Barriers in providing quality learning and teaching information on university websites to prospective students (0099)

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Introduction and Background

Choosing the right HEI is a key decision for HE students. It is critical that the product the students are investing in matches their expectations to hopefully engender higher student satisfaction (Connor et al, 2001; Yorke and Thomas, 2003). If unsatisfactory, it may have a negative impact on the academic reputation of the HEI leading to consequent student dissatisfaction and increased attrition rates. Providing information to improve pre-entry decision-making helps improve student retention and success in HE (Thomas, 2011; Andrews et al, 2012; Vossensteyn et al, 2015). Websites serve as one of the most influential sources of information for students in HE decision making (Pampaloni, 2010; Gordona and Berhow, 2009; McAllister-Spooner, 2008; Schimmel et al., 2010). According to Slack et al (2014), irrespective of the socio-economic status or whether they are first or second generation university students, the university website and prospectuses are accessed by 95% of the students during the HE decision making process.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2012) prescribed the need for higher education institutions (HEIs) to provide comparable standardised information on their websites drawn from the National Student Survey (NSS) scores referred to as the 'Key information set' (KIS), with the intention to help prospective students to make informed HE choices (Davies et al, 2010). KIS, however, provides limited information on aspects of learning and teaching (L&T) processes such as class size, pedagogical approaches used, student workload etc.; which may be of particular interest to individual students in their decision-making. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2013 a-d) produced guidance documents on how HEIs can provide more transparent and helpful information on their websites regarding L&T opportunities in their programmes in addition to the information provided by KIS. HEIs are expected to use these to discern the types of information desired by their students via their websites, prospectuses, and/or open days. A recent QAA study by Hosein and Rao (2015) surveyed the websites of 38 HEIs and found that only limited information was provided on several aspects of L&T as prescribed by the QAA to prospective students. A review of the literature indicates that there is a paucity of research in relation to the reasons as to why this should be the case.

The purpose of the paper is to present some of the challenges as identified by university personnel in providing quality L&T information on their websites to

prospective students.

Methods

The data for the study was drawn from interviews with quality assurance and marketing personnel from a selection of the 38 universities involved in Phase One of the QAA study (for details of the process of selection of the 38 universities refer to Hosein and Rao, 2015). Results of Phase One indicated an inconsistency in the L&T information on websites (Hosein and Rao, 2015). In Phase Two, the interviews focused on exploring the factors, which influenced the provision of L&T information on university websites.

Personnel from 30 of the 38 universities included in Phase One were contacted for Phase Two. (Of the 8 universities that were not contacted, personnel responsible for university website information could not be ascertained in six and the other two were excluded as they were part of the pilot study). Only eight personnel from the remaining 30 universities accepted to participate in the interviews. (Of the remaining 22 universities, nine did not respond at all, seven did not respond after making initial enquiries and six declined to participate). The interviewees participated in recorded semi- structured 30 minutes long Skype interviews. The inductive thematic analyses (Braun and Clarke, 2006,2012,2013) of the interview transcripts helped to identify two broad categories of barriers in information provision – operational and behavioural.

Results and Discussion

The interviews revealed that a multitude of factors might pose barriers in provision of quality L&T information to prospective students and lead to a procedural and formulaic approach to information provision. We classified the barriers identified to information provision by the interviewees under two broad themes – organisational and attitudinal, but it is important we acknowledge that in actuality there is often a complex interplay of a plethora of factors.

Some challenges appeared to emerge due to administrative, governance and/or logistical issues (organisational barriers). A lack of awareness of the documents, issues with dissemination of information regarding these documents and challenges in procuring information on L&T as advised by these documents due to lack of clear information governance processes were identified as key constraints.

In addition, barriers arising as a direct consequence of the interviewee's own perspective and orientations (attitudinal paternalism) on the type of website information which should be made available to prospective students influenced by the requirements posed by the external regulatory bodies (attitudinal barriers) acted as a deterrent. The interviewees expressed a heightened need to prioritise the obligatory information to achieve compliance with external regulatory bodies due to fear of punitive consequences. The regulatory bodies appeared to have created a

tension for professional performance – in what information the university professionals wanted to give and the information they were obliged to give (policy hysteria). Interviewees were wary of giving 'hostage to fortune' by providing specific and accurate information on aspects of L&T, which might be transient, for example staff-student ratio, which may fluctuate with student recruitment numbers. Further, the interviewee conceded that the teaching excellence framework may have further implications for their practice.

In spite of the small sample size, the in-depth interviews provided an illuminating perspective of the barriers to quality L&T information provision to prospective students. They also highlighted the changing nature of professional practice within the university which appeared to driven by the values of consumerism where 'the student-HEI relationship is clearly defined in legal terms' (Palfreyman 2013,109) and panoptic performativity (Perryman, 2006). We contend that the characterisation of these factors may facilitate HEIs and external agencies to recognise these challenges in the provision of quality L&T information on the university websites and may provide insight on effective ways of addressing some of these issues.

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