

## APPENDIX A: CASE STUDIES REVISITED

In this section, you will find more positive responses to the case studies presented in earlier sections. Read through these carefully and compare and contrast with your own responses. Remember there are no totally right answers; only ideas for enhancement that will be heavily contextualised when applied in practice.



### Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

#### Mel, Student Welfare Officer at Algorithm University

See Section 1

Mel is a local Students' Association Officer leading a campaign about the creation of positive student mental health at Algorithm University.

Algorithm prides itself on having a sophisticated learner analytics programme which measures, collects, analyses and reports data about students and their contexts, for the purposes of understanding and optimising learning at Algorithm.

- Mel is aware of the University's investment in the learner analytics work but has already scoped some evidence, in preparation for the meeting, which raises awareness of the practical and ethical limitations (Sobe, 2018; JISC Code of Practice).

In a meeting with the University's Head of Student Wellbeing, Mel outlines some ideas concerning how a campaign could be developed and constructed in partnership with the University to: raise awareness of indicators of positive mental health, how to notice if personal mental wellbeing is being compromised, and how to find and access local support to enhance personal mental wellbeing.

- Evidence is cited from UUK and OfS to demonstrate why this approach can be effective and should be prioritised.

In further discussion, the Head of Student Wellbeing surprises Mel by indicating that the learner analytics programme will automatically offer a comprehensive process of early alerting of students' needs with appropriate stakeholders. They suggest that any campaign should be constructed around this provision, into which considerable investment has been made, and urges Mel and the Students' Association to enthusiastically embrace supporting the learner analytics programme.

- Mel feels in a position to constructively challenge this notion and acknowledges that, whilst the learner analytics process is pivotal for overall student wellbeing, it is one of several sources that should be brought together as per the recommendations about the importance of partnership working outlined in the University Mental Health Charter.

The Head of Student Welfare is delighted to build on evidence emerging from the learner analytics approach as a starting point and asks Mel to help set up a joint Mental Wellbeing Partnership group. They also state that it is really important that we ensure that any provision to support our students' mental wellbeing draws upon the best possible evidence and information. Working with the Students' Association will be a great way to ensure that we can triangulate evidence from an array of sources and apply and interpret locally and in effective partnership.

Mel leaves the meeting with a very positive feeling and real excitement about the way the partnership might develop and how the Students' Association can play a key part in enhancing the mental wellbeing of Algorithm's students.



## Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

### Vic, Departmental Student Rep at the University of Enlightenment

See Section 2

Vic is a new Departmental Student Rep at the University of Enlightenment and has a keen interest in ensuring that the opinions of students who don't often get heard are surfaced.

- In preparation for the new role, Vic finds out about what might be deemed good practice by accessing sparq's resource Recognition and Accreditation of Academic Reps which has an array of resources and practical suggestions and links to the interactive Student Engagement Framework for Scotland.

Vic attends the Student Rep training offered by the University which focuses on 'Student Voice' mechanisms. To Vic's dismay, this appears to be focused solely on the Reps' role in getting students to complete the annual Student Voice Survey (SVS) which is a lengthy quantitative survey offered to all non-final year undergraduate students in February, or the National Student Survey (NSS) for final years. The SVS has a very low response rate, normally averaging 15-17% but this is still seen as a good thing to encourage students to complete as it mirrors questions asked in the later NSS.

- Vic had already looked at use of surveys as part of coursework for a research methods module that drew upon QAA Scotland Enhancement Themes webinars about Optimising Existing Evidence and, in drawing on this experience, consequently felt that the focus of the Student Reps training was quite narrow.

Vic tentatively raises some of these concerns at the end of the session with the University's Head of Student Engagement, who listens sympathetically but tells Vic that Enlightenment is a very traditional university and tends to focus on robust quantifiable mechanisms that have credibility with our staff and with the majority of our students.

Vic seizes the opportunity to suggest a further meeting and mentions that the QAA Scotland webinars might be useful to explore, too. The Head of Student Engagement is initially defensive, indicating that they are extremely busy. However, they do acknowledge that watching the Enhancement Themes webinars is on my list of things to do.

