



Building Resilient Learning Communities: Using Evidence to Support Student Success

#ETConf20



Student experience enhancement led by staff and student committee/research group

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Abstract

This paper presents a means for implementing research-informed practical applications to benefit the student experience in an institutional setting.

It highlights an approach that uses a university committee, with representation drawn from staff (both academic and professional services) and students, as a research group. The committee/research group takes a data-driven approach to identifying areas for focus: a variety of available institutional data (internal and external) are collated, analysed, and conclusions drawn each year, to prioritise and drive enhancements for the student experience in the forthcoming year(s).

In the context, nationally, of the Teaching Excellence Framework, and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic, and internally of a University Strategy and an associated set of Hallmarks of the Portsmouth Graduate, the paper discusses the progress made so far in implementing this new approach to delivering an excellent student experience. It explores the advantages, and disadvantages, of a data-driven, research-informed approach to implementing practical applications to enhance the student experience, and presents some lessons learned.

Introduction and Context

In 2014 the University of Portsmouth began the work of co-creating, with the whole University community (staff and students), the University Strategy, the Education Strategy, and a set of 'Hallmarks of the Portsmouth Graduate'¹ (a set of graduate attributes). The importance of community was highlighted in our Education Strategy 2016-2020, which committed us to '*providing a vibrant, supportive, collegial learning community of staff and students*'. Within these documents the student voice and students are at the heart of what we do.

In the Education Strategy, we committed to:

- Empower **students as partners** in a community of learning where staff, students, practising professionals and employers can **work together** to learn, create, research and solve problems.
- Promote, develop and foster a **culture of co-creation and partnership**, and extend the opportunities for students to engage in peer and inter-cohort training and mentoring programmes.

¹ <https://www.port.ac.uk/about-us/structure-and-governance/our-people/student-charter-and-graduate-hallmarks>

- Encourage **feedback** from our students and **act upon it**.
- Engage with our students, including through **working in partnership with the Students' Union**, to ensure that their **voice is heard** in discussions and decisions that impact on their education or the wider student experience.

As an institution, we are proud of our partnership work with students. The National Union of Students (NUS) provides the following definition of partnerships as: "...*investing students with the power to co-create, not just knowledge or learning, but the higher education institution itself*" (NUS, 2012, p.8).

Within the University there are a number of mechanisms which allow the student voice to be heard and acted upon, and this is done in partnership. We will return to this later in the paper.

Committee/Research Group

The Student Experience Committee (SEC) reports to University Education and Student Experience Committee. SEC is chaired by the Dean of Learning and Teaching, and its membership includes Associate Deans (Students) from each Faculty; a Head of School representative; representatives from each student-facing Professional Service; and most importantly Sabbatical Officers and staff from the University of Portsmouth's Students' Union (UPSU).

Notably, with reference to this paper, SEC has responsibility to:

- Review and evaluate the quality of the student experience, utilising national benchmarks such as the National Student Survey (NSS), and internal tools such as our module and course questionnaires.
- Review the activities of the various contributors to central student support and advice services to promote the alignment of purpose and coordination of activities throughout the student lifecycle.
- Consider and advise on approaches to enhance student support.

SEC is also concerned with the University's *Student Voice Policy – Valuing Students' Views and Opinions*². Our partnership with students, as set out in the Education Strategy and embodied in our co-created Student Charter³, means that we work with our students both to hear and value their views and opinions about their studies and the wider student experience, and how to respond to them.

'There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that 'listens' to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes. The concept of 'listening to the student voice' – implicitly if not deliberately – supports the perspective of student as 'consumer', whereas 'students as change agents' explicitly supports a view of the student as 'active collaborator' and 'co-producer', with the potential for transformation.' (Dunne in Foreword to Dunne and Zandstra 2011, p.4)

What Portsmouth sets out to do as an institution is to go beyond listening and responding to the student voice, we actively champion the role of students as 'active collaborators'.

² <http://policies.docstore.port.ac.uk/policy-069.pdf>

³ <https://www.port.ac.uk/about-us/structure-and-governance/our-people/student-charter-and-graduate-hallmarks>

Furthermore, in the SEC, the academic and professional services staff are also required to be active collaborators - as the committee takes a research-informed approach to its decision-making about the best ways to deliver an excellent student experience, based on sound evidence provided by the institutional data.

As Chair of SEC, the Dean of Learning and Teaching, has developed the committee as a research group for Student Experience. The purpose is to take a research-informed approach and use the committee/research group as a means for implementing research-informed, practical applications to benefit the student experience in an institutional setting.

