towards a ‘learning for earning’ agenda and the more recent process of professionalising teaching in HE. I will occasionally be drawing on interview data from a number of widening participation and retention research projects I have undertaken, both at MMU and elsewhere. My argument is that whilst there may be some differences between the students of today and those of fifteen or twenty years ago, such differences apply across the board and are more to do with contextual and social change rather than attempts to widen access.

The ‘New Student’ and the WP rhetoric

Government targets for widening participation in broad terms, sought to increase the numbers of young people from lower socio-economic groups and those from state schools, particularly those in low participation neighbourhoods. In the city of Manchester for example, where the average rate for progression to HE is currently in the region of 26%, there are wide variations across the city with some wards as low as 15% whilst in immediately adjacent wards in the neighbouring borough of Trafford,
the rate is around 43%\(^4\) (Wiggans, J. 2004) Within the general targets it is accepted that there are particular groups who are not well represented, such as Bangladeshi females, African Caribbean males and, increasingly, white males from low socio-economic groups. Recent research (Marr and Leach, 2005) however, suggests that aspirations for progression are there, although they may well become eroded due to lack of attainment. Other reasons for low participation are to do with family and cultural expectations but may also be a consequence of such students being encouraged to opt for vocational qualifications, sometimes in place of academic subjects. Additionally, such students are more likely to be attending schools where the overall academic performance is lower than national averages. Achievement in that context may be accepted as indicative of potential (as suggested in the use of Fair Enough criteria) but does not always match the ability or state of preparedness of ‘traditional’ A level students. Social background, socio-economic position and alternative forms of qualification may combine to produce a financially and socially disadvantaged student with high points in vocational subjects as easily as a well-off student with 3 poor A levels from a high-performing independent school.

Of course, this suggests that there are some young people who could be defined as the ‘new students’. But when we turn to one of the other key issues in the sector today - retention - our experience shows us that although low grades, vocational qualifications and low socio-economic background are often factors in non-progression, some such students may drop out but many do not. Furthermore, amongst those who do not progress are a significant number from well-off backgrounds who have been recruited from ‘good’ schools with ‘good’ A levels. Evidence for this can be found in MMU’s foundation programme, where as yet unpublished data suggests that students who had progressed from Foundation to Law were outperforming the traditional A level entry students by the end of their second year. This situation has been apparent for the last two years and suggests that there is, perhaps, not so much difference between those students we think of as wp students and those who come to us as before. The forthcoming evaluation of the first graduating cohort of foundation students’ experience may further emphasise this phenomenon.

These issues very much relate to the idea that the UK HE sector has undergone a process of ‘massification’. The shift from 12% participation in the 1950s and 60s to the near 50% of the 2000s will naturally impact upon our experiences as academics, purely in terms of volume of business. The real problem, though, is that the funding levels did not increase at anything like the same rate. Thus, tutors are now expected to teach groups of between twenty and thirty students with the same resources as they had delivering to groups of ten. This does not mean that the students are somehow different. Whilst there may be more of them, there is not necessarily a concomitant reduction in standards. In 1960 a smaller number of people were able to jump through the entry hoop – now we are using a much larger hoop but it had already moved closer to the ground as supply increased to meet demand for places. In most cases, though, it has not moved significantly downwards but has merely stretched to allow for a greater range of equivalences in the form of Access, GNVQ (and now AVCE) and other alternative entry qualifications.

Although the current expansion may be seen as supply-side driven (in that government policy is determining how many people should be recruited) earlier growth has usually been a response to increased demand. The polytechnic sector came into existence specifically to meet greater demand for qualification to degree level in a broader range of subjects. Indeed, the Robbins report was explicit in the way it addressed the need for a more highly skilled labour force as means of maintaining economic advantage. Even before Dearing, the sector again underwent a period of growth, particularly around the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 90s, in part, perhaps, due to an increase in mature applicants concerned at the lack of appropriate employment opportunities. But it would be wrong to argue that these were ‘WP’ students. Many were women in their 20s and 30s who had attended ‘good’ schools, studied A levels and came from middle class backgrounds, but had left the formal education system at 18. The sharp decline amongst these students around the beginning of the 90s may have been due to the removal of grants and changes in the rules about students in receipt of benefits. What was also noticeable at this point was the rise in the number of female students which has shown a steady increase, overtaking male participation rates. A more even participation by gender may mean that we are seeing new students but it does not imply that they are any less able than those who came before.

