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Student Perceptions of Outstanding Teaching (0150)

Context

This research developed out of the HEA Evidence Informed Quality Improvement Programme (EQUIP) funding stream. It explores similar themes to previous research – (Clarke and Watson SRHE 2009), (Dobbins Clarke Merton and Watson SRHE 2010): What makes excellent teaching in the current context of a more diverse student population and decreased resources? Themes include curriculum and employability; transitions in, through and out of university; assessment and feedback; support for learners. Each project has differed in its method of data collection. The first project relied on secondary sources from both students and teaching award winners. The second analysed the responses of one to one interviews with 21 lecturers. This third project utilised both an on-line questionnaire and student focus groups.

Methods

An online questionnaire based on the areas covered in the previous research was made available to all students through the university's student portal and actively championed by the institutions Student Union. Some 284 students responded to the online survey and the analysis of these responses helped to refine the questions that were put to students in the focus groups.

The first attempt at facilitating focus groups through Student Union channels was unsuccessful. A second attempt to organise focus groups was made by asking interviewees from the OLETDC project to encourage their students to take part. These students, drawn from across all faculties, included the breadth of their learning experiences in their contributions to focus group discussions.

Findings

The majority of respondents to the online questionnaire were 18-25 white UK undergraduates with no declared disability. Just under 50 **%** were first years and representation was spread fairly across the faculties. Key findings are that the majority of students found: lectures and tutorials as the best ways of being helped to learn; the use of technologies helpful in their studies and welcome the wider use of Web2.0 to enhance their learning; the variety and volume of assessment is appropriate and value feedback they receive as it helps them to improve; a more explicit link between their studies and the world of work would be beneficial.

Focus group responses emphasise earlier findings that students value teachers who connect with their experience, understand the challenges they face and appreciate the goals to which they aspire. They admire teachers who have a passion for their subject and can convey that powerfully; and who inspire them to become independent learners with the requisite knowledge and skills. This has implications for all teaching staff, in particular new lecturers who may start their careers with a limited conception of their role as purveyors of knowledge and skills. It takes time for teachers to develop the confidence to interpret the

role more widely and recognise that an important aspect of the job is to inspire students who want to learn how to learn.

Participating students believe that technology-enhanced learning fosters independent learning which was seen by the lecturers previously interviewed as one of the three pillars of outstanding teaching. It supplements but does not replace direct contact between teacher and taught which is still valued highly by students who recognise that the best teaching is essentially a social experience, dependent on strong and mutually respectful relationships between those who teach and those who learn.

Participants consider that some teachers struggle to manage large groups as productive learning events, in particular by failing to challenge students who under-perform and can distract other students from being fully engaged. They think that some teachers could do more to convert the large group into opportunities for collaborative learning. They also think that some teachers should be more attentive in particular to those targeted through widening participation initiatives, who themselves are struggling with the demands of higher education.

In preparing students for the increasingly connected and globalised world of work it an international dimension is valued by students when incorporated in teaching programmes. In other ways students tend to regard the curriculum as being highly relevant to the occupational and professional sectors they are seeking to enter.

Participants consider transitions to be generally well provided for by the university. Most of them find entry to university a huge step change from their previous education and value the peer support offered through student mentors and buddy schemes and the development of learning communities (see Dobbins et al 2010).

Students have different expectations and experience of assessment with regard to the loading and timing of assignments, the frequency, quality and timeliness of feedback, and the variance in the standards applied by teachers. While not expecting approaches to assessment and feedback to be uniform, students believe it is important that they should be as transparent as possible.

Overall, these students believe that the levels of support for their learning within this HEI are good. They recognise that resources for teaching are being squeezed and are realistic that the amount of time available for direct access to teaching staff for learner support is bound to remain limited. It is therefore fitting to develop more opportunities for peer support and thereby broaden and deepen the role of the student within the university.

Conclusions

The first project gives a framework for excellence (subject, pedagogy student) and a model of intellectual, emotional and creative engagement between teacher and discipline; teacher and student and discipline and student. The second project provides rich data on the significance of learning environment, learning community

and learner autonomy to outstanding teaching and exceptional learning. This third project demonstrates what students particularly value, but also how academics might learn from each other in times of decreasing resources to provide an outstanding learning experience for students.   Together this data could form a powerful agenda for reflection and, where appropriate, change at an institutional, faculty and individual level whilst acknowledging Harvey's (2003) concerns that students appraisal of teacher performance might not be 'improvement oriented' .

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References

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