What is meant by a research group? SEC is asked to focus on a research question: How can we measure and plan for enhancing the student experience for both current and future students? It is then asked to do this by interrogating our data in order to understand causes rather than correlations. This is achieved by application of the scientific method: Observation – Reason – Experiment; or in our case: Observation – Reason – Intervention. Then evaluating the outcomes, and returning to the first stage – Observation.

At the beginning of each academic year, all the members of the SEC in their Faculty, Service or in UPSU gather all information (quantitative and qualitative) available to them at that point. This has included, for example, internal survey data (course and module questionnaires, evaluation surveys, Students' Union Quality Report), and national survey data (International Student Barometer (ISB), NSS, UK Engagement Survey (UKES), Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE)), along with qualitative feedback from a range of mechanisms in Faculties and UPSU and the University as a whole. SEC draws common themes from the variety of sources, where the sum is greater than the individual parts. SEC then tries to identify the 'unknown unknowns', to use the phrase coined by Donald Rumsfeld.

Having collated, interrogated and discussed the data, SEC uses it to decide where to focus effort in the coming academic year. The Observation and Reason elements of the process have to be rigorous and meticulous, as any Intervention could be costly, e.g., SEC has to ensure it undertakes a cost-benefit analysis as part of the process.

Student Voice

The student voice is key to this approach. It is even more important during the delivery of our 'blended and connected' teaching and learning and student-facing services in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In all of this we are keeping in mind:

'Good teaching is inextricably intertwined with good curriculum design, which is about planning and aligning what to teach, how to teach and how to assess so that students experience coherent learning.' (Hunt and Chalmers, 2012)

'Pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all' (Hockings, 2010)

We implemented our new Student Voice Policy in September 2019. It states clearly our commitment to working in partnership with our students in order to enhance all aspects of the student experience. We work with our students both to hear and value their views and opinions about their studies and the wider student experience, and how to respond to them. We do this through student participation in committees, through surveys and other forms of student feedback, and through activities led by the Students' Union. Furthermore, we create a culture and environment that promotes student engagement and offers all students an opportunity to be involved as partners in our quality system.

Student Surveys

We amended our Curriculum Framework and implemented new courses in September 2019 with new course and module evaluations. It has been important to look at the survey data to prepare for the 2020/21 academic year. At the same time our Students' Union has carried out surveys with our students of their current experience. This has fed into our Learning and Teaching Workstream which has driven the work to develop a 'blended and connected' approach to teaching, learning and assessment for 2020/21.

We also have other feedback mechanisms, for example we created virtual student panels as part of the Workstream. The Dean of Learning and Teaching also runs a drop-in session with students called *Haver with Harriet* which will run virtually in 2020/21.

Student Representation

This aspect of Portsmouth's provision has been jointly reviewed over a number of years, with a role description and expectations clearly set out in the Student Voice Policy. Course Representatives are central to the Student Voice Policy, however we are electing, training and supporting them in a blended delivery model in 2020/21. They use an online system to gather feedback from students on their courses, and Student Voice Committees will be conducted virtually; so once they are elected and trained they will play the key role they always have in providing feedback.

Student Participation in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

We are proud of our partnership with our students, and we involve them as partners, notably in the SEC run as a research group, as described in this paper.

UPSU have been involved in all of the work to prepare for the 2020/21 academic year. They were members of the Planning Group and Workstreams and Workstrands.

They are already on committees, e.g. Quality Assurance Committee. Students are involved in developments, for example Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment (TESTA)⁴. TESTA was a joint HEA-funded National Teaching Fellowship Project. It developed an approach since used with circa 100 programmes in over 40 UK universities. It maps programme-level data to provide a rich picture of assessment - the quantity, formative and summative balance, variety, distribution and its impact on student effort, feedback practices, the clarity of goals and standards, and the relationship between these factors and students' overall perception of their studies. Using the baseline data, programme teams can address specific programme-level assessment issues. We used TESTA at Portsmouth when revising our curricula to align with our new Curriculum Framework.

Assessment & Feedback

Chosen by SEC as an individual area for focus with the best chance of achieving a significant effect, one key area of focus of the committee/research group has been assessment and feedback. Over the 2014-2017 period, much of the data gathered, was predominantly about the way students were assessed. Since 2018 the focus has been more on feedback, as initiatives to address issues with assessment have been implemented.

