Alumni studies in the United Kingdom

Book Section

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This chapter examines the current uses of alumni studies in the United Kingdom and outlines their challenges and limitations to informing policy and curriculum reform.

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There is a growing interest in alumni studies in the United Kingdom, but for varied and somewhat contradictory reasons. The attention of alumni may be sought in connection with any of the following objectives: to obtain their money, obtain data for performance indicators, improve teaching quality, assist potential students with course selection, and provide career information for future students. This list of reasons reflects a mix of forces that are collectively shaping higher education in the United Kingdom: marketization, consumerism, increased accountability to the state, and diversification of students, courses, and institutions.

It is important to note that the word *alumni* when used in the United Kingdom suggests that the individual is a prospect for charitably supporting the university. University degree holders are generally referred to as "graduates." In this chapter, however, the terms *alumni* and *graduates* will be used interchangeably to refer to all individuals who have earned a university diploma.

For many years, all U.K. higher education institutions have collected annual "destinations" data from graduates six months after their graduation. These data, which focus on the status and whereabouts of graduates, are collated and published nationally. Government is increasingly interested in using this information, along with other student statistics, to provide performance indicators for institutions. As part of this trend, a new national student survey is being introduced in order to obtain the views of students in their final semester of study. This survey inquires about the quality of students' educational experience, and the resulting data become part of publicly available information on teaching quality designed to assist prospective students in choosing courses and institutions.

Alongside these national interests in graduate studies are the interests of teachers, administrators, and managers of higher education institutions. Not so long ago, interest in the experiences of graduates was largely confined to the staff of university career services, represented by a national organization, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, and a central support unit, the Higher Education Careers Services Unit. These entities initiated and continue to administer the "first destinations survey" (recently renamed the "destinations of leavers from higher education survey") for the purpose of providing information to their current students. However, because of national quality assurance developments and government concerns about graduate employability, the views and experiences of graduates have become a much wider concern within higher education institutions. Not only do institutions need to be able to demonstrate that their graduates are in demand in the labor market, but they also need to show that their graduates have the right skills and competencies that employers require. Consequently, there has been a growth of various kinds of surveys to investigate the whereabouts and experiences of U.K. graduates. These surveys are sometimes conducted within teaching departments or as institution-wide initiatives. Information from such surveys can be used to inform course design and teaching and learning methods, but it also has an important use in demonstrating to government, national higher education bodies, employers, and future students that the institution's courses are relevant to employment and that its graduates are in demand. In this sense, they complement the national initiatives referred to above.

Some alumni studies in the United Kingdom are long-term analyses of graduates that follow their progress over three or four years after graduation. These surveys have generally been nationally funded (see, for example, Belfield and others, 1997; Elias and others, 1999; Brennan and others, 2001), but some individual institutions and departments have also mounted studies of this sort. The rationale for these longer-term studies is the belief that the six months of the destinations-of-leavers' survey is too short a time frame in which to make a judgment about the employment prospects of graduates. This is due to the fact that over a third of U.K. graduates have not even entered the labor market six months after graduation. Instead, they are enrolled in various postgraduate courses or are taking time off. And some, of course, are just unemployed.

The variety of interests in graduate surveys poses a number of methodological and political problems. First and foremost is the question of whether information is going to enter the public domain. When it is, the pressures on institutions to "tell a good story" are great. Second, different interests and purposes require different kinds of information. Teachers and course designers may find information about the kinds of workplace demands placed on their graduates more useful than simple information on whether their former students have obtained a job. However, governments may be more interested in the latter. A further problem comes from the great diversity of the higher education student population. Graduates leave higher education at any age and come from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds. Individuals also have a variety of reasons for enrolling in higher education, and their aspirations for their lives after study differ widely. All of these factors need to be taken into account in order to make sense of information collected through alumni studies.

This chapter explores these complex contexts for alumni studies in U.K. higher education by looking at student surveys more generally and their relationship to studies of graduates.

Are They Students or Consumers?

