STUDENT INCORPORATION INTO THE QUALITY PROCESS – AN EXAMINATION OF THE BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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Abstract:

As part of a wide ranging investigation into the quality management of business education in the UK (QUBE – Quality in Business Education project) the authors examine the ways in which the student voice is incorporated into the quality process. An examination is made of the literature base in which the variety of student feedback mechanisms are explored and it is noted that the quality loop may be not be closed if there is inadequate reporting back on issues. Suggestions are made to more systematically explore the impact of intervening variables in the input-process-output mode of quality viz the impact of size, the influence of a culture of excellence and the application of more generalised models such as EFQM. One particular conclusion drawn from the study is the importance of informal networks that parallel the more formal mechanisms for incorporation of the student voice. It is further hypothesised that business schools may need to be of an optimum size in order to ensure the effectiveness of such networks. Some case study material is explored which examines the quality of business studies provision in smaller colleges.

Keywords:

QUBE, student experience, student incorporation into quality, business school size, culture of excellence.

I Introduction

There is a belief in Higher Education that the more students are involved in a course the better the quality of that course. The same belief seems to be accepted by politicians as is shown by the communiqué of the Prague 2001 meeting of European Education ministers following up the Bologna Declaration. Their statement "affirmed that students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions".

The objective of this investigation is to provide methods of supporting those managers within Business Schools charged with the responsibility for improving quality. Although this research is part of a wider project [QuBE 2006] we concentrate here upon one aspect, student involvement. The considerable range of activities reported in the literature review as encompassed by student involvement shows that it may be used in describing the effect of comprehensive, institution wide frameworks such as the EFQM Excellence model and the QAA fitness for purpose model [Steed, 2003]. The particular pattern of student involvement activities adopted within an institution will relate to the overarching quality framework and institutional culture. If there is a prescriptive institutional framework a Business School quality manager will follow it, concentrating on those student involvement activities defined by the framework. These activities will typically be those that produce a tangible output – the student survey form, the module evaluation form or the minutes of the staff-student committee (see, for example, QAA [2002]).

Many Business Schools and, especially, Business Groups offering HE courses in smaller institutions, operate in an environment where the methods of involving students are only partially prescribed. They then have a choice as to how to involve students. More than this they may then have the more wide ranging choice as to whether to attempt to introduce a framework such as that of EFQM within the Business School itself.

Recognising that such choices exist and considering them from the perspective of student involvement through a series of structured interviews of UK HE and FE establishments we have explored the following questions:

- What types of student involvement exist in practice
- How does this vary with size of institution, size of Business School or Business Group and type of institution
- Whether there exists a quality culture and how this relates to student involvement

II Literature Review

Feedback Throughout the Institution

By student involvement we mean that students are encouraged to comment on and influence the delivery and development of their course. The UK Quality Assurance Agency undertook reviews of the subject of Business and Management in many UK universities in 2001. In analysing the reports of those reviews Ottewill and MacFarlane [Ottewill, 2004] in their section on *Quality Management and Enhancement* emphasised the need for widespread involvement of stakeholders including involvement of students:

> *"Such a strategy needs to:*
> *foster a strong sense of ownership on the part of all the key stakeholders (i.e. tutors, managers, students, employers, professional bodies and external examiners) by requiring their full involvement in managing, assuring and enhancing quality;"*

If we equate student involvement with getting feedback from students then the purpose of collecting that feedback must be established. In a review of student feedback Harvey [2003] saw two major functions. One was for purposes internal to the institution where the feedback would help to improve the quality of the offerings. The purpose might be to help an individual lecturer assess the impact of their teaching or as part of an institution wide application of a change management and improvement scheme such as the EFQM Excellence model or TQM. Another was for external audiences, where the institution wished to establish its standing with potential students and external agencies. Increasingly institutions are being required to publish evidence of such involvement. In a project that consulted some 20 UK HE institutions [Brennan, 2004], this same internal/external split was found, with some other related purposes being cited. There is also the possibility of using student feedback to appraise academic staff, but that is not considered here.

