Advancing HE through the voice(s) of experience

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Abstract

This original mixed methods study identified the potential of a systematically sought and sustained seeking of the Graduate Voice over time to inform academics, institutions and policy makers alike in Higher Education (HE). It was conducted with 202 responding graduates from across the globe who completed degrees at English universities across all institutional mission groups during the 1970s, 80s, 90s and 2000s.

The Graduate Voice currently appears selectively in HE through interventions in academic courses as providers of placements, careers talks, informed expert guest lectures, alumni awards, buddy schemes or high-profile alumni philanthropy (Warren et al, 2014). According to the findings of this research study, graduates considered their potential contributions undervalued by their institutions in terms of what they can do for their university (Gallo, 2012) in this important mutual relationship. Graduates identified that many would never achieve roles as financial philanthropists but considered they had significant contributions to offer as informed participants, employers, parents, ambassadors and evaluators. Most had never been asked to constructively reflect on their perceived value of their degrees or to contribute their perspective, something they identified as a missed opportunity. The research indicates significant advantages in maintaining intensive relationships with almae matres and placing the Graduate Voice at the heart of 21st century higher education. Building this key relationship supports individuals, institutions and the sector in providing informed perceptions to influence prospective students, current students, policy markers, alumni networks and institutional advancement.

The potential capacity of developing this vital ongoing relationship for individual institutions to sustain their unique offering and identities in an increasingly competitive marketplace was a fature of the research. An additional outcome of the study was the indication of significant individual and sectoral risks if the Graduate Voice should be ignored.

Key words: graduate voice, alumni, graduates, Institutional Advancement, employability, value

Introduction and aim

This work sought to understand the perceptions of value in their degree experience from graduates at varying distances from different programmes of study at different institutions. It asked those with experience where they allocated value.

Within education, and particularly within higher education, some elements of learning cannot be, or are rarely valued at the time they are taught or learned. Only after the initial experience is complete, often considerably after completion, does their value become significant. Time, circumstance, application or requirement to demonstrate those skills or that knowledge can all prove catalysts to later recognition of value. Tulving puts value at a distance from an experience thus: "Judgments about what is good and what is bad, what is worthwhile and what is a waste of talent, what is useful and what is less so, are judgments that seldom can be made in the present." (1991:42).

The research looked to identify:
- Whether and how, multi-course, longitudinal collation of graduate perceptions of value might inform sustainability of higher education
- How graduate perceptions could inform Institutional Advancement

Research methodology

Underpinned by constructivist theories of research (Kukla, 2000) and learning (Dewey 1916) the mixed methods two-phase study gathered quantitative and qualitative data from 15 interviews (Phase 1) and an online survey of 202 graduates (Phase 2) from universities in England across all institutional mission groups. At one to 42 years from their degree experience, they had experienced annual personal funding contributions ranging from £0 to £9,000. All participants were graduates from an higher education institution (HEI) where they were students, rather than members of a broader alumni body which might encompass non-graduating students, or former staff.

The research invited graduates to examine and allocate relative value of their degree in the well-established terms of economic/financial, academic and personal (Barnett (1990), Mezirow (1991) and Caul (1993).

The first phase of individual interviews informed the second, larger study. The ways graduates' overall value scores influenced how they acted as ambassadors for degrees, for the institutions from which they graduated and the courses which they studied was analysed statistically in Phase 2 after it arose as apparently significant within Phase 1. This enabled determination of whether graduate perceptions of value had potential influence to contribute to the sustainability of courses, institutions and indeed the sector. Thus Phase 2 specifically explored recommendation of a degree, of their institution and of their specific degree course. A Likert scale response option plus an additional optional text box enabled comments for all recommendations.

Key Findings

In total 99.1% of participants attributed value somewhere in their degree, indicating potential in systematically obtaining graduate perceptions of value.

However, respondents from both phases placed the economic/financial value lowest (Phase 2 – 23%/ Phase 1 -21%). This is contrary to the hegemonic discourse of economic/financial value.

In Phase 1 44% attributed highest value to the personal elements of their degree experience; whilst in Phase 2 academic value came highest (37%) with subject knowledge the most important and team/group working combined with leadership skills the lowest perceived values in their degrees.

High perceptions of value directly correlated to likelihood to recommend. This finding aligns with previous research recognising testimony from those with the credibility of first-hand experience as an indicator of value (Coady, 1992; Kusch & Lipton, 2002).

