STUDENT AND STAFF PERCEPTIONS AND "THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE" IN BRITISH HIGHER EDUCATION*

K. A. PERCY and F. W. SALTER

Department of Educational Research, University of Lancaster, U.K.

ABSTRACT

This article, using a variety of data from the Rowntree Research Project at the University of Lancaster, attempts to reconstruct student and staff perceptions of the teaching/learning reality of higher education, and in particular their perceptions of excellence. Ambiguities and confusions are noted in staff perceptions of excellence and important differences between staff and students in their perception of teaching/learning realities.

It concludes by discussing implications for staff/student communication and for the admission of students to higher education.

One banner to which all academics will rally is that of the "pursuit of excellence," and one contemporary problem to which many of them will point is whether current expansion of student numbers will damage that excellence. Legitimate desires for greater equality of access to higher education, some may think, are precipitate if the excellence inherent in higher education is destroyed. But excellence in what? Excellence in "scholarship" alone or excellence over a wider range of activities? Are we sure that higher education, which now in Great Britain is given in a heterogeneous group of universities, polytechnics and colleges, is uniformly concerned with the "pursuit" of the same kind of excellence? And do we really know if excellence (however defined) can be "pursued", can be developed by the processes of higher education?

This article explores the views on some of these questions of two major sets of participants in higher education: academic staff responsible for teaching undergraduate students in universities and polytechnics and the

* This article is a shortened and partly rewritten version of a paper of the same title delivered at the Third International Conference on Higher Education, University of Lancaster, September 1975.
undergraduate students themselves. What we attempt to do is to view the
issues from the point of view of students and staff, given the limitations of
the data which we have available. Is a concept of “excellence” in the
forefront of their minds as a means of ordering, or making sense of higher
education processes? And excellence in what? Do they think about excel-
lence in scholarship, or in intellectual achievement, and, if so, what do they
mean? Do students and staff perceive the situation in the same way?

The Rowntree Data

All the data to which we refer in this paper have been gathered as part
of the research project into British higher education sponsored in the
University of Lancaster by the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust between
1968 and 1973, and directed by Professor N. J. Entwistle. The several
approaches incorporated into this research and some of the findings have
been described in various other places. (See references under Entwistle and
under Percy). Put simply, the project falls into two phases. One is a
follow-up study of 2,695 students in universities, polytechnics and colleges
of education during their three or four years of higher education and seeks
to identify the characteristics of student success in different areas of study.
The other is an examination of the general aims and particular objectives of
staff and students, by empirical enquiry and by philosophical, historical and
sociological analysis.

The project has now ended and the final views and conclusions of the
researchers are being written up for publication in book form. What we out-
tline here is, we think, informed by ideas and impressions which have emerged
from both parts of the project, but in particular we refer to three separate
enquiries which have been conducted within the aims and objectives study
(two of which have not been discussed in published papers before). They
are:

(a) 80 semi-structured interviews with lecturers in universities, polytechnics
and colleges of education about their views on aims and objectives and
on the practical realities of teaching in higher education (Entwistle and
Percy, 1971: 1974; Percy, 1972: 1973); we only use them here to make
a number of general points.

(b) A study of two specialist music colleges which provide courses at
different levels (including degree-equivalent) for students intending to
become professional musicians and teachers of music.

(c) 300 open-ended questionnaires, comments, essays and letters sent to us
by staff and students from both universities and polytechnics.