

Responding to student needs: Emerging and continuing issues

Dr Margaret Harris, June 2010

Introduction

This report focuses on the work done since January 2010, examining how higher education institutions (HEIs) in Scotland are responding to student needs and in particular with regard to the current Enhancement Theme, Graduates for the 21st Century. Reported here are brief results of four events examining a range of issues related to responding to student needs. A brief background to each workshop is given, the results of each described and an analysis of the results made to ascertain common elements. From this, some conclusions are made, and emerging or important continuous issues are identified. Full reports of the events can be found on the Enhancement Themes website: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk.

What was done and what it told us

Workshops March 2010 (Harris, 2010a)

These workshops investigated the perception of student needs and tried to elicit from participants appropriate academic response suggestions to meet the needs identified. I was assisted by Robyn Davis, a master's student in Creative Media Practice, at the University of the West of Scotland. The workshop consisted of two tasks during which the participants, in groups, had to consider what student needs were. Groups had to compare the list developed by them to a pre-prepared list, adding/deleting any areas that they perceived to be missing/superfluous. Approximately 25 people took part, consisting of students, lecturers and support staff. The combined response from the participants over the two workshops was that students' needs consisted of the following:

A learning environment that is:

- fair; engaging; motivating and comfortable; accessible; challenging; appropriate; a learning community.

Courses and systems that:

- are fair and do what they say they will; offer opportunity, choice and flexibility; work and are accessible; share with different level students and recognise change from first to final year.

Lecturers who:

- turn up, are approachable, and who are prepared to develop relationships; are engaging, well prepared, skilled in what they are doing and are interested in, and motivated by, their subject; are willing to talk/debate and build conversations; are interested in and listen to their students and themselves (continuous professional development); are fair and understand students'

personal circumstances and the differing needs because of these circumstances; have the ability to explain what they mean using language that is appropriate and understandable to students; recognise students' talents, intelligence, knowledge and skills; can guide, challenge, motivate and mentor; provide timely, consistent, positive and negative directive feedback; provide examples of good work; use a variety of teaching strategies to cater for a wide range of student needs.

To be able to:

- get access to a personal tutor and get questions answered when needed; get easy access and able to download learning guides, electronic books and materials online; have easy and more comprehensive online search facilities for the library.

The groups recognised that:

- there was a change in expectations from the first year to the final year by both staff and students
- staff needed to consider what we ask in evaluations and when we ask it
- students' needs depend on background
- classrooms are not necessarily physical environments
- student needs vary in terms of method/approaches to learning, teaching and delivery
- generic skills, competences, attributes required of staff
- need knowledgeable, motivated and enthusiastic staff
- empowering approach to encourage personal responsibility co-creators
- a contract of learning is a possibility
- course types and the institution's atmosphere will have an effect
- students have some responsibility for their own needs.

The groups asked:

- Should we do more before they enter the classroom/lecture hall?
- Acronyms - why are there so many?
- How do we disseminate good practice internally?
- Why don't we use continuous teaching assessment to improve teaching practice?
- What is the importance of feedback in all areas of teaching and learning?

Workshop 13 May 2010 (Harris, 2010b)

The second workshop was that of a video conference held jointly with UHI Millennium Institute and the Scottish Agricultural College. The workshop involved 13 different locations, involving one to four participants at each. In total, 26 people took part and there was a mix of academic and support staff. I worked with Dr Iain Morrison, UHI, and Ms Lesley Howie, Scottish Agricultural College (SAC). The objective of this workshop was to encourage participants to think about the attributes required of Higher National (HN) and degree-level students and what we can do to make the experience of transition from one to the other more appropriate and useful for the students concerned. The intention was also to share good practice between the two organisations. There were three activities undertaken during the video conference.

- Activity 1 - discussion on the attributes required of graduates within the Scottish Qualifications Authority HN framework and where these were developed.
- Activity 2 - discussion on the needs of students when transferring from HN to degree-level study and the differences that they might encounter.

- Activity 3 - discussion on what is currently ongoing within the two organisations (or in others organisations if they were familiar with any) in responding to student needs in transition.

