

Graduate Voice – the missing link in forming modern HE policy

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ABSTRACT: Higher education today faces increasing competition, significant change and rising costs to institutions and individuals resulting from political policy and subsequent funding decisions. An emphasis on employability; graduate premium (earnings said to be related directly to possession of a degree); political aims to increase graduate numbers sustainably, and in England, rises in individual contributions, have increased scrutiny of the benefit to individuals of a degree.

The value of a degree has long been the subject of public debate often conducted in the media whose headlines of escalating student debt have conflicted with the higher education sector's messages to prospective students of a degree being a sound investment for the future.

Wise investment in education is essential for students, institutions and governments alike. How that return on investment is evaluated appears ripe for enhancement (BIS, 2015). Political policy has demanded students are equipped to make an 'informed choice' (Browne, 2010). Currently there is no systematic review of graduate value informing prospective students and institutions of a degree's lifelong impact. What is known about graduates post-degree often stems from marketing material.

What impact on education, learning and institutional advancement could more systematic research have on how current students and indeed alumni perceive value in their degrees? Could the degree experience be tailored more effectively through better informed approaches?

This paper is based on doctoral research involving 217 undergraduates from different countries, 1-42 years from their degree experience. They identify a significant shortfall in the sources of information for institutional policy makers and programme teams.

1 INTRODUCING THE GRADUATE VOICE

Exploring perceptions of the legacy value of an undergraduate degree among graduates at different distances from graduation, is a perspective not systematically sought within higher education today. The work provides new research identifying the role of the graduate voice in supporting more realistic student expectations, better informed policy making and thus sustainability of an increasingly commercialised sector. It comes as attention in England is focused on government expectations that a higher education degree should deliver lasting value to graduates and taxpayers alike (Johnson, 2016).

The graduate voice currently appears selectively 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). It is however spasmodically or selectively, rather than systematically, sought and tends to be focused to marketing positive employability.

Higher education's institutions and students face increasing competition, significant change and rising costs resulting from political policy and subsequent funding decisions. An emphasis on employability, the graduate premium (earnings said to be related directly to possession of an undergraduate degree), political aims to increase graduate numbers without bankrupting public funds, and the resulting rise in individual contributions increase scrutiny of the value of undergraduate degrees.

Wise investment is essential for students, institutions and governments alike. Political policy has demanded that students are equipped to make an '*informed choice*' (Browne, 2010). Graduates with their hindsight appear the missing link in demonstrating whether a degree has lasting benefit.

In economic terms the Higher Education (HE) sector has significant impact upon national economies globally (Freudenberg & Samarkovski, 2014). Sustaining a healthy HE sector is vital to national GDP (gross domestic product). Between 2011 and 2014 the UK higher education sector

alone increased 25 per cent to generate £73billion (Universities UK, 2014). In 2011-12 it was responsible for 2.8 per cent of UK GDP and created 750,000 jobs.

The significant investment being made by institutions in securing their student experience is acknowledged but the continuity of this relationship is rarely seen. However, as institutional advancement, defined by Muller (1986) as all relations internal and external which foster understanding and support for a university, gains significance the consequence of the graduate grows.

A literature review indicates that value within higher education has for centuries been perceived as a triad - personal, economic and academic (Newman, 1852; Rodgers, 2007; Caul, 1993). These have been researched individually, often to make a case for higher education, its benefits or fee structure, but to date no research has evaluated the balance of these three elements in the perception of those with lived experience. The segregated approach has the potential of leading some to consider that if they do not, or cannot, perceive a set outcome (generally economic according to the hegemonic discourse), then their time at university is considered lacking or devoid of value.

Value allocation connects to both purpose and expectation. Higher education is seen as the focus of expectations of society, institutions and individuals. It is itself a creator and developer of value and values. Barnett (1990) identified that personal value of higher education exists in the lasting impact it has upon each individual.