There are many mechanisms for getting feedback from students. Here we discuss them systematically.

Today student views are sought [Harvey, 2003; Leckey, 2001] about most aspects of the running of UK HE institutions and the means varies from institution-wide satisfaction surveys to module or unit feedback forms. We therefore conceptualise the range of approaches taken to getting feedback in terms of institutional hierarchy. Sometimes the form and/or substance of the evaluation process are determined at a higher level of the hierarchy for lower levels, at other times the lower levels have more freedom.

The policies and actions of the institution have a major impact. Many have an institution-wide student satisfaction survey. Some of the items surveyed (e.g. parking, catering, library facilities) relate to the whole institution. They are not directly related to an academic subject and so are not relevant when we consider involving students on business courses. Other items however are subject related and there may be questions about academic matters. The sampling is often not adequate to get information about student perceptions as they relate to a course or module. Typically students are grouped by faculty, school or subject. The responses allow management to get information about the state of student satisfaction, perhaps down to the level of a subject but not down to the level of a programme or module. Questions specific to individual modules are rarely asked; it is the institution or faculty which determines the form of the questionnaire.

Moving down the hierarchy many Business Schools are the size of a faculty and may operate as a faculty within an institution. We would expect a significant degree of coherence between the courses they offer. To the extent that there are common, discipline specific issues affecting all students in a Business School it may be fruitful to explore those issues with a single survey. At present this does not seem to be done frequently.

At the subject level feedback may be sought for some specific purpose such as a survey of graduating students. The UK National Student Survey has been inaugurated in 2005 [Richardson, 2005, Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2005]. The results of this survey of all graduating students were published in 2005 [TQI, 2005]. The main purpose of this annual survey is to provide information to prospective students about the teaching quality of subjects in institutions. Business schools may be helped in a rather limited way in their quality improvement by this data. To give a picture of utility to the subject a more extensive leavers' survey is needed, but each additional survey risks 'questionnaire fatigue'. Rather than surveys or questionnaires, at this level feedback is often sought through regular, formal programme or subject committees [Harvey, 2003; Brennan, 2004].

Module level feedback is most often collected by a module questionnaire at the end of the module. Although informal feedback to the module teacher may be extremely useful [Harvey. 2003] by providing in-depth student views, it is not readily in a form that can be presented to quality committees. The result is that students on almost all modules are now asked to complete a module questionnaire. The form of this questionnaire may have been determined at the institutional level, or its composition and processing may have been left to the tutor or subject.

Getting Student feedback

There are many methods of getting student feedback; see for example the student themes website [Quality Enhancement Themes – Scotland, 2004]. Here we consider a selection of them.

Formal methods of getting student feedback include surveys through questionnaires, staff-student committees and focus groups.

The content of questionnaires varies from the simple, with a few questions written by a module teacher, to an extensive and nationally determined questionnaire. A questionnaire written by a module teacher will address the concerns of that teacher specific to their module. The questions may relate to matters of concern to those originating the questionnaire, or as illustrated by the UCE methodology [Harvey, 2003], the questions may arise from student feedback via focus-groups, telephone interviews and other comments. In practice most questions are of one of two types. Firstly there are those about the institutional facilities such as the library, IT and general services. Secondly there are questions about teaching and learning and course organisation. Most questionnaires also include some open–ended questions. One comparatively rarely used questionnaire-like method of getting feedback is the 'one-minute paper' [Stead, 2005]. This requires students to answer only two standard questions at the end of a class. There is evidence that the immediate feedback to the teacher can lead to improvements for students.

The administration of an institution-wide survey is a major task. Increasingly this may be done electronically. At the module level questionnaires need to be distributed, collected and processed. Sometimes this may be done by some central agency to explicitly exclude the module teacher from the process. This is supposedly to convince the students of the independence of the process. It may, however, lead to the teacher becoming disengaged from and sceptical about the feedback process and thus decrease its effectiveness [Brennan, 2003; Richardson, 2005]. The answers to open-ended questions can be read by the module teacher to gain an understanding of student concerns. To get a more systematic view of the responses content analysis, at various levels of sophistication, may be applied. Even relatively simple techniques may give useful results [Lapham, 1999].