There was some, but not total, agreement from both UHI and SAC during the video conference that the attributes required by students at HN and degree level are generally the same, but the level of development of the attributes is different. It was also recognised that there was a need to recognise subject and course differences, which put a different focus on required attributes. There was discussion on the change between second year of HN and third year of degree and the different expectations required of the students, for example independent study, more analytical/reflective awareness, awareness of plagiarism, importance of correct referencing, and so on. Participants agreed that we need to prepare students for this from the beginning of year 1, but there was some recognition that not all HN students would be progressing, so this might affect the extent to which the attributes should be delivered during the HN modules and whether we should be enforcing the development of particular attributes in these learners.

It was generally agreed that employability is a very important attribute of HN vocational qualifications and the need to maximise student preparation for the workplace, but the group questioned whether this was at odds with preparation for degree-level study. Lastly, there was recognition that we need to make sure that students are aware that they are developing all of these skills/attributes in order that they can make the most of opportunities that require them and a staff development need was recognised so they can be prepared for teaching the wide range of skills and attributes that our graduates need. Good, ongoing and embedded induction was seen as essential to aid transition, as was appropriate staff/student relationships, understanding and meeting expectations, and more effective use of personal development planning (PDP).

Other issues considered important were:


- getting student views on the issues for all types of transitions
- providing classes in study/research skills and guides on exam techniques
- addressing the employability agenda
- use the Graded Units to develop attributes and use practice modules
- teach HN and degree-level students together/offer different assignments
- involve early-years students with those who are in later years
- allow HN students to participate in degree activities
- provide opportunity for tutors teaching HN and degree to mix and share ideas
- develop staff using peer-to-peer mentoring.

Workshop 18 May 2010 (Harris, 2010c)

Held at the University of Aberdeen as part of the Annual Learning and Teaching Symposium, the objective was to encourage participants to think about co-ordinated support for all students and good practice already in existence within the University of Aberdeen. There was one activity with a feedback session and 24 people were involved. Four groups each considered one of the following questions.

- How do we get joined-up communication between programme leaders, academic teaching staff and non-academic staff?
- As there will be a mix of support needs, what should be drop-in and what should be built in?
- How do we encourage peer support and a learning community?
- How do we encourage the 'student voice'?

The participants recognised two main areas that needed to communicate with each other to be effective: student support, students and student advisers, and registry, course coordinators and other



course teachers. The groups suggested that the communication effectiveness varied greatly between these groups and that training in communication was needed in all sectors of the university. The group suggested that there were academic, practical and social support needs involved and identified the issues of the diversity of intake, the difficulties in transitions and the differing requirements of discipline backgrounds. The group identified that a diagnosis of support needs was required as well as a development needs analysis, recognising that some support could not be anticipated, necessitating ad hoc support, while predicted support, could be built into the curriculum. The conclusion appeared to be that a blended mixture of support was required.


Question 3 prompted the response of creating a framework to encourage students to opt in to a peer-support ethos, using buddy schemes and using project and group work in classes. The group recognised the challenges of the modular curriculum, large programmes and large classes and the conclusion was that staff members have to be proactive in encouraging peer support and in creating a learning community. The group examined ways to include the individual and the collective student voice. Areas for consideration included the use of class representatives and involving students in curriculum development, being open with students and communicating that 'it's alright to ask', not catering only for those failing but also for those who seek to improve, taking cultural issues into consideration, trying to counter the acceptance of failure and more caring lecturers. The conclusion appeared to suggest a partnership approach to encourage students to engage in their own learning experience.

Workshop 28 May 2010 (Harris, 2010d)

The fourth event, hosted at Queen Margaret University (QMU), Edinburgh, but run jointly by QMU, the University of Dundee, and the project facilitators for Responding to Student Needs (me) and the First Year (Jim Moir). This workshop attempted to take a more specific look at the small things we can do to make a difference to the student learning experience. The staff involved consisted of academics and support staff.

There were two issues to which delegates were asked to respond prior to attendance at the seminar. Thirty-three responses from 60 delegates were received (approximately 62 per cent of those who actually attended). The first issue was to describe one thing that they currently did that they felt made the difference to their students' learning experience and/or development of attributes, skills or qualities. The second issue was to tell us about one thing that they would like to have happened when they were at university, which would have kept them going or helped them through their university years more effectively. At the seminar itself, participants in groups were asked to respond to the following question: 'What are the little things that you do that make/have the potential to make the difference between a student being successful during their time in HE or not in relation to: Transition and Induction, Personalisation and the Curriculum, Support and Assessment and Feedback?'

