



**Higher Education in the UK and the USA since Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan:
Converging Models?**

<http://www.univ-paris3.fr/conf-higher-ed>

Friday 23 March 2012

Maison de la recherche de la Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3, 4, rue des Irlandais, 75005 Paris, France

Marie-Agnès DÉTOURBE, PhD, Post-doctoral Teaching Fellow (*Prag*) in British Studies,
Université Paul Sabatier Toulouse 3, France
marie-agnes.detourbe@univ-tlse3.fr

The Quality of the Student's Learning Experience:

A strategic dimension of American and British higher education systems in the early 21st century

Abstract:

This paper examines the strategic role that the quality of the student's learning experience has come to play in the American and in the British higher education sectors via national student surveys. Starting with a general analysis of the different approaches of quality assurance issues in the two countries (Rhoades & Sporn 2002), the paper considers the increasing weight given to the student voice through the institutional assessment of student satisfaction and of student engagement in the early 21st century, with the National Student Survey (NSS) in the United Kingdom and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the USA. The rationale, theoretical foundations and contents of each survey are studied in turn and a brief syntactic and lexical comparison is drawn (Higher Education Academy 2007; Kuh 2001; Détourbe 2011). The strategic part played by the student voice is then analysed against quality assurance principles on the one hand and educational principles on the other. Thus, in the US, the focus on student engagement appears as a reaction by educators to long-standing productivity-oriented quality assurance mechanisms whereas in the UK, state-driven quality assurance mechanisms put student satisfaction at the heart of a system in which reputation indicators are paramount. Interestingly though, some British universities are considering assessing student engagement too, raising new questions about the meaning of student surveys amongst already heated debates about the role and purpose of higher education in the UK (Collini 2011, 2012; Thomas 2011; Vernon 2011).