POSSIBLE WAYS OF MANAGING THE INFLUENCES ON A UNIVERSITY COURSE

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Abstract

This report considers and comments upon current demands on university faculty. This is achieved by reporting upon the purpose of a university education and the role of faculty. Students at university are now of a generation that has grown up with the internet and use it in all parts of their lives. Generation Z students have several characteristics which might affect the way they learn and need to be considered. Employers are seeking graduates with different types of skills than a decade ago. University faculty need to teach and assess such skills alongside technical content of the course discipline. Examples are given of how this might be achieved within the accounting discipline. The discussion proposes possible ways of managing the various influences on a university course by using the resources available to prepare students for the world of work and a civil society.

Keywords: *Generation Z, teaching and learning, assessment, skills*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the age of: skills and competences, blended and on-line learning, learning platforms, tenure, student and peer review, Generation Z students, and accreditation by government bodies and in some cases professional bodies, university faculty in the classroom have to consider the needs and demands of many. This discussion paper will introduce and discuss some of the key influences and suggest ways interested parties in which university faculty can attempt to satisfy the interested parties. From the perspective of one who teaches the often misunderstood and non-popular core subject of accounting to students at a private liberal arts university in the hope is that others can gain insight into how to manage the many demands university faculty face.

Being a student or university faculty can be stressful as illustrated by the rising stress levels associated with studying and teaching at university. A recent article ([1] Guardian, 2019b) reports that issues such as leaving family friends, worries about debt and a poor work/life balance led to 80% of UK students reporting high levels of stress and anxiety. In the US three out of four students report feelings of stress ([2] ABS News, 2019).

There are also particular stresses on overseas students having to adapt to different cultures ([3] Brunsting et al., 2018) which can affect their ability to fit in. This can result in poor motivation to learn. It is therefore essential for university personal to be aware of the difficulties that many international students face.

There are also issues with student debt which contributes towards stress at University ([4] Baum and Schwartz, 2006). Not only to some students have to worry about repayment of debts associated with education later in life but have to work whilst being a student to cover living expenses. This can lead to absence, or, if students are present in class, a lack of engagement and reduced well-being ([5] Creed et al., 2015).

Faculty are also facing stress, in the UK the consumerisation of university degrees has led to the concept of the student as customer and demanding quality and are more likely to complain if they do not get the service, they perceive they should be getting ([6] Jabbar et al., 2018). other factors which have increased stress include the marketisation of higher education and pressures to publish ([7] Guardian, 2019a).

These issues have been recently exacerbated in the UK by the Teaching Excellence Framework ([8] Department for Education, 2017) which measures the effectiveness of teaching. The objective of the framework is to inform prospective students about teaching quality at the universities they apply to, to

raise the profile of good teaching and to meet the perceived needs of potential employers ([9] Office for Students, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to suggest possible ways forward to help students and university faculty to develop teaching and learning to help them to manage the influences on their classes.

The following sections will describe some of the demands associated with: the purpose of a university education, pressure on university faculty, generation Z students, skills development, review and accreditation. The discussion will propose literature and research-based ideas and methods by which all interested parties, such as the students and faculty inside the classroom, and management, assessors and employers outside the classroom can learn together to achieve what a university education should be about. University faculty should be teaching students not to just pass examinations and get good grades but to prepare them for employment and to take active part in a civil society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The purpose of a university education

Learning theory appears to be on a continuum between behaviourist acquisition of knowledge and social constructivism ([10] Graham, 2002). For example the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects approach to university education, encourages the development of technical knowledge ([11] Becher and Trowler, 2001) or hard skills. However this can lead to computational thinking ([12] Calderon et al., n.d.). Whereas the liberal arts and humanities approach to teaching and general education, encourages the development of hard and soft skills as a preparation for civil society. There also appears to be a difference of opinion between hard or knowledge based skills, such as retention of knowledge and practical or soft skills such as how the knowledge is used in the real world ([13] Buckley, 2015). This results in STEM students perceiving hard skills to be more important, whilst social science students such as those studying psychology and education rate soft skills such as critical argument as being more important. ([13] Buckley, 2015).