What may have affected the perception of these students as somehow different could be to do with the way they are concentrated within certain faculties and certain courses. In France in the 1960s, a similar massification process resulted in there being many more women in the sector. However, they tended to be confined to arts and humanities faculties and within those, in the degree programmes which were somehow seen as more ‘féminine’, such as the social sciences. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979). A similar picture can be seen today when we look at the way students who are targeted in WP are distributed through the sector. There are institutional differentials and subject differentials, with fewer WP students in pre-92 universities and more concentrated in disciplines related to health and social care, computing etc.

The impact of changes in the 14-19 sector

The deficit model of WP students constructed from the belief that ‘more equals worse’ is further compounded by a widespread belief that somehow standards of GCSE and A level have fallen substantially since the glory days of minority participation. Media reports of year on year increases in students achieving As and A*s cast doubt on the continued validity of the ‘gold standard’ although it must be pointed out that the improvements in per-cent age terms are often marginal. It might also be argued that this moral panic is a consequence of sloppy reporting which has become part of the media calendar in much the same way.
as the price of strawberries and the rain at Wimbledon. Indeed, many teachers and managers would argue that there has been an improvement in students’ performance and that this is in fact the product of better teaching, better systems and harder-working students.

One key contributory factor to overall improvement may be the existence of league tables which measure school performance in terms of results. At one school I visited as part of a WP research project, I was told that all students at that school now had to take a half GCSE in RE. The reason given was that pupils at the school tended to perform well in this subject and the more passes they could show, the better their overall appearance would be. This somewhat cynical approach to course design is hopefully uncomon as it clearly restricts pupil choice but could be an invisible way in which results generally seem to have improved. It does not mean the children are less able. More significantly there is some evidence to suggest that changes in curriculum over the last ten years and, in particular, the introduction of curriculum 2000 has had a bigger impact on performance. This is not always positive and of numerous outcomes reported to me by teachers in FE and VI forms one such is that students are now taking longer to go through the VI form years than they had done under the previous regime.

Perhaps the most noticeable change in terms of impact on student experience and preparation for Higher Education, however, has come from the introduction of Curriculum 2000. This new approach to the 16-19 experience was intended to even out disparities between vocational and academic qualifications in order to give greater breadth and to delay the time at which young people specialise. The addition of a new set of exams at AS level has increased the content but reduced the time for teaching. Some teachers have reported to me that they are reduced to giving everything to their students rather than encouraging them to find out things for themselves as there is simply not enough time in the academic year. Assessment techniques have also undergone significant change with a shift towards continuous assessment which, in line with vocational approaches, can be re-taken driving license style to pass or to improve marks. As the majority of students in England and Wales are now utilising this system of qualifications it follows that most entering HE are likely to have the same difficulties and problems when faced with becoming independent, autonomous learners. In other words, this is not peculiar to WP students.

Employability and Instrumentality

In a small-scale project carried out in 2003 in the Faculty of Humanities, Law and Social Science, a number of students who might be described as ‘wp’ were interviewed about their expectations, aspiration and experiences. All the students interviewed were unanimous in their belief that a degree would give them an advantage in the job market, would lead to higher potential earnings and an upwards career trajectory. Subsequent discussions with students in PDP meetings, for example, have confirmed this view of higher education as a means to a particular end – success in the employment market. I am not here arguing that higher education is just about improved employment prospects – it is, of course, much more than that - but we cannot ignore the prevailing culture in education which is very much determined by the skills agenda. Thus, young people are guided into choosing subjects and courses according to their career aspirations and seem to have come to accept the ‘learning for earning’ culture in which they are developing. Ally this cultural shift to a context in which driving test style assessment is becoming increasingly common and the instrumentality which so many people point to as a consequence of wp could be seen as an inevitability for most students.

However, it might also be argued that what we see as instrumentality is in fact pragmatism. As fees increase and funding for student support decreases in real terms, most students now undertake paid work to support themselves. Given the time constraints this presents, it is little wonder that such students will concentrate on what they have to do and neglect those aspects of the learning experience which do not show an immediate dividend. Thus, spending hours in the library is replaced by on-line searching at night, formative assessment is ignored in favour of summative assessment, extra-curricula enrichment activity is unfeasible.

The Professionalisation of HE teaching and the growth of the audit culture.