A Spearman's correlation was undertaken to determine the relationship between Overall Value Scores and graduates' recommendations. This indicated a significant positive correlation (Fig 1) between recommendation of a degree and OVS (= .175, n=200, p < .007) recommendation for institution (= .273, n=200, p< .000) and academic course (= .279, n=200, p< .000). Similar recommendation correlations emerged for institutions and courses as shown in the scatter grams at Figures 1-3.
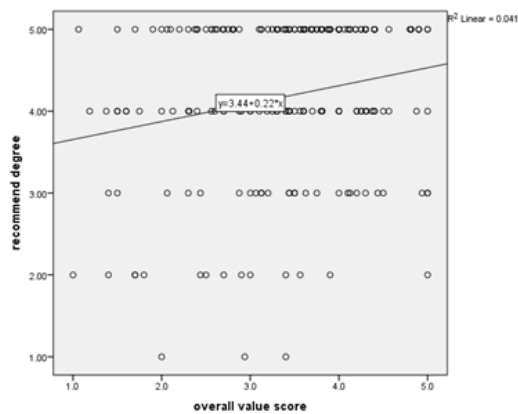

Fig. 1 Overall Value Score relationship to graduate recommendation of a degree
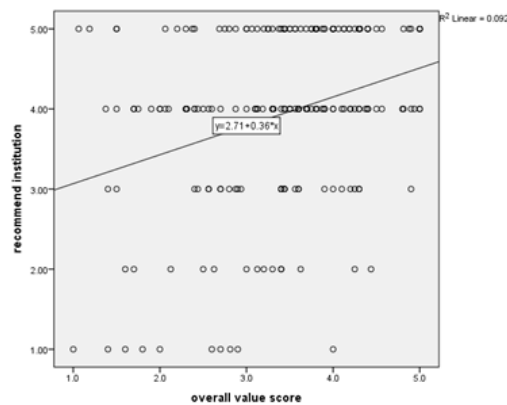

Fig. 2 Overall Value Score relationship to graduate recommendation of institution attended
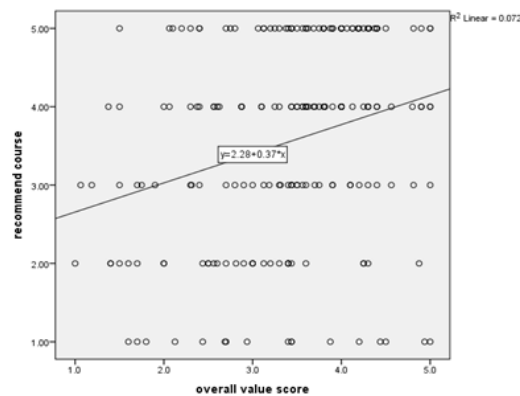

Fig. 3. Overall Value Score relationship to graduate recommendation of course studied

In aligning their perceived values to their likelihood to recommend, graduates' perceptions of value can be seen to be directly influencing the continuation and sustainability of higher education and individual HEIs as indicated by researchers into this specific area (Clark, 1998; Simpson, 2001; Gallo, 2012, 2013).

During Phase 1, 20% of interviewees specifically referred to an ongoing relationship with their alma mater as a missed opportunity for them, and for their institutions:

"I only every hear from (name of) University when they want money – they don't ask me to get involved in anything, talking to students, sharing experiences or being part of the university any more – they just want money." (A14)

"I'd love to have some involvement with (name of university) – I'm really grateful for what my degree has done for me, and I would like to be able to share that with future generations." (A5)

"They've never asked me back, never asked me anything, I think they just got my money and that was that." (A6)

A desire to contribute in practical rather than financial ways was evident among mature graduates. In total 74% of this group positively indicated a desire to contribute in person rather than financially to the sustainability of their alma mater and the discipline they had studied. New graduates also indicated a desire for non-financial contribution opportunities.

The majority of graduates identified little or no contact with their institution from their graduation day. This was not to say they saw no value in their degree, but that they believed they had never been directly asked to contribute their perspective as articulated in Phase 1. Blanket mailings through the post or via email/social media were not considered personal.

This finding contrasted with graduate perceptions of the importance to them of having developed a sense of belonging and engagement in a focused community during their degree. In free text responses this emerged as the most valuable aspect of their degree for 35% graduates from all mission groups. This aligns with Yorke's (2014) work on belonging and recognises that communities of practice are recognised as important developers and drivers of both learning and knowledge (Gee, 2000; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The teacher/student relationship is recognised at all levels of education as important for achievement and motivation in academic and social development (Bandura, 1996; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Statistical significance was identified in the impact of external pressures influencing motivation to undertake a degree, with a subsequent lowering of perceptions of value. Graduates who felt expected, often by familial pressures, to take a degree, recorded the lowest perception of value. This group made up 95% of responding graduates. They had been encouraged by teachers, parents and significant others, and generally constitute the largest grouping within undergraduate recruitment. The highest number of graduates who said they would probably not recommend a degree came from those participants paying £9,000+ for their degrees.. This may indicate higher criticality induced by fee payment, which could align with Callender (2008) of higher costs equating to debt rather than investment.