The timing of that recognition (of value) is also significant. Within education, some valuable elements of learning can only be recognised after the initial experience is complete. Time, circumstance, application and/or requirement to demonstrate those skills or knowledge can all prove catalysts to later recognition of value.

“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.” (Tulving, 1991:42).

2 RESEARCH METHOD

Underpinned by constructivist theories of research (Kukla, 2000) and learning (Dewey, 1916) the mixed methods study explored with graduates how they recognised and allocated value within the three established areas such as economic/financial, academic and personal, defined by previous researchers including Barnett (1992) and McGivney (2002). Research was conducted in two phases, each preceded by a pilot, involving 15 interviews and an online survey of 202 graduates from across the globe who had studied at universities in England across all institutional mission groups.

Graduates were invited to examine and allocate the relative value of their degree in academic, economic/financial, and personal terms. In this way it is possible to identify whether patterns exist in the allocation of perceptions of value. It is however not considered possible to quantify value, because what one person perceives as valuable will be different from that of another due to their personal circumstances, background, and/or expectations.

Graduates responded who had completed their degrees in the 1970s, 80s, 90s and 2000s. They started their degrees aged from 17-18 years old to 51-60 years old. The sample was evenly divided between first generation in HE, and those who were not.

3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings clearly indicated that whatever decades in which responding graduates studied their degrees, perceptions of value were high (99.1%). However least value was attributed to the economic/financial benefits. This indicated dissonance between graduate perceptions of value and the hegemonic cost/benefit discourse that underpins political policy around individual tuition fees. Only two graduates indicated that they perceived no value anywhere in their degree.

Some graduates identified their career goals might have been attained without a degree.

“I often wonder if I'd have been better off going straight into work.”

In terms of career advancement the inability of graduates to identify whether their degree had made a difference to their trajectory led many to question its value:

“I haven’t ever been out of work but I put that down to experience rather than my degree.”

Financially a degree emerged for two graduates as having a negative impact:

“My student loans are still being paid back and I am worse off than before I did my degree.”

However the graduate allocation of value indicated a breadth of perceived value more extensive than the economic/political cost-benefit equation which has dominated hegemonic discourse (*Table a*).

	Phase 1	Phase 2
How do graduates attribute value	All graduates attributed value somewhere in their degree	99.1% attributed value somewhere in their degree
How do graduates attribute value across the academic/economic and personal elements of their degree	Respondents from both phases placed the economic/financial value lowest (Phase 2 – 23%/ Phase 1 -21%)	
	Personal highest 44%	Academic highest 40%
	Academic 35%	Personal 37%
Do value perceptions vary among employed and unemployed graduates?	No statistical significance was identified in relation to employment. However of the 7 unemployed graduates who responded all indicated value in some elements of their degree experience.	

Table a. Comparative summary of the reported findings from both phases.

A total of 117 (62.6%) of graduates responding in the open text area emphasised they considered the most value added to them by their degree came from the personal development which they categorised in a variety of ways including individual identity development, as well as the social element.

“Being away from home allowed me to develop as a person outside of my family.”

This enables consideration of a broader picture of a degree rather than the compartmentalised and often narrow view of either employability/graduate premium or student experience sporting/social life approaches. The opportunity to reflect on the value resulting from a degree led to the expression of profound and clear evaluation.

“My degree increased my self-belief – in academic terms, career terms and socially.”

“Going to university as a mature student after a 20 year absence in the education sector changed my life, opened me up as a person, developed my passion for learning.”

“I suppose what changed me most was the way of looking at society as if from the outside which my degree programme developed.”

“It changed my life in every way.”

An association also became evident between entry motivation groupings and overall value scores (OVS). This was analysed using a non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test to see whether there was a statistically significant difference between these motivation groups and OVS. The test showed that the relationship between value scores and entry motivation was significant (*Table b*).