The Head of Student Engagement explains that they would welcome developing further partnership work between the Students' Union (SU) and University for enhancing and evaluating the Student Reps training. They suggest it is very timely as the programme has now been running for three years and they recognise that the training and possible over-reliance on SVS need to be evaluated in light of emerging evidence from the sector and in partnership with the local SU.

To Vic's surprise, they agree to arrange a meeting with Vic and the SU Officers for Reps and Equality and Diversity. In doing so, the Head of Student Engagement clearly values Vic's evidence-informed insights and commitment to helping assess whether the training and approach to Student Voice at the University of Enlightenment might need revamping.

- Consequently, Vic is now using the Departmental Student Rep remit to contribute to developing an evidence-informed approach for triangulating Student Voice in a more influential manner (see Heron, 2019; Tan, Murray and Loughlin, 2019).



## Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

### Drew, President of the Students' Association at Nudge University

See Section 4

Drew, as newly-elected President of the Students' Association, met with Chris, the Director of Learning and Teaching Enhancement at Nudge University. The meeting explored the use of learner analytics and getting the Students' Association 'on board'. Drew ended up feeling very uneasy about several matters: the proposed use of learner analytics in the way described; the purpose of the meeting, which felt more like a set of instructions than a real dialogue; the power dynamics between Drew (as incoming but inexperienced President) and Chris as University Director of Learning and Teaching Enhancement; how to influence what happens next.

Within the meeting a very reductive view was offered by Chris about the application of learner analytics. This concerned Drew who knew this didn't sound appropriate but didn't have any evidence by which to challenge Chris's assertions.

- To avoid this, Drew could have looked at the JISC Code of Practice for learning analytics before the meeting which expressly states that steps should be taken to ensure that trends, norms, categorisation or any labelling of students do not bias staff, student or institutional perceptions and behaviours towards them, reinforce discriminatory attitudes or increase social power differentials. This could then have provided an evidence-informed constructive way of challenging Chris's assumptions.
- Drew could also draw attention to some of the obvious benefits that effective learner analytics can bring which go beyond potential for unsophisticated stereotyping. *Accessing Big Data – Disruptive, Distracting or Adding Value?* (Katsomitros, 2017) could be a good starting point.

Drew also felt that being inexperienced in the new role didn't help to manage Chris's assumptions about the role the Students' Association should play. There are several actions that Drew could have taken to address these assumptions:

- Engaged in the sparqs training for senior student officers and accessed a range of resources in the Supporting Students webpages, including familiarisation with the Student Engagement Framework for Scotland which has lots of ideas about how to influence as a student within your own institution.
- The outgoing President could have worked closely with Drew, as part of the transition process, to hold introductory meet with Chris and other senior University figures so that expectations could be managed supportively and positively.

Drew might want to consider accessing further leadership development opportunities, in which aspects such as looking at cultivating personal presence and how to influence effectively at different levels might be helpful.

- Drew could begin by reading *In the Wings and Backstage: Exploring the Micropolitics of Leadership in Higher Education* (Lumby, 2015) which defines micropolitical leadership as that which encompasses a range of influencing behaviours, using social skills and interpersonal assets to achieve change through daily, often informal, activity (p6).

In order to influence further positive outcomes, Drew should invite Chris to meet with a range of local Students' Association reps to engage wider views of the proposed learner analytics approach in a more meaningful, supportive and collegial manner.



## Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

### Alex and Taylor, student complainants at the University of Datadwelling

See Section 5

Alex and Taylor complained anecdotally to their Course Rep about a specific module they both sat recently on their programme, believing it was too difficult and too hard to understand. They noted that the module content and delivery was significantly different to what they have experienced elsewhere on the programme. They also felt that the module leader, who is also the Programme Leader, had marked too harshly.

- Alex and Taylor might have considered: their marks across levels on all modules; a three-year trend analysis of marks for the module to present day; whether their own personal development is always predictable and even; how to surface their misgivings whilst the module was being delivered.

The Course Rep approached some trusted tutors to raise these issues on Alex and Taylor's behalf when the module was considered at the Departmental Assessment Board, as they didn't feel empowered to discuss this directly with the Programme Leader.