2.2 Faculty

What is the role of faculty or the professor in the classroom, and what influences how they teach and encourage students to engage in learning? We also need to consider if there are any cultural influences in higher education, as many university faculty in the classroom have only experienced other professors in similar environments and this can influence the way in which they teach ([14] Oleson and Hora, 2014). Other influences include previous classroom experience, if this was poor, university faculty are more likely to develop other methods of teaching. This is achieved by actively seeking professional development. Informal peer review through self-reflection and interactions with peers can also influence classroom practice. Other influences include discussion with friends and family, and research techniques ([14] Oleson and Hora, 2014).

There has in recent years been the development of the scholarship of teaching, one of the main influences was the chair of the Carnegie Foundation ([15] Carnegie Organisation, n.d.), Ernest Boyer who emphasised the difference between scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching ([16] Boyer, 1990). The former being applying scholarship about teaching, learning, and disciplinary knowledge by reading relent literature in teaching the discipline and consulting others in the disciple. The scholarship of teaching is asking questions about student learning, seeking critical review about assumptions and knowledge and then developing scholarly teaching ([17] Shulman, 2001).

The development of the scholarship of learning and teaching has led to development of teaching courses, many subject specific) and qualifications. This has been assisted by national bodies such as Universities UK ([18] Universities UK, 2016) and the Higher Education Academy ([19] HEA, n.d.), which has the mission of improving university teaching. A forerunner of this institution was set up after a review into UK university teaching outcomes, including skills such as critical thinking which were being achieved ([20] Leitch, 2006). There are also subject specific bodies which focus upon learning and teaching, for example the Education Special Interest Group of the British Accounting and Finance Association ([21]

BAFA, n.d.) which also encourages research into accounting education and produces the journal *Accounting Education: an international journal*. The professional accounting bodies in US and UK also sponsor frequent reviews of accounting education such as "The Pathways Report" ([22] AAA, 2012)

In the US representative bodies such as the American Institute of Higher Education ([23] AIHE, 2018) and the American Association of Colleges and Universities ([24] AACU, 2014) encourage good classroom practice and attempt to raise awareness of faculty and staff of societal and work place issues which should influence higher education. An example of this is the LEAP Challenge ([25] AACU, 2015) which focuses upon promoting essential learning outcomes, principles of excellence, promotion of good practice and assessment.

Worldwide organisations such as the Carnegie Trust ([15] Carnegie Organisation, n.d.) seek to further the benefit of higher education to society by providing funding for undergraduate students and researchers with the aim of advancing knowledge. In the US philanthropic bodies such as the Lumina Foundation also attempt to support development in higher education with initiatives such as "The degree qualifications profile ([26] Lumina Foundation, 2014) which focusses upon designing degrees and courses which prepare students for the work place and civil society. Such initiatives are supported by the sponsoring of reports such as the recent "*Trends in General Education Design, Learning Outcomes and Teaching Approaches"* ([27] Hart Research Associates, 2016), which focusses upon what universities are trying to do to achieve the Lumina Foundation objective to make learning opportunities available to all. In the accounting world organisations such as International Federation of Accountants ([28] IFAC, n.d.) provide guidance to accountancy educators to prepare the future generations for what they identify as a rapidly changing world. The next section will outline the current perceived need for the development of skills in the classroom, alongside essential subject knowledge

2.3 Skills Development

The World Economic Forum has predicated a the forth industrial revolution ([29] World Economic Forum, 2016) , which is occurring as a result of digitization, and the resultant intended and unintended effects. These for example include digitization in the work place, especially in disciplines such as accounting, which will require the development of different skill sets ([30] Brewer et al., 2014). The skills required for the forth industrial revolution are developing and include:

