Time to Shine: Improving the Student Experience in the Institute of Education Students as Academic Partners Project Report

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Abstract

This research examines the student experience within the Institute of Education (IoE), with the aim of strengthening the student experience across all IoE provision. Although the University of Worcester seeks to offer an outstanding educational experience to students, there is no specific published IoE vision for Learning, Teaching and Student Experience. Working jointly with IoE staff, two students from different IoE disciplines and levels conducted focus groups with students and Student Academic Representatives (StARs) from a range of fields and levels within IoE to establish existing strengths, and areas for improvement. Reflecting the Worcester Charter for Students segmentation of the student experience, this research focused on four areas; management and organisation, support for students, culture or staff interactions and teaching. Through utilising a constructive positive approach qualitative data has been gathered, which initially highlights consistency, communication, timetabling, varied pedagogies, and relevance as areas for strengthening the student experience. Thus, in attempting to research the student experience within the IoE, a shared strategy has been developed, which could enhance learning and teaching at the University of Worcester.

Introduction

The purpose of Students as Academic Partners (SAPs) is to integrate students into the teaching and learning communities of departments, developing collaboration between students and staff while promoting ownership and pride in the institution. Although the University of Worcester seeks to offer an outstanding educational experience, there was no specific published Institution of Education (IoE) vision for Learning, Teaching and Student Experience. Therefore, this SAPs research project examined the student experience within the IoE, with the aim of strengthening the student experience across all IoE provision.

Methodology

To achieve the above aim, the research attempted to identify the existing strengths and areas for improvement within the IoE with the aim of recommending actions for academic staff through consultation with students in order to strengthen the student experience. Although the student experience can be deemed to go beyond teaching and learning, definitions vary (Higher Education Funding Council, 2011). Consequently, for clarity, this research used the Worcester Charter for Students in defining the student experience, which emphasised four main areas of focus; management and organisation, support for students, culture or staff interactions, and teaching.

Research into the student experience was considered imperative as it not only influences learners' choices of university (Attwood, 2011), but is linked to degree completion and grade achievement (2003 BC College & Institute Student Outcomes, 2004); positive qualities that have been found to apply regardless of student, course and university attributes (2003 BC College & Institute Student Outcomes, 2004). Highlighting the need for an institution-based study, a national survey revealed that the student experience often varied according to the subject, with education falling significantly below average (Attwood, 2011). However, as institutions and their students have different student experience perceptions (The Higher Education Academy, 2013), establishment of a joint vision for the IoE was vital in fostering the positive attributes student experience can provide.

In order to gather qualitative data that is based on students' experiences and ascertain the IoE students' perceptions of student experience, existing strengths and areas for improvement, five focus groups were conducted with students and Student Academic Representatives (StARs) from a range of fields and levels within the IoE. Focus groups can be flexible and provide rich data, while encouraging participation with the research and are time-limited, benefitting busy students (Bloor et al., 2001; Matthews & Ross, 2010). The groups were formed of pre-existing classes of students and the research took place within the university, allowing good group dynamics and participant empowerment, through the participants' familiarity with each other and the environment (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

As lecturers acted as gatekeepers to potential participants, random purposive voluntary sampling was used in order to obtain a group of participants with the required attributes, knowledge and experiences (Denscombe, 2010; Thomas, 2009). All students in a class were invited to contribute to the research, but some students chose not to participate. Although purposive sampling cannot produce generalizable results, a purposive sample was necessary to acquire specific knowledge (Cohen et al., 2007) of the student experience in

the IoE. However, as purposive sampling can imitate representative sampling by including wide cross-sections of people (Denscombe, 2010), this sampling method can be deemed to generate generalizable results. Forty-seven students opted to participate in the research, and this sample was generally representative of the wider IoE population, although part-time students were underrepresented, with only one part-time participant. Participants were recruited from a variety of courses, with the majority being enrolled on a Primary Initial Teacher Education course. Although male students and mature students over 25 were underrepresented, the gender and age ratio of participants was representative of IoE students.

In order to identify themes within the raw data, the constant comparative method was used, which involves repeatedly examining and comparing the data (Thomas, 2009). Themes were recognised when factors contributed to the motivation of at least three participants in each group. These were subsequently coded, tabulated and summarised to generate our main findings (Figure 1), allowing correlations to be detected and producing an informative summarising interpretation (Hand et al., 2001).

Factors to be improved	Frequency of factors raised
Communication	4
Relevance	4
Consistency	3
Timetabling	2
Stimulating lectures	2
Feedback	2
Individual support (placements, assignments, hardships)	2

Existing strengths	Frequency of factors raised
Relationships with staff	3
Communication	2
Individual support	2

Discussions	2

Figure 1: Themes identified from focus groups

Although some contradictory data arose, reflecting the diversity of participants and student expectations, evidence-based conclusions could be drawn under each area of focus taken from the Worcester Charter for Students.

Findings and Recommendations

Management and organisation

StARs usually only meet during course meetings; however, StAR clinics are a dedicated meeting for all of the StARs on a course with a specific member of staff to chair the meeting and feedback to other staff. Although only one StAR clinic is currently running within the IoE, it is greatly appreciated by its participants and is considered to be an important element of improving the student experience.

Recommended action: StAR clinics with designated StAR staff to mediate and feedback.

Support for students

Although individual support through tutorials and personal communications throughout IoE was considered good, more support appears necessary in understanding the relationship between lecture-content and assignment tasks.

Recommended action: Institute-specific study skills workshops on how to maximise the value of lectures and seminars, and the different expectations of university-based learning compared to previous educational experience, with anonymous feedback provided to lecturers.

Culture / Staff interactions

Participants most frequently cited their relationships with staff as a positive aspect, yet communication and consistency of communication was most frequently raised as a factor to improve. It was also apparent that many student questions could be answered by their peers or students at higher levels and that students and lecturers should be aware of each other's individual pressures, constraints and expectations.

Recommended actions: Mandatory lectures to impart the communication expectations of both staff and students, and on-going online course-based inter-level general discussion, with guest access for optional cross-departmental modules, with anonymous feedback

provided to staff by designated independent moderators, such as administrators or students from another Institute.

Teaching

Although many participants reported that good discussions take place during taught sessions, the relevance of teaching material and lectures with regard to their assignments, course and career goals was identified as an area that requires improvement.

Recommended action: Optional feedback forms to be completed by students regularly throughout each module to anonymously comment on the relevance of the module.

These recommendations have been developed to support the creation of a shared strategy to enhance student experience at the University of Worcester. This research has been used to inform the IoE's Strategy for Learning, Teaching and Student Experience 2013-2018.

Conclusion

Regarding our personal experience of SAP, we felt that it built on our undergraduate experience and furthered our knowledge of the research process. We found working in partnership with staff, on a project that was personally relevant, rewarding and enjoyable, while the leading and active roles gave us ownership of our work. Furthermore, the project supported our links within the institution and wider university. In conclusion, we would recommend SAPs to other staff and students, as we believe that these multi-level projects can provide greater benefits than individualised research.

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Biographies

Christine Aveyard is a mature student who completed her undergraduate degree in Education Studies at the University of Worcester in 2013. She is currently studying for a Primary PGCE at the University of Worcester and hopes to gain employment as a primary school teacher in the future.

Kay Bushnell completed her undergraduate degree in Education Studies with English Language at the University of Worcester in 2012. She is currently undertaking the MA Education at the University of Worcester, and the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector at the University of Warwick, and teaches literacy to adults with learning difficulties.