

# Empowering students

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'Empowering students' is a phrase often bandied about at conferences on teaching and learning and appears more and more frequently in the literature. Empowering students, however, means many different things and it is debatable how seriously we really are about giving students control over the educational process and their post-educational lives.

There are those for whom empowering students lies at the heart of a radical reappraisal of higher education and underpins any assessment of educational quality. There are others for whom empowering students is a contradiction in terms. Students cannot possibly know what's good for them, nor should they be encouraged to make a nuisance of themselves by demanding time, effort and resources from a hard-pressed intellectual elite that deigns to give them the benefit of its wisdom.

For those to whom empowering students is an important consideration for the future development of higher education, four aspects of empowerment are identifiable. First, empowering students is equated with *student evaluation*. Students are invited to provide their views on the content and organisation of the programmes of study on which they are involved. These are fed back into the day-to-day management and teaching of the programme and into the longer-term strategic plans. Some institutions require that student evaluation reports are included in annual course reports and review and validation documents.

A second approach to empowering students is to give them more control over their own learning. This ranges from allowing students to *select* their own curriculum to students entering into a learning *contract*. The selection of a curriculum usually means, in practice, choosing which *teaching* programmes they attend and thus which assessment they undertake. While superficially liberating this does not necessarily empower the student. The American experience from the 1960s suggests the contrary. An unstructured collection of small units that the student selects from a sometimes-bewildering array of available options, with little or no guidance, can ill-equip them for the post-educational experience. The problem with the open 'cafeteria' approach is that while units are accumulated there is often no identifiable progression. It is the 'Green Shield Stamp' approach to education. Collect enough credits and cash the book in for a degree. What is likely to be missing is conceptual development. Of course, not all well-structured modular courses in Britain fall into this trap.

The development of a learning contract, while apparently more restrictive, has a much greater potential to empower students. The student does not simply choose which teaching programmes to attend but negotiates a *learning* experience. This has been used in work on management competences. The teacher is seen as a facilitator. The object of the programme is to achieve the management competences specified. It starts with the facilitator helping the student to work out what competences they have and how they might go about providing the evidence of their competence in that area. The rest of the programme might be in the shape of a learning contract negotiated between student and facilitator concerning work on achieving the other competences. The student controls *how* they learn and when and how it is *assessed*. In an extreme case there could be no lectures or seminars at all.

A third perspective on empowering students is the idea of a Student Charter. Like any other 'consumer charter' this is intended to give students a greater say about the nature and purposes of higher education as a whole. There are various ideas of what such a charter should involve and these reflect various degrees of student empowerment. The weakest is the Student Charter as a set of expectations about teacher performance (usually set by management) that students monitor. A stronger version is the charter as an independent kitemarking body monitoring basic provision within programmes, such as seminar facilities, library, information technology and personal tutorial provision (*Guardian* 15/10/91). It is debatable whether these 'watchdogs' empower students. They react to, rather than inform, educational policy. A strong version of a charter would go beyond the classroom and give the 'consumer' power to effect changes in institutional or even national provision.

The involvement of students as a pressure group in policy at the national or even institutional level has been perfunctory. The Student Satisfaction Project work at Birmingham Polytechnic provides a rare example of 'consumer' perceptions (if not demands) having direct effects on aspects of *institutional* policy. Recent research is focussing more on students, for example, HEIST have just reported the results of a national survey of students.

While each of these approaches offers some control over the education process it is debatable how far they go to empowering students in their post-education careers. The fourth approach attempts to do both. Students, it argues are empowered by developing *their* critical thinking, or *metacognition*. This requires an approach to teaching and learning that goes beyond requiring students to learn a body of knowledge and be able to apply it analytically.

Metacognition is about encouraging students to challenge preconceptions, their own, their peers and their teachers. To question the established orthodoxy rather than swallow it unthinkingly. To develop their own opinions and be able to justify them. Metacognition encourages students to think about knowledge as a process *they* are engaged in. Not some 'thing' they tentatively approach and selectively appropriate. Metacognition is about students having the confidence to assess and develop knowledge for themselves rather than submitting packaged chunks to an assessor who will tell them if it sufficient or 'correct'. Metacognition requires students to self assess, to be able to decide what is good quality work and to be confident when they have achieved it. In short, an approach that encourages metacognition treats students as *intellectual performers* rather than as compliant audience. It transforms teaching and learning into an active process of coming to understand. It enables students to easily go beyond the narrow confines of the 'safe' knowledge base of their academic discipline to applying themselves to whatever they encounter in the post education world.

An approach to teaching and learning that develops students' teaching and learning is thus an altogether 'dangerous' process for professional academics. It is not just a loss of control over the structural organisation or academic content of higher education it is a loss of control over the intellectual processes.

How far, then, is the drift towards empowering students likely to go? Will it be a mere gesture: a Student Charter of minimum acceptable conditions; a voice on a Board of Studies; or the provision of modular programmes with unlimited choices? Or, will it be a serious attempt to empower students through proactive involvement in educational policy, learning contracts and the development of metacognition?