As far as transition and induction was concerned, there were many examples of activity ongoing within the universities to encourage participation from students, staff and parents. There were also many examples of technology playing a part in providing information for students. Examples given for transition were as frequent as those for pre-entry and transition was examined from differing angles: school-HE, further education (FE)-HE, workplace-HE. On-entry discussions were around the expectations that students had of HE and the need to provide significant and appropriate information for them. The issue of coordination of inputs from the various sectors and departments was seen as an important issue and of initial meetings to introduce all types of staff. A major contention was that there should be ongoing activities for students, including a range of group work activities. The first year was seen as particularly important and it was clear that the expectations that staff had for students had to be made explicitly clear from the beginning and that contact and support between modules was important.



The importance of longitudinal induction was stressed and of the skills and availability of the academic tutor who could run tutorials without deficit connotations.

In Personalisation and the Curriculum, the issue of 'knowing' the student was virtually repeated across each of the groups and the ideas that the student is to some degree in control of their own learning and that their learning outcomes can be a personal driver carried over into the issue of assessment in terms of linking up with learning styles. Structural issues were around matters such as timetabling and entry points into a programme and the current structure for degree programmes. There was a sense in which some little tweaks here and there could allow for greater personalisation and flexibility. Other issues raised were in how departments work together to look across issues that affect the delivery of a programme and of learning how to be a student and the implications for staff in all areas. Finally, there was considerable support for the idea of helping students to understand that they can learn from each other, that is, from collaboration.

There were a number of themes that ran through the groups when it came to support and, as one delegate suggested, there has to be a multi-platform approach taken if we are to effectively deal with student support. The culture of the organisation and the attitude of the academics, which persisted because of the culture, were understood to be important in examining the support for students and what we could do to make a difference. The services that were funded by the university and the technology provided all had an impact on what the staff could do and how the services could operate. The attitude of academics, as those who should be responding to students from both an academic and, indeed, a social and personal perspective, was considered crucial. In that respect, discussion on training for staff ensued and it was considered necessary and important that all staff who come into contact with students get trained in how to do this effectively, including a requirement for most (all) staff to have basic counselling skills. Communication involving staff and student, as might be expected, was also seen as crucial, particularly at times of high stress or absences, for example between courses, after exams and before resits. The issue of socialisation with and access to academics/tutors and student support staff was raised with many delegates bemoaning the fact that there is a move to exclude students from outright access to academics. The issue of feedback, including the speed of feedback, was raised, as was the language used by staff, that is, that staff speak to students so that students understand.

The areas that appeared to be of most interest in the assessment and feedback area were issues around providing students with exemplars of previous work to indicate the standard of work required, the use of electronic feedback for providing quick response to the whole cohort then individualised feedback at a later point and feedback on exam scripts, building relevant formative assignment into courses, experimentation with technology for individualised feedback, and the use of electronic versus personal feedback. There was also discussion on avoiding the apparent disconnect between what students perceive to be feedback and what staff see as feedback and that there was probably an educative process required here too. It was also recognised that access and availability of the staff to students for discussion of assignment grades and feedback varies considerably across the sector. Important discussions centred on the need to link assessment with the module/course learning outcomes in the minds of the students, and the help that students need to become the 'marker' so that they can apply the marking criteria to their own work, effectively self-assessing. Interestingly, the requirements of professional bodies added another layer of restraint/complexity/restriction on what is considered to be appropriate feedback.

Analysis of the results

What do these results tell us about student needs?

Although the focus for each workshop was different, many issues were repeated. Table 1 shows the issues that were raised, some of them many times, and it did not seem to make a difference whether these were degree level or subdegree level, the issues remained the same. One issue that became apparent was that we might need to ask students what they need, rather than making assumptions.