Questionnaires alone can not capture all aspects of students' views. There are also staff-student committees operating at the level of the programme, subject or faculty. Staff-student committees are seen as having several advantages [Brennan, 2004]. They provide a forum for dialogue, for staff to express their concerns and to feed back on the actions they are taking. Their main limitations are the representative ness of the student representatives and their ability to communicate with their fellow students. The student unions in many institutions have part of their websites for representatives and also run training schemes. The subject or department can also support student representatives by providing time for representatives to meet with other students and email lists and web space for communication. In at least one UK university there is a module specifically for student representatives [University of Wolverhampton, 2005]. Another formal method for getting feedback is the focus group. A few instances of this have been reported in the literature [e.g. Wall, 2001; Hill, 2003]. This seems a technique capable of producing detailed information but requires time from the group members and the knowledge and skills of a facilitator; one who is not part of a unit's delivery team if it is a module that is being evaluated. It is not clear that a worthwhile amount of information, commensurate with the extra resources required, is produced by this method as compared with a well-designed questionnaire.

Informal contact between staff and students is seen by many authors as a good means of student feedback [Brennan, 2003; Harvey, 2003]. It is particularly important at the module level, giving immediate feedback and the prospect of prompt remediation in the event of difficulties. Issues can be raised on a confidential basis. There is, however, a downside. Views expressed informally may not be widely shared and without a record their impact is likely to be limited to few staff.

Service Quality

Somewhat different approaches to those described above are employed commercially to measuring the quality of service received by customers. If higher education provides a service to its customers (students) then those methods should be of relevance. In fact several authors have described applying such methods to investigating the quality of courses – for example Clewes [2003], Firdaus [2005], Narasimhan [2001], Oldfield *et. al.* [2000] and Tan *et. al.* [2004]. One of these approaches is the SERVQUAL methodology in which service quality is seen as the difference between the customer's perception of the service they receive and their expectation of that service. Tan *et. al.* applied the methodology to measure student satisfaction of students studying the same subject at two neighbouring universities. Narasimhan extended this approach to include the expectations and perceptions of the staff as well as the students, as well as suggesting that feedback be obtained during the semester. There are difficulties with the approach. The SERVQUAL methodology itself has been questioned on the grounds that it is not necessary to include expectations and that an alternative methodology, SERVPERF, based upon perceptions alone is preferable [Firdaus, 2005].

III The relationship between the measures, processes and outcomes in the search for quality.

Quality is a notoriously slippery, not to say contested concept. We could cite the words of Sallis who opines that:

> 'Quality is at the top of most agendas and improving quality is probably the most important task facing an institution. However, despite its importance many people find quality an enigmatic concept. It is perplexing to define and often difficult to measure… no two experts ever come to the same conclusion when discussing what makes a good school, college, or university'
> [Sallis, 1996]

The approach taken here is to follow the well-trodden path of a distinction between inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes. *Inputs* may be conceptualised as resources (such as quality of staff and student intake) whilst *processes* are the range of mechanisms, both formal and cultural which constitute the routine operation and management of the organisation's pursuit of organisational goals. A tacit assumption in this model is that given 'quality' inputs and 'quality' processes then 'quality' *outputs* (or, in the longer term *outcomes*) should be attained. Of course this is a probabilistic rather than a mechanical or deterministic relationship with an implicit assumption that quality procedures are conducive to quality outputs but the indeterminate nature of the relationship is not often specifically acknowledged. In particular, we wish to turn our attention to two particular factors which have not received much critical attention in the literature.

The effects of institutional size upon quality

In any discussion of size, it is immediately apparent that our unit of analysis is critical to any discussion. Firstly we need to distinguish between the size of a programme and in particular its student intake and staff support. Secondly, programmes are themselves embedded in institutional structures (e.g. a Business School) in institutions which themselves vary considerably in size. Each of these institutional structures can have a cascading effect upon others as for example the well developed procedures within a medium to large business school will in all probability be applied to even the smallest programmes within it. Given these complexities, it is perhaps not surprising that the impact of size has not been systematically investigated.