Some of the concerns already noted are founded on a study on student feedback commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2003 (Brennan and others, 2003). The study followed in the wake of a national task group that looked at information on quality and standards in higher education. The task group advocated a number of provisions for quality assurance, including "feedback from recent graduates, disaggregated by institution, collected through a national survey" and "feedback from current students collected through higher education institutions' own surveys, undertaken on a more consistent basis" (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2002, p. 9).

As part of the funding council's student feedback study, information was collected from higher education institutions about their approaches to collecting and using student information. The study found that student feedback was most frequently collected at the level of the individual course or module for use by teachers. Surveys of the whole student experience or even a whole year of study were less common, and alumni studies were rare. However, many of the issues raised in the student study are applicable to alumni studies.

First, the study found that student feedback often had to serve several purposes within institutions and that this raised many difficulties. For example, the surveys sought to measure the students' learning experience but also gathered externally imposed public accountability and consumer information.

A second common problem was the level at which information was collected, analyzed, and made available. Although the level of an individual course or module was the most common focus for feedback, feedback was also collected at other levels: the individual teaching session, the year of study, or the entire course. What presented a problem was the attempt to use information collected at one level to address issues of concern at a different level. We might surmise the existence of similar problems with alumni studies. For example, student and graduate experiences of higher education are likely to be mixed. Attempts to summarize the whole are likely to be difficult for the student or graduate as well as the teacher or administrators interpreting the results.

The third commonly cited problem was the use made of feedback data and the widespread cynicism among students regarding their use. The study concluded that less feedback could be collected and that the data could be used more effectively. The same is surely true of alumni data. Destinations-of-leavers data may be given full attention in the institution's career service but are often given only cursory attention among its teaching staff.

A final problem cited by the HEFCE study was obtaining adequate response rates from students, which varied between 20 and 80 percent. The most effective way of obtaining a good response rate was requiring students to complete the questionnaire in class, an option not available when dealing with alumni.

These problems and ambiguities in the collection and use of student feedback data raise questions about the role and status of students in today's higher education. The newer government-inspired interests in student and graduate feedback reflect concerns to empower "consumers" in increasingly market-regulated public services. Emphasis is placed on public information and its use to promote choice among consumers and competition among providers (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). More traditional interests of institutions and teachers in student and graduate feedback are concerned with the student as learner and the use of feedback information to enhance that learning. These contrasting conceptions of the student do not rest easily alongside one another.

Types of Alumni Research

There are broadly three types of alumni research: official national surveys, institutional research aiming for quality improvement, and academic research geared toward exploring the relationship between higher education and the labor market.

Official National Surveys. The annual destinations survey (destinations of leavers from higher education survey) is administered six months after graduation and gathers data about graduates' employment and educational status (whether employed, studying, or unemployed and, if employed, what type of work and type of employer). Institutions are given a target response rate of 80 percent (70 percent for those who studied part-time). The results of the survey are analyzed and published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, and the funding council publishes institutional performance indicators. As this information has increasingly become available to the public and institutions are judged by the employability of their graduates, the value and accuracy of the data have been increasingly scrutinized. It is clearly in the interest of the institution to obtain "good" results, and thus, some corners may be cut. For example, it is known that if graduates report that they are unemployed, they may be resurveyed nearer the deadline to see whether they have gotten a job since the initial survey contact. Employed students will not be followed up to see whether they lost their job, in contrast.

Many observers of the employment market say that the survey is a flawed measure of higher education outcomes because it is undertaken too soon after graduation. After graduation, there is a period of turbulence when students are taking time off, undertaking temporary work, or trying out alternative careers. In addition, many graduates are still enrolled in higher education and undertaking further studies.

Another problem concerns the analysis of outcomes. Having a job provides minimal information; rather, it is important to know what type of job the graduate holds. Is it a permanent or temporary job, and is it a "graduate job" (that is, one normally requiring a degree for entry)? The former is a simple question, but the latter relies on expensive and potentially inaccurate coding procedures. The destinations survey is a short and fairly blunt instrument. Nevertheless, there are plans to supplement the survey with another survey sampling graduates after two years of earning their degree.