- Complex problem solving
- Critical thinking
- Creativity
- People management
- Coordinating with others
- Emotional intelligence
- Judgement and decision making
- Service orientation
- Negotiation
- Cognitive flexibility

The skills identified need to be introduced, developed and assessed at university. This is more prevalent at Liberal arts universities which emphasize a general education. However, there can be confusion as to what is meant by liberal arts. Some commentators perceive liberal arts to be the humanities, whilst others ([31] McCuen, 2014) recognise a broader definition which emphasises the need to develop metacognitive skills such as communication and critical argument.

The "Degree Qualifications Profile" published by the Lumina Foundation ([26] Lumina Foundation, 2014) is a good example of how colleges in the US are trying to build in soft skills into degree programmes. Skills such as specialised knowledge and collaboration are clearly identified and assessed

using clear learning outcomes. However, the fine tuning is left to faculty of how they identify, teach and assess student skills at subject level. The following section discuses the current generation of students studying at universities.

2.4 Students

Generation Z students are considered to be those born between 1995 and 2010 ([32] Seemiller and Grace, 2016) and as a generation they have shorter attention spans, often due to the need to check for messages on smart phones due the phenomenon known as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Research ([33] Buff and Burr, 2018) indicates that this can lead to anxiety. This can lead to internet addiction, or more precisely addiction to social media ([34] Carbonell et al., 2018). Generation Z can easily access knowledge but may find it difficult to evaluate sources of information and distinguish between credible on not credible sources, this can lead to a lack of critical thinking as it's so easy to just find the answer ([35] Pew Research Center, 2012).

The level of knowledge and expectations of students needs to be considered by faculty as soon as they enter college One of the difficulties in teaching core subjects such as accounting is negative preconceptions that students come to college with ([36] Mladenovic, 2000). These must be managed as such negative preconceptions can affect how students approach the courses, and some may interpret the course as something to be passed and adopt a surface learning approach ([37] Marton and Säljö, 1976). University faculty need to consider this and try to manage students approaches to learning. This can be achieved by running academic skills courses which relate the subjects being studied ([38] Bunney et al., 2015).

2.5 Review

University faculty in the classroom faces several different types of review, these are as follows. Course accreditation: this can come in two forms, first the university as a whole gets accredited every five years and samples of syllabi and coursework may be examined to ensure that the education is at a suitable level. For example in the UK the Quality Assurance Agency ([39] QAA, n.d.) sets criteria for universities to follow to achieve accreditation. It is useful for university faculty to become aware of such criteria so they able to teach and assess students in the approved manner. For some disciplines there is also professional accreditations: some courses and disciples will be subject to examination by profession bodies. For example, in the UK accounting students can gain exemptions form examinations of professional bodies if the university course has a similar content ([40] CIMA, 2018).

There are also several types of internal review which can occur such as: peer review: many universities run a system of formal peer review, which will form part of a bigger appraised scheme, which can lead to contact renewal and some universities also encourage students to review university faculty, usually anonymously, which can lead to some interesting outcomes. Both student and peer review can also be conducted informally which can help individuals to learn from colleagues and students in a friendly was, questions such as "What worked" or "was that fun" at the end of the class can lead to some interesting discussions. Some faculty undertake self-review and find it useful to keep a self-reflective diary, which can help keep track of effective teaching and assessment methods over time.

3. UNIVERSITY FACULTY

3.1 University Faculty

University faculty in the modern university must keep up to date with research in their respective fields, through relevant publications and blogs, and, if available, education research in the discipline such as that encouraged by the British Accounting and Finance Association special interest group in education.

University faculty also need to become more aware of generational trends and resultant characteristics of the students, and how they might need to adapt their teaching styles and methods to accommodate their needs. There also needs be a raising of awareness of stress factors and potential mental health problems of students leaving home, perhaps entering into a new culture, and being away from the security of home. This can be achieved at an institution level, with the setting up of a teaching and

learning group, or regular away days with education related training sessions. Peer review should become more informal and encourage the sharing of best practice.