Not only is the student’s life-world changing but that of their tutors has also undergone profound change over the last ten to fifteen years. Sectoral change, as the polytechnics have become universities, is one aspect of this as institutions taking on the new title attempted to emulate their older and more established cousins. The net effect of the removal of the binary divide is that more organisations are operating in similar markets and competing for student numbers and finances in the same pots. Thus, research became a significant driver in the post-92 sector- firstly, as the perception grew that career progression was dependent on a research profile and secondly, as a result of staff moves from one sector to the other. The need to become research active presents a dilemma for those in institutions where the majority of funding comes from teaching – teaching and administration take up increasing amounts of time and prevent the level of engagement in research necessary to acquire the reputation which attracts funding.

The increase in administration might well be attributed to HEFCE or QAA requirements but these themselves are part of what Jary (2002) has referred to as the ‘audit culture’. If we accept that the use of public money must be accounted for then we should accept that what we do be open to scrutiny and that some form of monitoring needs to be adopted ( see Harvey and Knight 1996). I do not wish here to enter into arguments over whether the forms of monitoring are appropriate but offer the example of retention measurement as an indication of the need for monitoring procedures. Retention has been widely researched
both in the UK and elsewhere and although we know many of the reasons for drop-out we still do not know enough to reduce numbers to acceptable levels\(^2\). As we now have retention targets attached to our funding it is very important that we implement strategies for retaining students and monitor their success.

We also have, in my view, a moral responsibility to help people who have committed time and scarce resources to their own development. If we accept students on our courses, we should do the best we can to help them to complete those courses. But this means that we now have to fill in forms to show what we have been doing and how it might help. We know, for instance that students with poor attendance are likely to drop out and so we take more care over monitoring attendance. All this increases our administrative burden and we lay the blame for this on the increasing number of students and in particular on the wp students, reinforcing the deficit model of the ‘new student’. It would be interesting to compare attendance levels now with those of 15 years ago to see whether there really is a great difference.

At the same time as monitoring has been increased, higher education has also been undergoing a process of professionalisation as firstly the ILT, and latterly the HE Academy have begun to highlight the importance of teaching and learning in universities. Fifteen years ago, it was possible to work in a polytechnic as a graduate or post-graduate student with no teaching experience and progress to become a lecturer. Now it is expected that new staff will undertake a professional teaching qualification and existing staff will engage in continuing professional development. Whilst none of this could be said to be a bad thing, it adds yet more to the requirements of an academic – they must be a professional teacher, a competent administrator and a publishing researcher. Add to this the pastoral support we have become accustomed to deliver and it is little wonder that we should start to see problems where they may not exist.

### Conclusion

I have been arguing here that our perception of students today is determined by a range of factors which apply across the piece. And yet, such perceptions can apply to typical widening participation students (whatever they might be) or traditional A level entry students from well-off families. Their educational capital will be similar in that they will have experienced the same kinds of teaching and assessment wherever they went to school. Some schools may be ‘better’ than others in terms of overall performance and discipline but the innate abilities of the students should not vary so much. However, as numbers grow and monitoring requirements increase we become more aware of the problems that students face. We also improve our own practice in support of them and even become pro-active in seeking out their dependence. As one student said to a colleague recently: ‘why do you keep asking us if we are all right? You’ll make us think we are supposed to have a problem!’

As a polytechnic student in the late 1980s I can recall that it was not seen as appropriate for students to talk to tutors without an appointment and they certainly did not get to see the course leader without going through his secretary. I remember being told in no uncertain terms that I could not just walk in and talk to him at the drop of a hat. When I started teaching I felt it was important to be approachable – I had had too many bad experiences with lecturers and wanted to model myself on those I thought were really good with students. Experience suggests, however, that it is possible to make oneself too available and having done this over many years, perhaps we only have ourselves to blame for some of the dependency we have engendered.

However, whilst the higher education field may look very different now to how it appeared ten, fifteen or twenty years ago, I would strongly resist the notion that this is a consequence of widening participation and that we are seeing ‘new’ kinds of students as a result of that policy and that policy alone. Widening access and increasing student numbers will bring more people into HE and thus will highlight some problems and the need for alternative learning, teaching and support strategies more explicitly. These arise not because the students are inherently worse but because they are coming into a rapidly changing environment from an equally rapidly changing educational experience. They may be ‘new’ but that does not make them either exceptional or lacking in ability.

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**References**


Jary, D. 2002 Benchmarking and Quality Management: The debate in UK Higher Education, Birmingham, C-SAP.


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\(^2\) Current UK retention figures suggest fall 18% drop out each year. If we accept that the irreducible minimum is around 4% then 14% are lost unnecessarily.