An instructive piece of research has recently been undertaken in examining the relationship between size and performance in Welsh secondary schools. The authors [Foreman-Peck and Foreman-Peck, 2006] have examined statistically the relationship between size and performance in every Welsh secondary school in receipt of public money. Their broad conclusions are that that performance declines when schools attain a size of 600+ with larger classes also being associated with poorer results. Data from other educational systems are not consistent as in Scotland, performance seems to first deteriorate and then to improve as size increases [Sawkins, 2002]. An American study suggests that schools of the size 600-900 students may achieve an optimum balance between economies of size and the potential negative effects of very large schools [Andrews, Duncombe and Yinger, 2003]. An English study concludes that larger English secondary schools achieve better exam performances when they are at least 1200 pupils and probably up to 1400 pupils [Bradley and Taylor, 1998] but these results do not exactly mirror the pattern suggested by the studies previously cited.

When this modelling is translated to the provision of business studies in the HE sector, it is easy to hypothesise why poorer results may be discernible at the extremes of a distribution. In the case of very small programmes (perhaps typically but not exclusively located in the College of Further Education sector) then the critical size of staff and students may not have been achieved that would attract and retain the higher quality staff and students. In the case of extremely large business schools (although no doubt well-developed quality mechanisms would be in place) there is an ever-present danger of student anonymity and perhaps sense of isolation. It is instructive that Warwick Business School which led the QAA rankings for its provision of Business education has a combined intake of 280 for its three main undergraduate courses, considerably less than the maximum found in other business schools [Warwick Business School, 2006]

We would hypothesise that the degree of formality of quality assessment procedures would increase as the size of the programme increases, particularly with regard to the ways in which the 'student voice' is incorporated. Such increases will be 'stepped' functions in that very small programmes may make a minimal use of formal methods of student consultation but more formal methods will be applied once certain critical sizes (depending upon institutional norms) apply. It is important to stress that formal methods of consultation do not vitiate the informal contacts between staff and students which is the way in which immediate issues are raised and resolved. Our own observations and interviews have indicated that in some programmes there are close and intimate working relationships between staff and students (e.g. at postgraduate level and in some of the smaller colleges of further education studied) and recourse to 'formal' methods of raising issues could almost be judged as an indication of failure. More formal methods of capturing the student voice can be seen as overlaying the matrix of informal connections that already exist.

An indication that the student voice is heard does not by itself indicate that quality outputs are achieved or achievable. It is probably the case that the degree of formality of instruments to capture 'the student voice' is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition, to achieve high quality and it is unlikely that colleges without robust systems of student incorporation will deliver the quality they desire. One of the difficult questions with which business school managers have to grapple is how to handle the relationship between size and quality of output. On the one hand, in eras of declining student resource there are often great institutional pressures, particularly upon the business schools, to increase intakes as the marginal costs of teaching the extra student can be low in relation to the income generated. On the other hand, beyond a certain size drop-out rates may well increase and other quality indicators indicate a decline which could threaten the position of a supplier in the league tables and the market place more generally.

This leads us to suggest that there is an optimum size of programme in which the interests of quality outcomes and efficiency can be reconciled. Optimum sizes could well be determined by more pressing but pragmatic considerations such as teaching room size and availability rather than quality considerations *per se.* In terms of ensuring that the student voice is well incorporated into quality procedures and outcomes, however, we would suggest that a point could well come particularly in very large departments where the voice of the individual student could well become attenuated whatever the nature of the formal or formal mechanisms deployed and this could threaten the goal of quality outcomes.