An additional national survey, the National Student Survey (NSS), is being introduced in 2005 for administration to full- and part-time undergraduate students in their final semester. Its focus is on the quality of the learning and teaching experience, unlike the destinations survey, which focuses on employment issues. The main purpose of the NSS is "to help inform the decisions of prospective students, and contribute to securing public accountability for the use of public funds by indicating where there are high levels of student satisfaction" (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2003, p. 4). The NSS is an essential element of teaching quality information that is to be published for each institution. The questionnaire draws on the Australian Course Experience Questionnaire (Ramsden, 1991) and invites students to express the extent to which they agree or disagree with a number of statements about various aspects of their course: teaching, assessment and feedback, academic support, course organization and management, learning resources, and personal development. It is not yet clear whether this survey will be administered annually or less frequently.

The NSS has its critics. One of the areas of concern is the possibility of low response rates and whether sufficient questionnaires will be returned to make meaningful comparisons between courses and institutions. Another issue is the level at which the data will be reported since nineteen broad subject areas are proposed. Will these areas be too broad to be helpful to prospective students? A further concern is that media will create league tables, or rankings of institutions, through the use of these data. Another worry is the impact the NSS will have on institutions' own surveys, which are often conducted around the same time.

Institutional Surveys Aiming for Quality Improvement. Surveys of graduates are undertaken by institutions for their own purposes and thus are almost never published. Consequently, only general comments can be made about these surveys. Institutional surveys provide supplementary information to the annual destinations survey over a longer time period. They can also be tailored to suit specific information needs.

In the previously cited study of student feedback (Brennan and others, 2003), institutions were asked whether they collected and used feedback from recent graduates on the quality and standards of their courses. Most institutions responded negatively. Despite the limitations of the annual destinations survey, many institutions found the survey to be sufficient because it enabled them to demonstrate publicly that their students had gained employment. In other words, purposes of accountability were satisfied without measuring the job satisfaction of the graduates. The costs and logistics associated with tracking graduates were other reasons that most institutions did not collect their own graduate feedback.

However, the study did find some institutions that surveyed their graduates, and the reasons for doing so fell into three categories. First, some institutions reported that some departments surveyed their graduates for their own purposes, even though there was no systematic collection of graduate feedback at the institution itself. These departmental surveys provide staff with information to inform future course design and career pathway information for current students. These surveys could also help prospective students with information to inform course choices. Second, some institutions required or encouraged their departments to collect feedback on graduates' views of course quality as part of the institutional processes of internal review. These surveys also provide evidence for external reviews carried out by the national quality assurance body. In the third category of institutions were those that undertook regular centrally administered surveys of their graduates (or of a sample of graduates) either annually or every few years.

Institutions provided a number of reasons for undertaking these surveys: to supplement departmental information about their former students; find out about graduates' views of their learning experiences and the quality of teaching, services, and facilities; and find out how the students' studies had influenced their careers. Graduates' perceptions of the value of their courses in developing personal and workplace skills were also important.

Most of these institutional surveys are conducted as students graduate or immediately after. Fewer institutions conduct longer-term follow-up surveys. For example, one university followed up its undergraduates (and their employers) eighteen months after graduation, and another had recently conducted a longitudinal survey to enhance its knowledge of graduate career progression after five years. The purposes of these surveys were to find out what graduates were doing and to learn how the skills they developed at the university had affected their career development (Brennan and others, 2003).

Relationships Between Higher Education and the Labor Market. Finally, there are surveys carried out by academic researchers who are interested in the functioning of the higher education system, or at least certain sectors of it. In other words, they are not seeking to evaluate a particular institution or to create league tables or rankings. Instead, the focuses of these studies vary. Labor market economists, for example, tend to be concerned with graduate earnings. They want to know whether the public and private returns from higher education justify the investment (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003). They aim to inform higher education policymakers about whether to expand student numbers and, if so, in what areas. However, this information is also taken up by the national press and has the potential to influence individual decisions about choice of study programs and whether to enter higher education.