Assessment

⁴ www.testa.ac.uk

The following comments, contained in the Students' Union Quality Report (2016), on the volume and timing of assessment, were incorporated in the project to revise the University's Curriculum Framework, which was undertaken in 2018/19:

'84% of students are satisfied with the volume, timing, and nature of their assessments. They told us that they have lots of preparation time, that deadlines can be negotiated, and that lecturers can adapt assessments to suit their needs. However, even more students highlighted that there are recurring issues in deadline bunching, both in terms of multiple deadlines being set at the same time, often the same day, and little time to complete assignments after finishing a topic or receiving feedback, both of which have resulted in difficulties in managing workloads.'

Student comments on assessment, such as these excerpts, were considered in a wide and extended consultation exercise (via open consultation events, student surveys, and consultation in Faculties) on the proposed new academic year structure and new Curriculum Framework.

'Some units I feel have a perfect workload i.e. ones which include two 2000 essays/reports which are due in at the end of first term and end of second term. However there are other units which have two hours worth of lectures per week plus two hour practical which have assignments due every 3/4 weeks.'

'Not having all the assessments due in on the same date.'

'All the exams are close to each other at the end of the year.'

'I like when the units have a clear assessment guidance.'

'I think have summative examinations at the end of the academic year in May-June work[s] well. Could possibly introduce a more formative exam period in January.'

Following an extensive consultation exercise, we adopted a differentiated academic year structure and a new 'Curriculum Framework Specification' for Curriculum 2019⁵.

As part of the work revising the Curriculum Framework we developed an *Assessment for Learning Policy* requiring course teams to take a different approach to assessment. The new academic year structure came in for the 2018-19 academic year, the courses designed with the new Curriculum Framework and Assessment for Learning Policy started to be taught from September 2019. It is too early to see many results in any quantitative data, further compounded by the feedback gathered in course and module surveys not being a true reflection of the teaching and assessment of the revised courses, but rather of the online teaching and assessment undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic. However we have an initial indication in the following feedback from open comments in the 2019 NSS, or via *Haver with Harriet* sessions that the work has enhanced the student experience:

'So many times our assessments clumped up together. Lately efforts have been made to remedy this, which has been good for the most part.' (NSS)

'Assessment guidelines are clearly laid out and sufficient support is available for any queries. Group coursework involves a choice of team members. Structure of units is well thought out, with a clear progression in the topics taught throughout the year.' (NSS)

⁵ <http://policies.docstore.port.ac.uk/policy-217.pdf>

Like the change to the academic year – easier to follow and assessment is better.
(Haver)

Prefer the new layout for modules and assessment by Teaching Blocks. (Haver)

*Like the modules being in different Teaching Blocks for breaking up assessment;
used the Consolidation Week for dissertation writing.* (Haver)

An outcome of the committee/research group discussion in 2019/20 was an assessment criteria working group which has developed recommendations which are now being considered through the university's committee approval process for implementation.

Feedback

As Bartlett highlights: *“student engagement with feedback remains a key concern in the higher education sector, with student ratings in National Student Surveys consistently demonstrating that students are dissatisfied with their feedback (HEFCE, 2014).”* (Bartlett in AdvanceHE 2020, p.21). SEC noted that we had more to do in this area as exemplified by these NSS 2019 comments:

‘The feedback on some of the coursework has been a bit generic and could be more useful to show what I need to do to improve my mark for next time.’

‘Have had bad experiences with lack of feedback and late feedback which has affected later work.’

‘Not enough constructive criticism to improve on further assessments.’

SEC recommended work be undertaken with administrative colleagues to help improve mechanisms that would aid timeliness of feedback thereby addressing how feedback would help improve future work. This work is underway, along with a pilot of a new feedback tool which enabled qualitatively different feedback to be provided to students, which was proving very successful, but has had to be paused during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lessons Learnt

In order to have as much time as possible to implement changes the committee/research group has to look at the data available very early in the academic year. This means taking a snapshot approach, and working with data that may be nearly a year out-of-date if it is available just after the date of the meeting (for example induction survey data). It is also true that implementing change often takes longer than an academic year to come into effect, so evaluating the success of initiatives is more difficult.

The committee/research group has a very wide membership. On one hand this is good, as it means that many voices, and sources of data, are brought into the mix. A good number are academics, and so one needs to ensure that the other members' voices are also heard and that they do not feel that the task asked of them is too alien. In the second year of operation a template was provided to guide the process more tightly in terms of collating themes in the data and interrogating it for areas of institutional focus. It is also key to empower the student voice in the room, not least because this is the first committee meeting of the year for the Sabbatical Officers. The presence of UPSU staff, which do not change year on year, has helped with this aspect.

It will come as no surprise that the survey data may say one thing, but interviewed students may say the opposite. A mixed-methods approach is therefore appropriate, and easy to implement given the range of student voice and feedback mechanisms at Portsmouth.

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