Table 1: student needs

- Students need to see examples of good work. This enables them to gauge their own response to assignment questions. It more often than not will give them confidence that they know how to do the assignment rather than result in them copying it.
- The language used to students needs to be in a format that they can understand. There may be an assimilation period to consider here, but if this is the case, this has to be recognised by tutors. It also has to be remembered that English may not be the student's first language.
- Interaction with other students, including mentorship, peer work and buddy systems, including a buddy counselling service, appears to be significant. There was considerable support for peer work in academic matters, such as in project and course work, as well as in support matters generally, and of mixing types and levels of students in this process. There was some support for both compulsory and opt-in systems, but the benefit recognition, such as enhanced communication, confidence raising/boosting, familiarisation comfort, enhanced learning, self-help, and responsibility-taking were all significant areas discussed and demonstrated.
- Being part of a learning community which is motivating and challenging, at whatever level, offering opportunity and fairness, was seen as important. This would provide support academically, developing academic understanding and socialisation skills.
- Students need real, one-to-one academic support from their tutors. They need to be able to talk to tutors who understand the kind of academic assistance that they need and who will provide the time, explanation and guidance to solve any problems.
- Feedback is vitally important to students. They need feedback from exams and coursework that is given to them in good time, and certainly in time to allow them to make a difference to the next assignment. They need feedback on both the positive and negative aspects of their efforts, to increase confidence and provide guidance and directions for improvement purposes. They need feedback that they can read and understand and in a format that suits them, whether typed, handwritten, oral, or by technology, but such that it can be re-referred to as and when required, and this should be formative as well as summative. Students also need to be educated in how to recognise and interpret feedback and they need to be educated not to fixate on marks, which may mean an alteration in our feedback processes, type of feedback or indeed style of assignment.
- Students need to understand what they are doing and why it is important to them. They need to have an understanding of how they learn and the different learning styles that exist in order to understand themselves as a learner. They need to understand how the courses/modules or each element of their programme is valuable to them and where they fit into the bigger scheme of things. They need to understand the attributes and skills that they are developing, why they are developing them, where they are developing them and how they will be useful. They need to understand the assignments and what is being tested and why, including understanding assignment criteria.
- Students need a variety of teaching and delivery styles to keep them interested and to satisfy their preferred leaning style, whether they know what that is or not. While this may vary from student to student, most students, like tutors, will get bored with the same old thing.
- Having good, open relationships involving explicit two-way communication with staff was seen as a need for students. Good communication to enable 'productive conversations', where both

parties feel confident and free enough to be able to say what they want, without fear of being sued or of being penalised, is necessary. Students need staff to value them and to listen.

- Personalisation was also seen as an important need. Students need the staff to get to know them personally. There needs to be rapport between them. The relationship needs to be much more of a partnership, particularly for the older student, but there still has to be an acknowledgement that the student is there to learn from, or through, the tutor, although this learning may not be discipline knowledge.
- Students need tutors who care, who are proactive, who can mentor and who understand or take into consideration their background and experience.
- Students need attribute development even though they do not always understand why. The attributes appear to be the same for all students but may differ as to depth and amount required. The development needs to be progressive. The attributes include the need to be confident in their dealings inside and outside of the university environment; taking responsibility, decision making and empowering themselves (including responsibility for their own learning). They need to be enabled to do this.
- Students need to be prepared for university. If they are to succeed they need to understand what will be expected of them before committing to a course of study. They need to understand what is expected once they begin and at each level, during each module, and so on. It is unfair to leave them to 'find' out' slowly as they progress. Although there is some benefit in allowing them to discover on their own, it will depend on the context or circumstances. There has to be some compromise on what should be provided for them and what they should discover naturally. Our students come from such a variety of backgrounds and qualification levels that we cannot assume that the understanding or experience is there to be able to cope with the changes such as the requirements for broader/wider reading, the depth of answers required, knowing why rather than knowing how, research, referencing/academic styles, plagiarism.
- Students need their expectations managed and if possible and if reasonable, met. That includes those students who want to succeed and who have high expectations. They also need to understand staff expectations of them, especially in the first year.

What do these results tell us about the support required?


The support that we provide needs to be linked to student needs. This seems obvious, but it could be argued that organisations provide support to suit their own needs, or indeed to suit the perception of what student needs are, rather than real student needs. In addition, the support services, whether academic or otherwise, must be supported by the organisational structure and funding. Table 2 looks at the support required.

What do these results tell us about how we should respond?

Whatever else, the results of the workshops indicated that we should be proactive and forward thinking in all areas of response and that our response needs to involve all areas of the university in a joined up and cohesive way. Table 3 provides some indications on how we, as academics or support staff, should be responding practically.

Table 2: support required

- Student background and rationale for being on a particular course will likely dictate the needs. Many may be there simply for a particular qualification. Many will be there with a work-based or employability focus, others simply to learn more generally. Some will not want to develop specific attributes, some will want to develop them to a particularly high standard, and for some only the qualification will be important. In addition, some will have come from an FE environment, some from school, some from other universities, some from another country and



some from the workplace. One may be 18 years old another 46 years old, one may be full-time another part-time, some with high IQ and some with high EQI (Emotional Quotient Inventory). Some will already have many developed attributes, others are just in the process of developing these. Some may be physically disabled. The question is should they all be treated the same?