Motivation groupings	Mean OVS score	Standard deviation	n=
Expected	2.74	.980	30
Personal	3.45	.898	90
Specific career goal	3.36	1.00	30
Personal and expected	3.45	.656	25
Personal and specific career goal	4.23	.467	10
Personal, expected and specific career goal	3.52	.948	15
Total	3.38	.935	200

Table b. Descriptive statistics for relationship between entry motivational groupings and OVS

The null hypothesis that this relationship was the outcome of mere chance was rejected $X^2(5) = 25.546, p \leq .001$. This identified higher perceptions of value among those whose motivation to enter their undergraduate degree was personal aspiration combined with a specific career goal that required a degree. Those who perceived the lowest value in their degree experience were those who considered their only motivation in going to university had been to satisfy the expectations of others (Fig. 1).

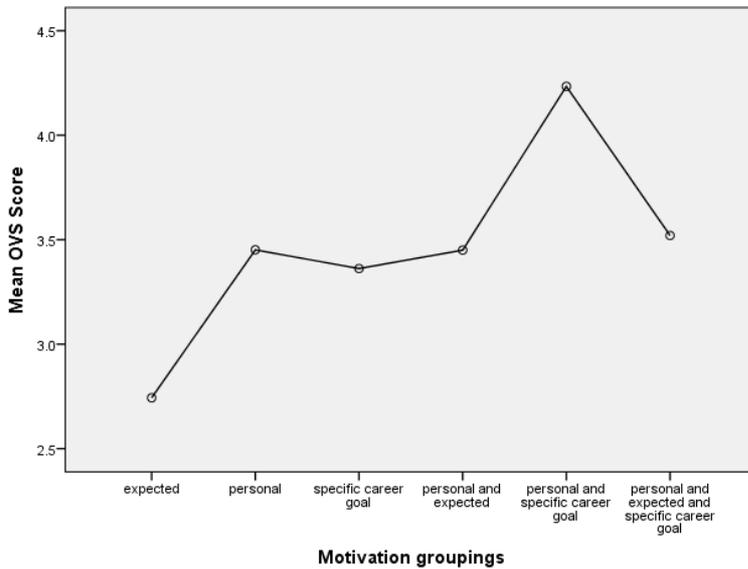


Fig. 1 Relationship of entry motivation with Overall Value Score

An unexpected area which arose during the interview phase, led to the consideration of areas of institutional advancement. Graduates at different distances from graduation, and from different institutions indicated how the importance of their own experience and the value they placed upon it had influenced them as ambassadors for higher education. In this their perceptions of value were 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).

A Spearman's correlation was undertaken to determine the relationship between Overall Value Scores and graduates' recommendations. This indicated a positive correlation (Table c) between OVS and recommendation of a degree (= .175, n=200, p < .007); recommendation of an institution (= .273, n=200, p < .000); and recommendation of academic course (= .279, n=200, p < .000).

Spearman's	Correlation Coefficient	Sig (1-tailed)	n=200
Recommend a degree	.175	.007	200
Recommend institution (alma mater)	.273	.000	200
Recommend course	.279	.000	200

Table c. Correlation between OVS and graduate likelihood to recommend their experience

Testimony from those with the credibility of first-hand experience is recognised as an indicator of value and as valuable to others (Coady, 1992; Kusch & Lipton, 2002). The value graduates perceived was mirrored in their recommendation to or discouragement of prospective students, in some cases significant others, such as their own children. This was recognised as another indication of their own perception of value (Ledden et al, 2011). Graduates who valued their experience emerged as most likely to be positive ambassadors for higher education, their own institution and their course.

4 IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Responses from graduates indicated broader value than that which has been the recent focus of HE political policy and emphasis. This recognises that whilst there can be, and for many graduates there is, economic/financial value, it is not a necessity for overall value to be perceived. This has implications for the ways in which institutions and policy set expectations among prospective students.

It is in line with the warnings of both Gray (1999) and Milne (1999) who counselled of the dangers of presenting higher learning in too narrow a manner.