One recurrent theme indicated in the literature relates to the nature of the 'report back' mechanisms whereby students are informed of actions that may have taken place once their concerns have been articulated. Whilst the majority of institutions have well-developed and robust methods for the collection of student opinion, the mechanisms for the report-back of actions arising from the expressions of student concern is less transparent. Various mechanisms exist such as annual monitoring reports that review actions undertaken since the last iteration of the report, putting report-back as an agenda item on staff-student consultative committees, the posting of results (physically and electronically) on notice-boards and so on. Some of the problems are due to the timescales involved in that the next 'reporting period' may be one that is too late to concern the present cohort of students. This is particularly true in the case of module assessments in which (typically) the module is evaluated at its conclusions in which there remains no time left for any remedial action required. In the institution in which the authors teach, this issue is addressed by having more informal mid-module assessments (both paper and electronically based) so that any incipient concerns can be immediately addressed. One suggestion arising from consultation with our staff and students is that teaching staff start each module with a review of the concerns (if any) raised by previous cohorts of students on the module and a report of action taken to remedy the same. As Harvey and Associates [1997] indicate it is 'closing the feedback loop' that is a vital process for successfully incorporating students in the quality management process and, in any event, it is a manifestation that students concerns are treated seriously.

The most direct and individual of feedbacks is concerned with the nature of the return of assessed work. Whilst most institutions now have standardised assignment cover sheets, the amount of time taken to return assessed work remains a matter of perennial concern. Results recently collected in the national Student Survey and Published in the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website shows that responses to the question 'Feedback on my work has been prompt' was likely to generate some of the lowest average scores (e.g. about 2.5 out of a maximum of 5.0)[Teaching Quality Information, 2005]. Evidently this indicates some of the pressures upon individual staff members following the 'massification' of the higher education experience in the last two decades. It does help to reinforce the argument advanced above, however, that expansion of student numbers beyond an optimum point may have a deleterious effect upon at least the *perceived* quality of provision.

The effects of 'culture'

A 'culture of excellence' may be easy to experience in the context of higher education but searching for a definition that would meet with universal approval is much more problematic. One line of argument is to suggest that a culture of excellence is likely to follow the implementation of specific models or programmes (such as EFQM) to build quality 'into' a system of higher education [Pupius,1998; Osseo-Asare, Longbottom and Murphy,2005; Hides, Davies and Jackson, 2005]. However, there may be a certain circularity in this argument as a culture of excellence may well have predisposed academic managers to adopt a specific quality model which then reinforces the culture of quality.

An American approach to this problem that starts from the same 'massification' drivers that have fuelled the quality debate in the UK is advanced by Reuben [2004]. After specifying eight challenges to the development of a culture of excellence, he argues that excellence should be exhibited not only in teaching and scholarship (which he terms 'academics') but also in service (relationships with stakeholders) and operations (work practices). As the classroom has 'no walls', it is important that interpersonal and organisational aspects of the student experience be given specific attention and that it is recognised that contributions to the learning experience are provided by administrators and support staff.

A distillation of the common themes in both the American and UK literature seems to highlight the following three factors:

- Academic leadership to instil and promote a culture of excellence
- Self-reflection and systematic improvement in the teaching and learning process
- Incorporation of all the stakeholders i.e. a culture of excellence pervades the relationships which a department maintains with both intra-organisational and extra-organisational stakeholders.

From the perspective of the incorporation of the student experience into the quality process, it is possible that a 'culture of excellence' can be experienced whether a specific quality philosophy (such as EFQM) has been incorporated or not. Whilst cultures of excellence may be easier to experience than they are to define, it seems evident a culture of excellence will successfully convey the implicit messages to the student body that the student voice is not only heard but respected.

The EFQM Model

The EFQM Excellence model is a comprehensive institution wide framework aimed at institutional change that is being actively applied in several UK HE institutions. It is one of several approaches under investigation by UK universities that have their roots in the application of TQM principles. Some idea of how the model is applied can be gained from the papers of the Centre for Integral Excellence at Sheffield Hallam university (see for example Pupius, 2005 and references therein). An account of its application in one university by the person who lead its introduction is Brown [2004]. Recently considerable doubts have been raised as to its long-term viability [Temple, 2005], but it is not the purpose of this paper to analyse the framework. Rather we are considering the place of student involvement when such a framework has been adopted. It should be noted in passing that EFQM as a framework for the whole institution will probably be of little use to the manager charged with improving the quality of a business school. It is does not seem feasible to apply the model to a constituent part of an institution in isolation and if the institution decides to adopt the model, the business school has no choice in the matter.