- The tutors concerned didn't feel that this would be a helpful place to draw initial attention to their complaint. They suggested that the Course Rep as advocate (and Alex and Taylor if comfortable) should sit down with the Programme Leader to explore these issues as soon as possible in a constructive manner. As a consequence of the initial discussion between the trusted tutors and the Course Rep, the Rep examined further evidence and found *Use and Abuse of the Student Voice: Leaders' Responsibilities for Making Positive Use of Student Evaluations of Teaching in Higher Education* (Jones-Devitt and LeBihan, 2018). This investigated the experience of academic staff as the subjects of student evaluations and the challenges this presents for academic leaders. This gave the Course Rep, Alex and Taylor some new insights into the complexity of using data to measure student satisfaction.

The Course Rep brokered a meeting between Programme Leader, trusted tutors and the students to discuss the complaint, share pivotal moments and to examine projected actions within the module experience that could result in enhancement for all. As a consequence, several evidence-informed and co-designed actions were agreed.

- The Programme Leader would work in partnership with Course Reps to consider:
  - Whether relying on the standard end of module evaluation questionnaire (MEQ) is the best vehicle to gain all student opinions?
  - Identifying other forms of student engagement evidence that could be used to encourage dialogue and debate.
  - Whether moving to programme-based assessment could be a fairer pedagogic process?
  - How to develop a continuous enhancement culture in which they could all legitimise their opinions, before things became problematised.
- Within this context, the Course Rep, Alex and Taylor understood that their own development isn't necessarily based solely around numerical marking in assessment (O'donovan, Price and Rust, 2004). They also began to recognise the complexities of students' learning journeys in relation to over-simplistic measures of student satisfaction (Langan and Harris, 2019).



## Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

### Blake, Student Research Officer at University of Enlightenment

See Section 6

Blake works as a Student Research Officer for the Students' Association at the University of Enlightenment. A survey was constructed to investigate attitudes and beliefs of BAME students' in relation to the degree awarding difference at Enlightenment, which is presently at 25%. Due to a variety of reasons, such as timing, overlap, lack of clarity about the population sample, lack of ethical clearance, very low response rates and an array of complaints, the survey was withdrawn. When planning the data collection process, Blake could have planned the investigation more thoroughly by considering:

- Any prior work done to explore BAME students' attitudes and beliefs within an institutional context. This could have been found by undertaking judicious searching of the wider evidence-base, including any available systematic reviews critique of secondary data and policy analysis (including synthesis of the literature (TSEP, 2018) complementary/comparable investigations) and local work done at Enlightenment.
- If there was any chance of the student population experiencing survey fatigue or duplication. In this case, if Blake had identified ongoing work via undertaking thorough planning, and perhaps approached this collaboratively by working with those with a shared interest (such as the BME Forum and University colleagues with roles and responsibilities for student engagement and experience) many of the problems that arose could have been avoided.

Due to Enlightenment's much higher awarding gap in the sector, Blake would have gained considerable support, and a ready-made set of allies, as many key stakeholders at the University were already examining good practice both internally and externally to help address this matter constructively. It is viewed as of strategic importance by the Senior Leadership Team at Enlightenment, so further resource and momentum has been assured with funding available to support.

Blake needs to consider the ethical and methodological challenges more fully when designing research processes. For example, Blake hadn't realised that internally-focussed work of this nature still requires ethical scrutiny. There are considerable resources and training that could be accessed to support this important area of work and to enhance the quality of the work undertaken by Student Research Officers:

- Social Research Update is an accessible, freely available resource for social researchers. Blake could have accessed *Researching Ethnic Inequalities*, and *Examining the Paradox of Achievement Gaps* as a good developmental starting point.
- Excellent training and development is offered in developing research design and implementation by attending further training (such as offered by Social Research Association and ScotCen). Blake's own University has an online training platform covering survey design, ethics, etc., in addition to free online resources such as blogs provided within the sector.

Blake might also think more creatively to go beyond the survey, as the data-collection tool of choice. There are many other ways of exploring data collection in a less transactional, more participatory and thus more effective manner. Methods could include:

- Digital storytelling; visual research methods; using vignettes; walking interviews; snowball research strategies and many more.

Taking these straightforward evidence-informed steps when considering data collection could have led to more constructive outcomes and real insights.