- Support must deal with general issues and specific discipline/course and subject issues and the discipline involved will have an effect on the support required. The support needs to be relevant and provide comfort that the qualification, with its associated attributes and skills, compares well to others and is related to workplace requirements, if appropriate. This issue is probably even more problematic where a particular professional/trade body is involved.
- The support needs to be provided, or at least initially instigated, by the organisation/tutor. Curricula and examination support must be done in a way that is suitable for the student rather than the organisation.
- The support has to recognise that the learning environment is not always physical, fixed, tangible, or on campus. It has to offer comfort and a sense of belonging, being open and friendly in a range of circumstances and designed to suit a wide range of learners. Support needs to involve technology. Like it or not, technology is marching on and the younger student is learning in a different world to many of the older students or indeed the tutors. Older technology must not be discarded, but blending of the old with the new may facilitate a way forward to cope with the diverse cohort of students. Technology also allows greater flexibility with the distance learner.
- Support structures require good communication. The communication between sectors within the university needs to be effective and smart. Staff need to understand how their university works and the codependence and interdependence of each course, department, faculty, and so on. Staff members need to mix to be able to understand each other's skills and abilities, goals, requirements and job roles. They need to understand the significance and effect of poor communication between parts of the university. Coordination of input from various sections of the university is important and essential right from application stage. On a more personal scale, the support communication between lecture and student needs to be effective, prompt, proactive and worthwhile.
- Support is required in many forms: academic, practical, social, emotional and support structures and practices need to consider the diversity of intake, difficulties in transition and the differing requirements of disciplines. It needs to be early and personal and not of the deficit variety - 'too little too late'. Support needs to be proactive and an enabler/empowerer, not a crutch.
- Support needs to be blended; students don't care if you are academic or support staff when they need help - they just want help. Not all support requirements for each individual student can be anticipated, but much can, so some can be built in and some left as ad hoc. It also needs to be impartial, non-judgemental and confidential if the student requires it - it is about the student, not the organisation. It needs to start from application (maybe before that) through to graduation (maybe after that) and it needs to be structured in some way with follow up. Support needs to show relevance to the student's needs and be given by appropriate people with the necessary skills/knowledge and abilities.
- Support needs to be easily found, accessible, visible, and not stigmatised. It needs to be outward facing with an employability focus. It needs to come in various formats: orally, web-based, written, pictorial and services need to be monitored to ensure we are providing help not just information.

Table 3: how we should respond

Staff

- Provide support that offers guidance and be open and collegiate. Offer support in groups and on a one-to-one basis. Use PDP more and not as an add-on but more as a part of the total learning experience. It should involve talking to the students about study options, goals, skills and attribute development and of planning ahead in order to meet these needs. Make our academic support available at any time; in the coffee shop, refectory, corridor, by email, telephone, chat rooms, websites, and so on. Academic support should come from directors of studies, module tutors, seminar tutors, heads of department, professors, and readers; there should be few restrictions. Tutorials should be run without deficit connotations. Offer impartial and confidential guidance (especially to those considering leaving). Offer one-to-one skills sessions (academic or otherwise). Get them to self-reflect - think about themselves. Offer placements, internships, volunteering - set up office to help them with this. Develop training in how to be a strategic thinker/planner and how to be a peer supporter. Academics could invite support staff into the classroom to do small talks.
- Try to engage students not only in the work for the topics but also in more general learning. Assessment should be linked with learning outcomes in the minds of the students. Build into our support 'educating' students in how to 'mark their own work' by looking at the criteria. Build into our support guidance to students on how to engage with their topic areas, and assessment, perhaps involving examples of good work. It will help with understanding the relevancy and where attributes are being developed and why.
- Start academic support immediately students arrive at university and a Director of Studies (DOS) (or equivalent) should be allocated. The DOS needs to be proactive. All support should be personal and in a language that the student can understand. Ensure that, initially, things are explained simply without jargon, or with jargon or discipline-based terminology, explained appropriately. Stop assuming that students will just have to understand - be more considerate and use students' names.
- Develop a learning community involving a range of social and academic activities and a range of staff and/or students. Having organised academic/learning activities provides the chance to meet others within the same discipline and also 'different' others from other disciplines/cultures, and so on. Staff need to develop this, at least initially, and perhaps invite students personally to participate.
- Tackle the disconnect between what we think is feedback and what students think is feedback. We also need to teach students how to interpret feedback rather than just giving them unexplained comments to read. We must not assume that students know what feedback is or how to use it. We need to build in (to our programmes) instructions on feedback. As access to feedback varies considerably across the sector we need to ensure that students get access to feedback when they need it. This links in with the use of technology and, indeed, the timeliness of it.
- Encourage the student voice in all aspects of their learning and involve them, ask them, encourage them to become a class representative. This all links with allowing the student to voice opinions and building confidence by appreciating their views, and we can use familiarisation activities at induction with the freedom to say what he/she wants without fear of recrimination.
- Take into consideration why we evaluate and what we ask. We need to understand that a modular system should be flexible and ask ourselves why we restrict ourselves to fixed points. We also need to appreciate that large classes and programmes should not be a barrier or restriction in creativity and flexibility.
- Communication with our students is important and we should attempt to answer student emails immediately or at least promptly. This was considered important by a number of staff members and students. We should also follow up issues diligently and do what we say we will do. We should communicate with students between courses and at times of high stress. Academics