The EFQM framework is undoubtedly complex and we consider it only briefly here. The eight fundamental underpinning concepts are embodied in an HE version that involves a self-assessment requiring the collection of evidence against nine criteria and thirty-two sub-criteria. Performance is then enhanced through the management of processes at all levels and throughout the institution. It seems that student involvement is a process that must be managed. Thus the development of the framework in the area of student involvement will lead to a choice of a mixture of approaches from those identified in the literature review above. From the perspective of student involvement there is nothing new here. In fact it would be expected that because of the institutional wide compass of the activity and its expression in terms of specifically identified processes that the choice would emphasise formal approaches to student involvement. As we have seen such an emphasis may not always be the most effective form of student involvement.

IV The Investigation

The objective of this investigation is to provide methods of supporting those managers within Business Schools charged with the responsibility for improving quality. Although this research is part of a wider project [QuBE, 2006] we concentrate here upon one aspect, student involvement. The considerable range of activities reported in the literature review as encompassed by student involvement shows that it may be used in describing the effect of comprehensive, institution wide frameworks such as the EFQM Excellence model and the QAA fitness for purpose model [Steed, 2003]. The particular pattern of student involvement activities adopted within an institution will relate to the overarching quality framework and institutional culture. If there is a prescriptive institutional framework a Business School quality manager will follow it, concentrating on those student involvement activities defined by the framework. These activities will typically be those that produce a tangible output – the student survey form, the module evaluation form or the minutes of the staff-student committee (see, for example, QAA[2002]}.

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Recognising that such choices exist and considering them from the perspective of student involvement through a series of structured interviews of UK HE and FE establishments we have explored the following questions:

- What types of student involvement exist in practice
- How does this vary with size of institution, size of Business School or Business Group and type of institution
- Whether there exists a quality culture and how this relates to student involvement

General characteristics of the colleges

Students and staff in three colleges in central southern England were interviewed in the Autumn of 2006 but they are not identified here. They scored 16, 21 and 23 respectively in the QAA Subject reviews and hence cover the range of reports in this sector.

The Higher Education (HE) classes within the colleges of further education tend to be small in number. They cover areas as diverse as HNDs and HNCs, Foundation Degrees and professional courses. In the three colleges sampled, class sizes were all small – in the range of 12-15 students. In addition, HE work is regarded as high prestige work within the college and is more likely to be populated by mature (i.e. 21+ students) than the rest of the college profile. These course and demographic characteristics impact upon the nature of student involvement with the quality procedures exhibited within the colleges.

Formal mechanisms

The colleges all employed a general course evaluation survey, typically combining course information with the elements found in a student satisfaction survey. For this reason, there was a general feeling that the information gathered was of a very general nature and did not focus very specifically upon the unit(s) to which the students were being exposed. The questionnaire was usually designed for all students and was either handed out in class or was centrally administered, typically on an annual but sometimes on a termly basis. Data from the questionnaire was typically collated and fed into a more general course evaluation compiled by the programme manager and submitted to subject and departmental heads. Two particular mechanisms were found that are worthy of note:

(a) In one college, responses to issues raised in the monitoring reports was posted on the college notice-boards

(b) In another college, reports were automatically sent to employers who, via a college coordinator, would liaise with the college if it was felt that an important service was not being provided. The course in question was for a professional accounting technician qualification (AAT) and it is probable that similar mechanisms apply for other professional courses taught with colleges of this type. As students were well aware that employers (who paid the fees) would be expecting to receive reports from the college and progress was discussed with the individual student in the place of employment, then this was an important mechanism for ensuring that both consumers (students) and customers (their employers) were satisfied with the level of service provided by the college.