This will ensure that students are engaged in active learning and also learn how to think critically and not merely have a perspective that academic knowledge can be downloaded, but learning has several aspects including the classroom process. The "3P" model of learning ([41] Biggs, 1993) emphasises that the best to engage students in learning is to consider the presage, the process, (e.g. the students previous knowledge and experience) the process (learning activities) and the product (the outcomes). For Generation Z students, this can be achieved by defining what is expected in the classroom with clear instructions. ([32] Seemiller and Grace, 2016). Other considerations are pacing the learning and providing clear goals with frequent feedback, which helps to build confidence, or if a student is struggling provides opportunities for identifying problems early and providing either peer or one-on-one support. This can be supported with a mix of in class and online courses which provides opportunities for both individual and interpersonal learning ([32] Seemiller and Grace, 2016). Digital learning can also help engage Generation Z students in learning, examples include, instructional videos from YouTube, polling apps such as Polleverywhere ([42] Poll Everywhere, 2018) can encourage interactive learning. Apps such as iMovie can help students to create their own presentations and movies, topics could include current issues in the discipline. I use Polleverywhere, in class presentation software, and video uploaded to YouTube, this appears to engage the majority of students. But not all Generation Z students are the same, and some will prefer more traditional learning, so the way forward might be to vary learning in the classroom and find out what works and what does not.

University faculty have a responsibility to not only pass on knowledge but also emphasise how to use the knowledge across different topics and in real life. Generation Z students appreciate enjoying learning ([43] Seemiller and Grace, 2019) and this can be achieved by enthusiastic teaching, having a sense of humour, and by possessing real life experience. Learning can also be helped by discussing any difficulties in learning which students encounter. This can be helped by connecting with students face-to-face, however e-mail is not popular with Generation Z as they may not have been taught the formalities of composing a message ([32] Seemiller and Grace, 2016). There are several ways to manage students to develop within class boundaries of phone use. These include introduction of one minute tech breaks, which are reduced as the semester progresses; sharing research on digital distractions and the end result, incorporate the phones into the class, and use software such as Polleverywhere, or get the students to find out definitions on the internet using phones. One reason students' may not engage is boredom, so teaching needs to be engaging and active.

3.2 Skills and assessment

Evidence of subject knowledge and the skills required to use the knowledge learnt on university courses can be tested by assessment. Evidence of the knowledge and skills acquired at university needs to demonstrable to potential future employers. Therefore, both knowledge and skills need to be assessed with practical assignments which do more than merely test knowledge retention and reproduction.

Assignments such as long examinations are fine for testing retention of knowledge but there is also a need to develop methods of assessing other principles and skills such as those outlined in the LEAP challenge of the AACU ([25] AACU, 2015) These include critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving abilities which more than 90% of employers say are more important than the discipline studied. This can be achieved by setting independent studies in the real world as assignments.

When considering assignments, it is important to consider what is being assessed and why. Generation Z does still read, but less so that in the past ([44] Twenge et al., 2018). [43] Seemiller and Grace (2019) suggest the use of tools such as the Course Workload Estimator at Rice University ([45] Emily, 2017) to guide instructors regarding the amount of reading they should set for classes; whilst this may not be suitable for all disciplines, it does require instructors to think about the purpose of student reading. Focussed reading can help to encourage deep learning, as can mixing text book reading with contemporary material from relevant web sites designed for everyday reading ([43] Seemiller and Grace, 2019).

Readings need to have a purpose for Generation Z, and there needs to be clear instructions for assignments ([32] Seemiller and Grace, 2016). These could include examples and exemplars, checklists videos, written instruction, and the purpose of the assessment, for example the Lumina Foundations Degree Profile ([26] Lumina Foundation, 2014) suggests clear learning outcomes, these tend to commence with words such as "*the purpose of this assessment is to….".* Some professions such as accounting provide guidance on the skills required ([46] ICAEW, 2018). There is also plenty of guidance on writing learning outcomes available on the internet (e.g. [47] Kennedy, 2006).