could let students know they are thinking of them. This is essential right from application stage and we also need to ensure students are aware of what is on offer - signposting.

Programmes and courses

- Include more appropriate academic support with more guidance and explanations of assignments, discussions on topics, and general life. They should be relevant and up to date, relating to where students will be after university, for example the private workplace, the public workplace, in general the life place.
- Use a range of assessment types including collaborative assessment. Have structure in modules but still provide a degree of choice and control in, and of, own learning. A range of activities should be included in programmes/courses such as field trips, competitions, project and group work, quizzes, problem-based activities to allow students to take the responsibility and to make the programme or course interesting and fresh for them and the tutors. Teaching/delivery styles need to be varied in order to keep interest of the able as well as the less able. In addition, use a variety of sources such as TV, radio, books, newspapers and film in classes.
- Embody discipline-based knowledge, skills and attributes such as professional body input/requirements but also involve a wider range of activities so that students can mix with 'others' in different disciplines, walks of life. Try to recognise and accredit wider life experience.
- Include an element of choice. This can range in size from almost total control in design in the content, the learning outcomes, the assignment and the study materials and mode, to simply small choices in topic for assignments. Some choice in assignment is seen by many as the first step to personalisation of the curriculum and of students taking control of own learning.
- Embed PDP rather than as an add-on and use it more effectively for academic and general support processes. It can be used to talk to students about study options and planning ahead. Tutors could use the UCAS personal statements as a starter for discussion with new students, or get them to write one and you can gauge your students' understanding.
- Educate students not to fixate on their mark by changing the style of assessment and assignment that you use, such as using peer assessment in formative assignments. Use more formative assignments. Build in instruction on assignments and understanding assignment criteria, how modules/elements in a programme relate to each other and are valuable for the student. Perhaps get them to peer assess each other or mark an essay and compare to tutors assessment of the same essay - use self-assessment. All helps student understanding.
- Include education for students on how students learn and on learning styles (although you may want to use a different language). This will enable more students to understand themselves.
- Environments are also not always physical, or fixed, or tangible and we need to adapt our programmes/courses appropriately. We need to be more creative.
- Teach different levels of student together and get them involved in joint activities. Use group work/project work/competition (internal and external) and involve staff. Provide a variety of examples of coursework to help students understand requirements.
- Student attribute development should be progressive and built into the programmes and courses. The attributes appear to be the same for all students whether degree or subdegree, only the levels/depth differ.
- In planning programmes and courses we should take into consideration the very wide range of student needs. We need to ensure a balanced course and exam timetable. We need to offer alternatives. Building in flexibility and allowing personalisation of courses/programmes will provide added stimulus to students and tutors.

Feedback

- Make it worthwhile and cover both the positive and negative aspects of the student's work and in some detail - tick-box feedback should be avoided as it is not constructive and essentially encourages students to fixate on the mark.