The highest perception of value, aligned to the highest recommendations, was recorded by those motivated by personal aspirations combined with specific career goals. They indicated self-authorship, control and ownership in their degree were the key factors in them recommending a degree experience to others.

No significant connection was indicated by the responses of unemployed graduates to their employment status influencing their value perceptions.

No institutional pattern emerged to suggest that learning communities were more powerful or better established in one particular institutional group. However comments indicated that it was not how these learning communities had developed, but how they were sustained and the quality of that continuity which was valued. This focus on lasting learning relationships was evident as graduates talked of increased learning and developing criticality within their academic work, as well of changing perspectives and transforming ideas, through discussion within a community of academics and peers. The value in these learning communities was recognised as being predominantly academic, carrying personal and economic value and having importance in their sustainability into their graduate lives:

"It widened my horizons and introduced me to ways of knowing and thinking about the world that I had never encountered before."

"The opportunity to work with a fantastic supervisor who broadened my mind academically and politically and has since become a dear friend."

"The whole course/university experience broadened my horizons and helped me become more open-minded and understanding."

"The ability to express myself and to explore interesting ideas within an innovative work environment that was world leading. It is an environment I really miss."

For others the communities of practice of which they became a part by being students and where they learned were professional, and for many remained having supported their transition into employment. This was particularly evident among humanities graduates who indicated professional practice leading to enhanced employability as of significant value.

For some the transformational element highlighted by Mezirow (1991, 1995, 1996, 2000) was the most important value within their degree experience, and all commented they had encountered insufficient opportunities to share their positive perception:

"It changed my life in every way."

"I left University as a free-thinking adult, which is probably not a good description of me on arrival." "I suppose it was just the simple realisation that I could fundamentally change the academic and social direction which my life was travelling in. I was an agent of change and not a powerless passenger."

"As a mature student, previously a 'stay at home parent', and the first in my family to go to university, I cannot put a value on the way the experience increased my self-esteem, self-confidence etc. - priceless! "

"I think that given the current economic climate it's all the more important that people study something they really enjoy as there are (for most) no guarantees re employment."

Recommendations

The findings indicated that whilst more post-2004 graduates said they would not recommend a *degree*, over 40% would recommend their *course,* although only if counselling and consideration of course content was provided to enable future students to make the right choices. Many were prepared to support their institutions in achieving this. This is perhaps in recognition of the investment risks of not getting onto the right course first time, which has

implications for how graduates could support course teams in ensuring informed choice to improve retention.

The research spoke of the implications for all institutions to understand the importance to graduates of maintaining meaningful professional relationships, particularly those developed with academics during their degrees. Finding manageable ways to sustain and develop these appears important. Whilst some talked of the cohesion brought by sport or social interactions in their time at university, and these are important, they are not inclusive for all, as is the academic degree.

Whilst it is not always possible to influence entry motivation, the sector and institutions within it have the capacity and duty to inform potential and current students about the value open to them. Enabling students to take more responsibility for the outcomes of their studies through self-authorship opportunities enables increased engagement, and thus recommendations.

 Managing student expectations has become increasingly important for HE since fee increases. The perception of students as customers has led to "unrealistic expectations by some students through their equating the 'right to education' with 'the right to demand a good degree with good grades" (Kaye et al, 2006:98). Many student complaints stem from unrealistic expectations (Buckton 2008; Burke 2004; Radcliffe & Lester, 2003). Longden (2006) identified complaints stemmed from a 'mismatch' between students' perceived expectations and the reality they face. The impact of unrealistic expectations can lead to a disillusionment and dissatisfaction (Jones, 2006). The challenge is to manage expectations without compromising the purpose and goals of higher education. Setting realistic expectations informed by those with independent experience is highly relevant. It is particularly important within first generation higher education students, for whom reliable benchmarking is not always available within their immediate circle. Actively supporting all students to set realistic and recognised goals prior to arrival, as well as working to improve perceptions during their courses has value in retention and progression as well as students' academic experiences. Building expectations with the informed hindsight of previous generations provides a 'long view' context supporting individuals and institutions alike.