Other surveys focus on topics such as the differences between subjects or institutional types and their effects on employment by gender, social class, or ethnicity (Brennan and Shah, 2003). These studies differ depending on whether the emphasis is on employment or education. Concerning the former, they may emphasize features of the job search process or objective features of the jobs obtained, such as a person's salary or whether a degree was required. In addition, these surveys may focus on subjective features such as the competencies required of graduates or the match between the job obtained and the course of study completed. Finally, these studies may also be interested in postgraduate education and training experiences. Most of these academic surveys are funded by higher education policy bodies. Consequently, the content of these studies is somewhat shaped by these bodies.

Academic studies of alumni use large-scale representative samples of graduates who have graduated two or more years earlier. However, such surveys tend to achieve relatively low response rates of around 30 percent (see, for example, Belfield and others, 1997; Elias and others, 1999; Brennan and others, 2001). Sample sizes are often too small to permit detailed analyses of subgroups by subject of study, type of institution, or age and social background of the graduate. As a consequence, aggregated data tend to hide the diversity of alumni experiences. Such surveys, however, have been useful in correcting impressions made through early destinations data regarding the existence of serious graduate unemployment or underemployment. These long-term surveys suggest that unemployment of graduates after two or three years is between 2 and 4 percent (Elias and others, 1999; Brennan and others, 2001).

Using Information from Alumni

So how is this information used? Are better decisions made as a result of the information that becomes available by these types of surveys? Different users will require different types of information to be collected. Thus, potential students may be interested in whether graduates from a particular course get good jobs, although they are likely to have different conceptions of what "good job" actually means. This kind of information is also likely to be of interest to funders and, consequently, institutional managers.

Teachers and the designers of courses may be more interested in whether the course proved relevant to students in their subsequent jobs.

The teachers' perspective suggests that questions should be concerned with how the course equips students to "do" a job rather than to "get" one. The two questions are by no means identical, although they are sometimes confused. Also of interest to both intending students and the people who teach and advise them are questions about graduate satisfaction with their experiences. Whatever the uses of alumni data, there are three areas that can cause problems in interpretation: timing, accuracy, and generality versus specificity.

Timing. By the very nature of the way data are collected, they are immediately out of date. Graduates are reporting on higher education experiences that took place several years earlier, and many changes may have been introduced in the intervening period. Similarly, labor market conditions frequently change.

Accuracy of the Data. Unsubstantiated doubts have always surrounded the data collection methods of the annual destinations survey. Response rates seem high to researchers who have carried out comparable studies. It may be that all institutions feel they are under pressure to produce positive results, and thus the findings tend to be optimistic. Long-term follow-up surveys by neutral researchers are unlikely to show such biases. However, the biggest problem is low response rates. Countervailing views suggest either that it is the "happy" graduates who are more likely to reply in order to demonstrate their success in the job market, or it is the less successful students who want to air their complaints. It is thought that these latter graduates are also easier to contact because they have been less geographically mobile. A further problem concerns the collection and coding of jobs. National coding schemes are always out of date and struggling to catch up with the proliferation of new job categories.

Generality versus Specificity. A university may appear to be doing very badly in terms of graduate employability. However, if the problem is to be addressed, the types of results described above are likely to be too general to suggest specific actions. For example, if a university's engineering graduates seem to have problems finding jobs, one would want to know whether this was true across all the engineering disciplines. Constraints in terms of sample size, response rates, and time and expertise in data analysis often prevent anything more than the simplest of analyses, which may be insufficient as a basis for action.

Acting on the Results of Alumni Studies

The underlying position of the current U.K. government is that alumni research and information assists choice (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). This in turn leads to better decision making within institutions and hence a better and more efficient higher education system. The underlying assumptions behind this position seem to be the following: (1) student demand will focus on good courses at successful universities, (2) poor departments or universities will be closed, and (3) successful departments or universities will expand. Hence, the general quality of higher education will have improved.

This perspective, however, assumes that students have the appropriate information with which to make an informed choice. In reality, decision making is inevitably based on less than perfect data and criteria that may be far from the preferred ones of policymakers. For example, Callender (2003) conducted a study of students' attitudes toward debt and the impact on their participation in higher education. The study found that students from low socioeconomic groups based their choice of university on cost, and thus tended to enroll in the university nearest to home.