If a degree is not seen to realise goals for future employment due not always to the degree (economic climate, increasing credentialisation) or reduction of the graduate premium. (Johnson, 2015) then disillusionment with a degree and the sector can result (Schumpeter, 1943; Gedye et al, 2004;). Brooks and Everett (2009) went further, identifying disillusionment with an undergraduate degree as curtailing further engagement in the future, with professional courses or postgraduate study.

Tomlinson summed it up thus:

“The notion of employability has become a central pillar in the economisation of higher education, and indeed central to human capital-orientated policies. At its crudest level, it represents an overall pre-occupation with preparing graduates for the labour market and better attuning them to its demands. But it has become higher education’s defining purpose, eclipsing other potential benefits such as enhanced citizenship and cognitive enrichment.” (2013:125).

If future generations perceive the value potential for higher education not to be worth the outlay then the consequent move away from higher education has implications for society, governments, individuals, and institutions in terms of revenue, social mobility, economic prosperity and growth, and international capacity to compete.

Another area of concern is a risk of devaluing degrees and thus the value in them for existing graduates. If the purpose of undertaking an undergraduate degree is seen as being fundamentally to achieve economic benefit, then perception by those graduates who have achieved a degree but not perceived economic/financial value could have significant negative consequences.

Failure to recognise and articulate the full potential personal impact of a degree has consequences for those already in HE (to anticipate dissatisfaction) and among prospective students it could encourage moves towards alternative post-compulsory education or alternatives that do not incur significant financial outlay. Using the graduate voice to articulate the full potential value within a degree has the capacity to inform individuals and society about wider benefits.

The research also indicates a link between entry motivation and perception of value which indicates a potential opportunity to enhance perceptions of value (in this study for 95 per cent of students) that would enable enhancement of individual perceptions of value.

5 IMPACT OF IGNORING THE GRADUATE VOICE

Maintaining the hegemonic emphasis of degree value related to economic/financial benefits has the potential to narrow higher education provision in three ways.

Firstly, as a threat to academic integrity by aligning provision only to recruitment and employability as academics have warned of in the United States of America. *“Higher education may become intellectual fastfood and the long-term needs of society will not be well served.”* (Waugh, 1998:62).

Secondly by increasing complaint and litigation costs to the sector resulting from a significant change in the academic-student relationship. 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. Unrealistic expectations can lead to disillusionment and dissatisfaction (Jones, 2006). Increased consumerism can fuel negative perceptions and complainants heard over satisfied consumer, often carrying more news value (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). This has negative implications for the sector in terms of prospective students, the wider population and current students’ expectations. Expectations can be costly if unmet in terms of administration and potentially in settlements for cases which are upheld even if they do not reach court.

Thirdly, by reducing the recruitment pool for HE to those for whom a degree could be assured to bring economic/financial legacy and thus those certain of achieving value. Without clear demonstration of the value of a degree in terms broader than cost/benefit, prospective students could be dissuaded from considering undergraduate education in favour of other alternatives. Those most at risk would be those uncertain of career paths; first generation students without the benefit of prior knowledge of wider

value, and indeed those clear that they want a degree but without private funding so concerned of the personal debt involved. In this study these graduates formed the largest group, which has implications for the continuation of higher education in its current expansive and diverse form.

6 POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THE GRADUATE VOICE

The graduate voice appears not as a panacea for issues currently besetting higher education but as a further, logical source of information about the proven value and legacy of a degree. The graduate is the product and ambassador of the sector, an individual institution and its programme of study.

There appear significant advantages in developing opportunities for graduates to maintain and develop intensive relationships with their alma mater. These relationships support the individuals concerned, institutions and the sector regarding perceptions. However the findings indicate that locating the graduate voice as a tangential element in higher education is erroneous. Its most effective location for impact is to be central (*Fig.2*).