Group work is often used to assess students. But some Generation Z do not believe this it is effective ([32] Seemiller and Grace, 2016) for several reasons; they might find it difficult to work with others, they might be concerned about the ability of others, or simply that they prefer to work alone. Such fears need to be effectively managed. This can be achieved by considering, how groups are formed; how they develop; holding mandatory regular meetings with groups, either face-to-face or online, conducting a session on teambuilding within the syllabus; considering a individual assignment prior to the group work; and encouraging polite peer review and self-reflection as part of the assignment.

Generation Z like to know where they are. Thus milestones in a larger assignment can be considered ([43] Seemiller and Grace, 2019). This can be achieved by breaking up large assignment into smaller units, and giving rapid regular feedback, which will not only motivate students but can also lead to higher grades. Feedback needs to be timely, regular and meaningful. Feedback can be assisted with the use of rubrics which identify how students can achieve a particular grade ([48] Brookhart, 2013).

Other considerations when designing assessments should include, timing, to avoid clumping at certain times of the semester, types of assignment, the spread of assignments across the core courses, to ensure an element of variety. Designing assignments with regular feedback and review can lead to an upward skew in grades, and this needs to be made explicit to management and colleagues if a culture of standardisation of grades exists within the institution

3.3 Students

It is essential to assess students' level of knowledge, skill and expectation when they enter college? This will enable colleges to map out students' pathway through the years they are at university, this can be achieved with a core curriculum which introduced, develops and assess the necessary skills to prepare students for the workplace and a civil society ([49] Arum et al., 2016).

Universities can harness the generation Z's willingness to seek knowledge but this must be well managed by faculty and staff by explaining and establishing the methods and rules early in the university course. There must also be steps taken to ensure consistency regarding rules and regulation across faculty with policy which is regularly reviewed. This would ensure that students do not get mixed messages about ways of learning, in class activities and coursework.

Managing Generation Z's digital distractions also needs to be considered by university faculty. Generation Zs' learning need to be properly understood to be managed effectively with frequent feedback, and academic and life skills developed in all classes. Examples might include courses which help students to assess sources for credibility by asking the purpose of the article, credentials of the authors, credible references ([43] Seemiller and Grace, 2019).

3.4 Review

Accreditation of university courses is essential for the institution, and thus it is important that faculty are included in the process and made aware of the criteria and procedures associated with the relevant body. Peer review should be frequent and if possible, informal and part of process of critical self-reflection ([50] Thomson et al., 2015). The value of anonymous review by students in questionable, as it is questionable if students are qualified to evaluate teaching staff ([51] Hornstein, 2017).

3.5 Limitations

As stated in the introduction, this paper is intended a statement of position, as such is partly based on the author's own opinions within the discipline of accountancy, only one of several disciplines taught and studied at university Not all the recommendations in the discussion will apply to all universities.

There are cultural considerations to consider and also the objectives of the wide range of universities from small private liberal arts universities to huge publicly funded institutions. University faculty and students face different types of pressures for many socio-cultural reasons. However, all the students will graduate into the same increasingly international world.

4. CONCLUSIONS

There is more to teaching than using a text book, or reading out notes in a didactic fashion, university faculty and staff need to raise the awareness of students why they are learning what they are learning for. Teaching needs to be active and varied. University faculty need to realise that students are young people who are easily influenced by factors outside the classroom. There are often unseen mental health problems associated with growing up and being away from parents. Universities need to harness the resources available to guide Generation Z students, merely passing on knowledge is no longer sufficient to prepare students for the workplace, as evidenced by several studies ([32] Seemiller and Grace, 2016).

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