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Nothing succeeds like success: supporting high achievers in HE after enrolment (0535)

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Introduction

As an example of excellence coupled with inclusivity a focus on high achieving students may appear counter-intuitive at first glance. Historically, high achieving students have often been regarded as a safe bet, one which requires little intervention as though their outcomes are somehow assured. Our view in contrast is that high achieving students are entitled to and will benefit from being stretched still further. As a result, we established the High Achievers Recognition Scheme (HARS) in the Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences at BCU in 2015. High Achievers are offered access to enhancement opportunities in addition to their regular studies. The students play an active part in shaping their route through the Scheme; once identified they complete a behavioural analytics profile and are interviewed by a HARS consultant to prioritise their goals for the year ahead. The opportunities offered fall into 4 Tracks: advanced academic skills; community engagement; leadership development; and international mobility. BCU is a widening participation institution and we were determined to avoid the trap of reinforcing historical/social educational advantages. In addition to those students with end-of-year average grades of 68% and above, any student entering BCU with less than the expected points but who is able to achieve an end-of-year average grade in the 2:1 category is also invited to join on a 'distance travelled' basis.

Methodology

This paper shares findings from a small-scale qualitative evaluation of student perceptions of the HARS. This involved semi-structured interviews (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011) with seven students from varied disciplines and levels of study across the Faculty, and who had varied levels of engagement with the HARS activities. The evaluation was informed by an appreciative approach (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003) intended to enable the students to reflect on their experiences in a supportive environment, as well as contribute to the development of the scheme. Interviews were recorded, transcribed then coded and analysed to draw out themes across the data set. The evaluation aimed to discover student perceptions of:

- the HARS in the context of their wider academic achievement and professional development.

- factors that enabled and hindered their engagement with the HARS.

- potential benefits and impacts of engaging with the HARS.

- how the HARS could be further developed/improved.

Discussion

Multiple threads and connections emerged from the evaluation findings. In this paper we focus on those which relate to the perceived impacts and enablers identified, and how these link to wider issues of supporting student engagement and community, employability, and inclusive practice.

Employability

The findings relating to participants motivations for and the perceived benefits of engaging with the scheme included a focus on student employability, relating to potential career benefits and the development of professional skills and identity. Research by Jackson argued for the re-defining of graduate employability by embracing the notion of "pre-professional identity (PPI) formation", and explored the concept of such formation occurring when students are given the opportunity to connect with skills, qualities, conduct, culture and ideology of an intended profession. Through enabling students to be active HARS members in existing communities of practice, students seek to develop their PPI alongside the "landscape of practice" which exists in HE. Indeed, the inclusion of HARS activity in the University-wide employability weeks, demonstrates just how significant the impact of the scheme has been in fostering a commitment amongst the students towards highly refined skills sets, which position them competitively in the Graduate market place and beyond. Student respondents made clear the value they placed on HARS in relation to employability; raised academic goals; positive attitudes towards their self-efficacy; and growth mindsets.

Student engagement and community

In reflecting on the perceived impacts and benefits described by respondents we draw on scholarship relating to student engagement, for example: Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) description of the cognitive, emotional and behaviour dimensions of engagement and Thomas's (2012) work suggesting the importance of a sense of belonging to student success, retention and engagement. Our respondents described the social factors as enabling their engagement with the HARS, often focusing on supportive relationships with staff. Some identified building community amongst students as a potential area of development for the scheme. The HARScontinues to grow and develop as a result of established success and vision, alongside a confident student voice. The Scheme has a cemented its Tier 1 offer working with undergraduate students. Furthermore, the Scheme will be developing a Tier 0 offer working with college students and FE provision to draw down those students in an outreach capacity to choose BCU as their degree provider, on the strength of the opportunity we can offer eligible students whilst they are studying. Working in this way enables a significant ability to raise aspirations amongst college level students, a quality which is desirable going forward into HE and graduate employment. The Scheme is also already building its Tier 4 offer, which fosters strong partnerships with HARS Alumni. This enables the offer of current, practice-led initiatives, and to work in strong partnerships with local employers to secure the most rounded applicants into professions.

Conclusions

The findings from the evaluation indicate that student respondents held broad definitions of high achievement, which sometimes extended beyond the parameters of the HARS. They valued their participation in the Scheme; for the recognition it provided of the past achievements and for the contribution to their continued development. They perceived there to be personal and professional benefits from participation, and gave constructive suggestions for how it could be improved and some of the barriers to engagement addressed. Interestingly, although the students selected for the Scheme were already achieving well, not all of our respondents had previously thought of themselves as high achievers. Even the act of invitation onto the scheme had an impact on these

students, their sense of pride in their achievements and identity. We feel this underlines the importance of proactive and inclusive approaches to supporting high achievement.

This evaluative research received ethical approval from BCU's HELS Faculty Ethics Committee.

References

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