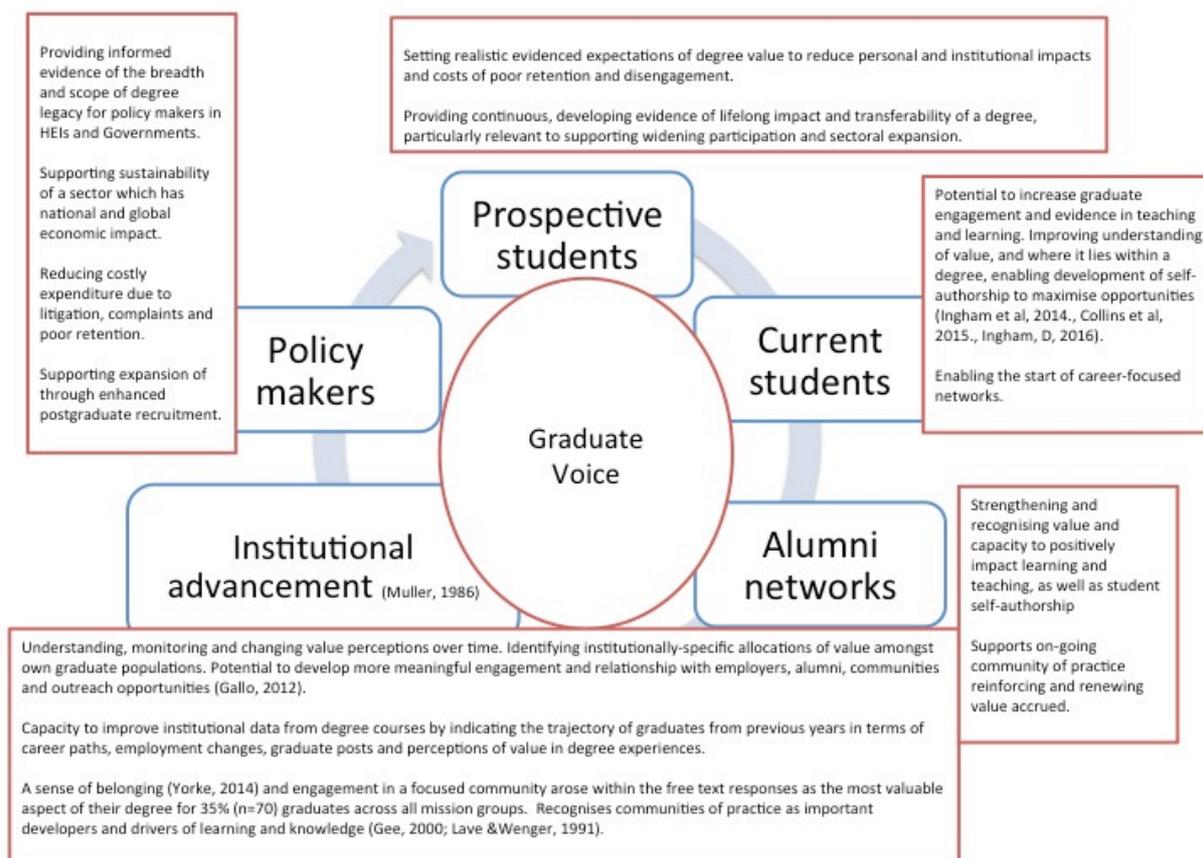


Fig. 2 Potential impact of the Graduate Voice in HE

7 CONCLUSION

This research identifies the potential of the Graduate Voice to inform potential academics, institutions and policy makers alike. It responds to Nelson’s observation in 1964:

“One factor often overlooked is the final product, the graduate. This factor is perhaps the most significant determinant of adequacy of programs and measure of effectiveness.” (1964:111).

Foucault opined that for anyone to yield power well, they must be informed and have understanding. He outlined understanding as a process resulting in modification of what we know, and modifying what we do in order to know (Faubion, 2001). Evaluating the progression of graduates as they journey from their degrees, apply and build upon the knowledge they gained at university, has potential to modify in an informed manner what we know and how together with their input, the higher education sector can develop.

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