Staff-student consultative committees were deployed but on a college rather than a course level (where the small number of students would not particularly justify their use)

Informal mechanisms

When class sizes are small, the programme manager is also likely to be a course tutor for some or all of the course components. Day-to-day concerns are easily addressed and typically (although not invariably) issues can be resolved with a minimum of delay or recourse to more formal mechanisms.

For such smaller courses, tutors deployed a weekly tutorial session in which a range of academic or study-associated issues could be discussed and this was often complemented by an ‘open-door’ policy. Colleges reported that tutors made extensive use of email and email requests for assistance were typically responded to with alacrity. These mechanisms which provided for multiple points of access to tutors obviated the need for more formalised mechanisms in many cases.

Use made of VLEs and other ICT

The smaller colleges did not deploy the range of VLEs and other learning resources typically found in larger colleges although one college was experimenting with the use of Moodle (a public domain sourced VLE). Computing facilities were typically provided centrally and provided internet access for on-line searches but without the access to specialised bibliographical tools and databases typically found in the larger business school.

Quality as perceived by the students

It was evident from student responses in open-ended questions that students particularly evaluated courses that they could see were well-planned, deployed a variety of teaching methods and were perceived as being particularly relevant in the work-place. Early return of marked course work was also mentioned as an indication of quality.

Two particular issues stood out from the case studies:

Employer involvement (particularly in the case of professional, day-release courses) was one external referent by which the course quality could be monitored, to the extent that quality is perceived as satisfying the requirements of major stakeholders

Choice vs. Exit. When colleges compete with each other for students, then it is possible for students to enrol in another college – as one mature student opined:

> *' if there had been a serious problem, I would have changed colleges'*

This would appear to indicate that 'exit' as well as 'voice' (after Hirschman, 1970) can be significant in quality assessment. Tutors confirmed that re-enrolment (the equivalent of 'repeat business') was typically used by course managers and college managements as an indication that courses were meeting the needs of students and employers.

Some implications

From the case studies, it was evident that informal mechanisms were adjudged to be far more important as a mechanism of student incorporation than were the formal mechanisms such as end-of-course questionnaires, student representatives and course committees. This was primarily a consequence of the following characteristics:

- small numbers of students in each cohort
- mature (i.e. 21+) intakes
- course managers themselves knew each student through their own tutorial contact.

It is evident that as the numbers of students enrolled upon courses increases, then more formal mechanisms are necessary to capture the voice of the individual student experience and to ensure that legitimate concerns are both expressed and acted upon. The relationship between size and quality (as measured by examination performance) is an inexact one but a forthcoming paper suggests that intermediate size Welsh schools may actually produce better results than larger ones [Foreman-Peck and Foreman-Peck, 2006]. However, this relationship remains to be tested in the arena of higher education.

Class size may be an artificial statistic in that it may average out large lectures and smaller tutorial groups to a somewhat meaningless figure. Nonetheless, it is instructive to indicate a certain sensitivity to large class sizes. For example:

- Oxford Brooks indicates an undergraduate class size of 35 on its web-pages
- Manchester Business School indicates enrolments of 40-50
- Warwick Business School has 280 undergraduate places each year

Many business schools will enrol several hundreds upon their undergraduate courses but the relationship between enrolment size and quality does not appear to have been systematically examined.

V Conclusions

Our review and the literature and subsequent investigations into the nature of student incorporation into the quality process do not indicate any nostrums that indicate a direct relationship between student incorporation and subsequent performances. But we would conclude that the importance of close and informal relationships between students and faculty, complementing the more formal mechanisms in which students are given voice, are neglected at their peril and contribute to a culture of excellence which is likely *ceteris paribus* to contribute to quality experiences and performances

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The following reference list contains hyperlinks to World Wide Web pages. Readers who have the ability to access the Web directly from their word processor or are reading the paper on the Web, can gain direct access to these linked references. Readers are warned, however, that

1. these links existed as of the date of publication but are not guaranteed to be working thereafter.
2. the contents of Web pages may change over time. Where version information is provided in the References, different versions may not contain the information or the conclusions referenced.
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