There is concern in U.K. higher education institutions that the use of alumni and other data to inform consumer choices will distort these data and reduce their value with respect to other uses, particularly within institutions. As the student body becomes increasingly diverse and quality assurance requirements focus more explicitly on learning outcomes, the need for good data on graduates becomes even more important.

Interpreting Diversity

As we have seen, the varied purposes of alumni studies and the different questions asked are not easily combined in single studies. A further issue in interpreting the results of alumni surveys lies in the increasing diversity of the graduates themselves. The model of the young school leaver living away from home but fully supported by parents or the state often provides the basis for questions and analyses of alumni studies. This is an outdated model in U.K. higher education.

For a majority of students in the United Kingdom, university study is now a part-time experience. A significant proportion are also undertaking paid work; many continue to live at home, and many are older and have children. All of these factors influence their learning and achievements as students and their life prospects after graduation.

Is it appropriate therefore to ask the graduate who completed her studies as a part-time student at the age of forty the same kinds of question asked of the graduate who completed his full-time course at the age of twenty-two? This is not just a question of output measures reflecting input factors but, in addition, of the effects of the variety of students' experiences while attending university. The life of the first of the two graduates mentioned above will be a product of a wide and complex set of experiences and achievements over many, many years. The ascription of a "higher education effect" is likely to be much more complex in her case than for her younger counterpart.

The implication of growing diversity is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish higher education effects from the effects of a wide variety of other social and educational factors. Yet it is necessary to do so.

The reality of diversity is particularly relevant to alumni studies. A key question must surely be whether higher education is helping to remove social differences or exacerbate them (Brennan and Shah, 2003). Alumni studies can help provide an answer. They are central to an improved understanding of the benefits, employment and otherwise, enjoyed by higher education graduates. But they can be misleading in identifying the contribution of higher education (its different programs, different institutions) to the achievement of such benefits. The effects of a wide range of other variables and their interaction effects must be taken into account before we can use alumni studies to assess the success of different study programs or institutions. Like everything else about higher education, its outcomes are becoming increasingly diverse. The diversity of outcomes relates to diversities of inputs and processes in complex ways.

Conclusion

Alumni studies are poised to become an increasingly important part of the higher education scene in the United Kingdom. This is partially because of fundraising initiatives that target alumni. A report by a national higher education endowments task force has cast envious eyes at fundraising from alumni in the United States. A May 2004 article in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* declared, "If Britons could be persuaded to follow the example of US donors, universities could raise £400 for each undergraduate or about £600 million annually" (Baty, 2004). The report recommends ways in which universities can improve their techniques for extracting monies from their alumni.

Also raising the profile of graduate surveys are government concerns about employability and the rise of computerized record systems and email that make keeping in touch easier. Another reason relates to institutional interests in marketing postgraduate and other courses in a world of lifelong learning.

What alumni studies are likely to increasingly show is the great diversity of the outcomes of an expanded higher education system. One of the problems in interpreting and using this information is the challenge in determining the proportion of diversity that is the result of higher education factors rather than input factors. The two are correlated but only to some extent. Distinguishing between the two is a central task in determining the relative impact of different courses and institutions. Insofar as input and process factors are not distinguished, many higher education output measures become substantially affected by input characteristics. And as the greater amount of output information in the public domain gets used to construct league tables, or rankings, of the "best" institutions, the results of alumni studies will only contribute to the increasing stratification of U.K. higher education. Thus, higher education becomes better able to play its role of elite reproduction within a mass higher education system when the status of its elite segments is confirmed by the misrecognition of course outcomes as a function of institutional or course quality when they are really largely a function of input characteristics.

The diversity inherent within mass higher education includes a diversity of aspiration and circumstance among its students. Diversities of these kinds are often insufficiently understood by higher education's teachers and managers. Alumni studies can reveal a lot about whether aspirations are achieved and the factors that have affected their achievement. And aspirations are not necessarily only about employment. Perhaps no one has a better appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of a course of study than a recent graduate from it. Higher education has much to learn from its alumni. Whether the kinds of standardized surveys that are currently being introduced will enable them to do so is another matter.

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