

This house believes that student surveys
give us the wrong information

Nicholas Barr
London School of Economics
<http://econ.lse.ac.uk/staff/nb>

LSE Teaching Day

22 May 2012



This house believes that student surveys
give us the wrong information

- 1 Objectives
- 2 Lessons from economic theory
- 3 Quality assurance

For more, see

http://econ.lse.ac.uk/staff/nb/Barr_HEReview100215.pdf

1 Objectives

- Objectives
 - Quality
 - Access
 - Size
- All three are necessary not only for their own sake but because the world has changed; higher education is now an essential element in national economic performance and individual life chances

2 Lessons from economic theory

- Lessons rooted largely in the economics of information, i.e. the arguments are more technical than ideological
- What are the value judgements?
 - Higher education has intrinsic value
 - Economic performance matters
 - Access matters – not just posturing

Lesson 1: Graduates (not students) should share in the costs of their degree

- Social benefits; but also private benefits
- But students are credit constrained, hence:

Lesson 2: Well-designed student loans have core characteristics

- Income-contingent repayments
- Large enough to cover fees and realistic living costs
- The right interest rate

Lesson 3: Competition between universities benefits students

- Does competition work? Yes when consumers are well informed
- Are students well informed?
 - Students mostly a savvy, streetwise bunch
 - Much information is available and more can and should be made available
- Good information is a central source of quality assurance – more below
- LSE 1980+

Lesson 4: Government has an important continuing role

- To provide taxpayer support
- To ensure that there is a good loan scheme
- To promote policies to widen participation
- To redistribute within higher education
- To regulate the system
 - The fees cap
 - **Ensuring that there is effective quality assurance**

3 Quality assurance

- Why does quality assurance matter?
 - To protect the interests of students
 - To protect the interests of the economy

The wrong way: LSE October 1999



The right way

- When people are well-informed they do their own quality assurance (you don't go back to a restaurant where you've had a crummy meal)
- So the best quality assurance is to give people the information they need to make their own choices
- Questions a bright 16-year-old will ask
 - Will it be fun?
 - Will I be well taught?
 - Will I get a good job?
- These are good questions
- An important part of quality assurance is mandatory publication of information that answers them

Answering the questions

- Will it be fun?
 - There are already plenty of good university guides
 - Survey of student experience
- Will I be well taught? Require universities to put on their external web sites things like
 - Teaching evaluations (NUS needs to talk to UCU)
 - Answers to questions about
 - Contact hours
 - Class size
 - Classes taught by faculty or graduate students
 - Number of pieces of written work
 - Completion rates, etc.
- Will I get a good job? Data on what happens to the institution's graduates
- All those data need to have common definitions, and to be audited

Bottom line

- Are student surveys perfect? Of course not
- Are they necessary and desirable? Yes
- The right sort of surveys – notwithstanding their imperfections – are a core element in a good strategy for higher education finance