The study identified an opportunity to place the graduate voice at the centre of HEIs, to inform and influence.
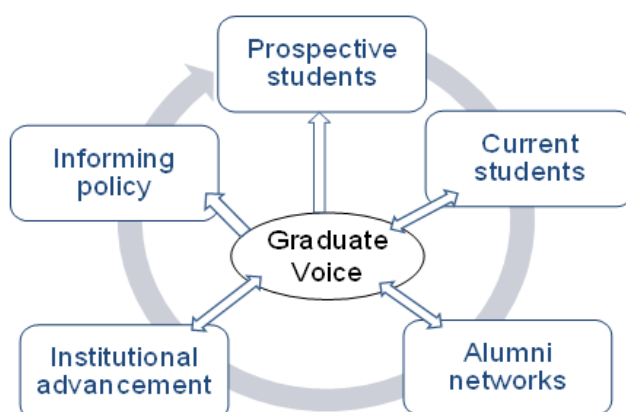

Fig. 5 Repositioning the graduate voice at the heart of the HE academic community. (Ingham)

These areas expand accordingly:

i.   Prospective students - continuous, developing evidence of lifelong impact and transferability of a degree, particularly relevant to prospective students without access to previous knowledge of HE.

ii.   Current students - supporting developing of self-authorship through opportunities, attitudes, skills and knowledge to maximise degree impact during the experience. Enables the start of building career-focused networks and enabling placements.

iii.   Institutional Advancement - potential to develop more meaningful engagement and relationship with employers, alumni, communities and outreach opportunities

iv.   Alumni networks – ongoing community of practice reinforcing and renewing value accrued v. Informing Policy – providing informed evidence of the breadth and scope of degree legacy for policy makers in HEIs and Governments. This positioning builds on the establishment and benefits of a strong graduate voice. It values graduates for their roles as informed participants, employers, parents, ambassadors and evaluators.

v.   Evidencing the graduate voice and destinations is a powerful way of demonstrating the impact of institutions and their various courses on the lives of individuals.

The research also identified the risks to HE sustainability for institutions and the sector of maintaining the hegemonic discourse

Maintenance of hegemonic discourse emphasising economic/financial benefits of HE

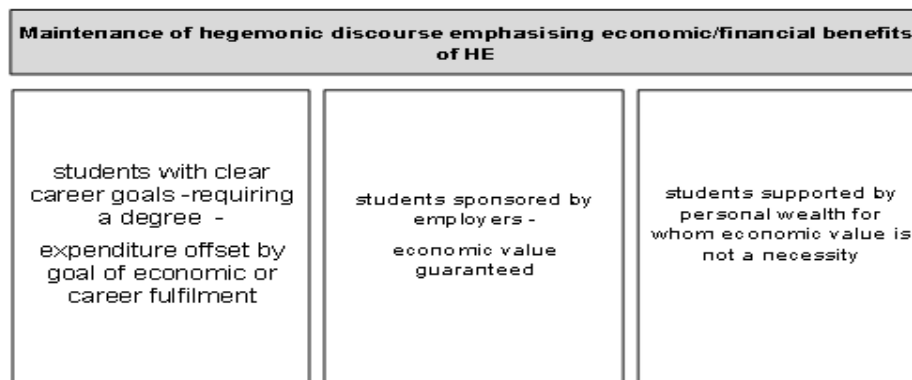| students with clear career goals –requiring a degree – expenditure offset by goal of economic or career fulfilment	students sponsored by employers – economic value guaranteed	students supported by personal wealth for whom economic value is not a necessity

Fig. 4 Risks of maintaining hegemony of cost/benefit emphasis related to degree value

Conclusion

From these findings it is possible to conclude that the HE sector has the capacity to be strengthened through graduate insight into the scope and breadth of value in degree study. The research demonstrated that through evidence from graduates of the lasting and in some cases still developing value they perceive from their undergraduate degrees. This research showed graduates consider the value of a degree is significant and something they would recommend to future generations, but its value lies in areas not neatly quantifiable by cost-benefit analysis.   Recognition of the lasting impact of degree value in personal and academic terms is evident in Baxter Magolda's (2009) theory of self-authorship arising from an 18 year longitudinal study encompassing students as graduates. Brooks and Everett (2009) too drew on graduate perceptions to evaluate the impact of degrees on formal lifelong learning. This work indicates value to the HE sector in combining the approaches of both these previous studies to build the importance of regularly researching and publishing the graduate voice in relation to the entire degree experience, and increasing self-authorship within the curriculum to support value development.

The opportunity to tell the stories of the journeys of graduates from different degrees has the potential to enrich not only the expectations of prospective students, but course teams by enabling recognition of the application particularly of the transferable skills in their programmes of study.

This move to see the student as a contributor to their degree experience is perhaps a result of the change in expectations within higher education (Bryson, 2014). The alteration in expectations creating the possibility that whilst students were being viewed in a different light (as consumers) they were also being given participation opportunities which had not previously existed within higher education, and these combined with the changing expectations of a fee-paying environment may have led them to regard their own role differently.

Education is a high stakes investment both personal and financial, in expectations and outcomes. Outcomes of study cannot be guaranteed, however the research findings identified that graduate perceptions of value have relevance and the capacity to inform individuals, institutions and society about the value of an undergraduate degree.

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