- Feedback also has to be timely and provide guidance and direction helping students understand how to improve. It should be given from coursework and exams and should include comments on content and style.
- Do it differently and in different formats to cater for the wide range of students and learners that we deal with. Using technology such as MP3 players to record feedback, sending it electronically, using text services to mobile phones, and so on, are ways that we could use, in addition to handwritten/typed and/or verbal feedback.

Relationships

- We need to be developing a different kind of relationship with our students (both academic and non academic). We need to be more open with them and be communicating so as to have 'productive conversations' that allow both parties to be able to speak freely without fear. We need to really start listening to our students and get to know them, building rapport. We can do this by simple changes such as using students' names (a very popular suggestion), arriving early to class to chat, making yourself openly visible (rather than hiding in your room). Getting to know them personally and demonstrating that you care and value them will assist in developing the necessary relationship which will assist them in developing too.
- We need to be treating and thinking of our students as adult partners, but with consideration and acknowledgement that they are learners and want to learn from or through us. This relationship is vital to the experience of attending university, otherwise students could simply stay at home and read for their degree. This is an aspect that makes attending an establishment a different experience to that of someone studying on their own, so it needs to be obvious.
- An open-door policy and being visible were seen as essential elements for good communication and good relationships. Allowing students to ask questions, however mundane, and explicit two-way open communication were seen as essential. Staff needs to take cognisance of student backgrounds, ages, cultures, focus and experience and recognise that needs will differ. In this respect staff should attempt to engage their students in particular to their needs and wants and not as a one-size-fits-all strategy.
- Our communication should not always be electronically done. Face-to-face is important too. We should be more available to students and let them know it. We could also be more proactive in our communication, for example email students who miss classes/tutorials or text them/phone them - use a variety of ways.

CPD for staff

- Staff need to develop attributes and skills too. Personal attributes are important. The academic role is changing and the academic has to be a multimode facilitator, sometimes teacher, sometimes mentor, sometimes friend. Attributes seen as important by students for tutors are: approachability, an encouraging nature, knowledgeable/professional, motivated/enthusiastic, communicative, confident enough not to let their own academic ego in the way of developing a partnership relationship, proactivity, friendliness, being helpful.
- Academic staff members also need to be skilled generically and specifically and know how to teach and how to give/write feedback. In this respect staff need development and training too. Staff members need to understand the attributes that we are trying to instil in the students and how these can be developed. Continuous professional development was seen as essential and it was considered that training was required in communication strategies and how the university works, to ensure all parts of the university work together, and in basic counselling skills to enable them to deal with the wide variety of issues that are thrown at them on a daily basis.
- Our communication and collaborative working needs to improve. It appears still to be lacking between sections of universities. Staff has to start mixing and training together (academic/support/different disciplines) and each type needs to recognise the value of the

others. An example of good practice was joint staff assessment briefings (academic and support). The use of peer review was seen as a useful way to get formative feedback on your own style to help you improve.

The organisation

- Organisational culture needs to recognise that it will have an effect on how staff can respond to student needs, so funding, structure, resources, practices all have to be examined in the light of all of the above. Positive changes do not all have to cost money and management should learn how to recognise and implement these. The issues of communication and relationship building are no less relevant to management than to other staff. The organisation must also have a culture that allows its staff the time and the ability to get to their students so that there is not a 'them and us' situation.
- We need to help prepare students for university. We can do this by providing classes in study/search skills, provide guides on exam techniques, developing practice modules, explaining and using different styles of teaching, involving parents, pre-entry work, providing lots of choices, and mock lectures. Induction is important for this preparation stage. It should be ongoing, built in and encourage participation.
- Departments should work together to look across issues that affect delivery and come up with innovative and creative responses. Suggestions and examples were creation of a teaching and learning community and hosting monthly internal lunch events; holding an internal teaching and learning conference; bi-monthly forums across Schools to discuss good practice and a teaching awards scheme.
- We need to manage expectations of both student and tutors from initial application and recognise that there is a changing need as student progress through first to final year. Student support needs to go out to schools/colleges/workplaces/work with school guidance staff to ensure the correct information is reaching the students.
- The university needs to provide appropriate training and staff members need to use it.
- The negative effect of poor communication or not working together should be demonstrated using case studies. Coordination of input from various sections of the university is important not only for student understanding but so that we understand what is being provided across the institution to respond to student needs.
- Provide services when the student needs it, for example longer library opening times. There are lots of part-time students who need this as well as flexibility in course requirements, for example study times, submission dates, entry points, assignment dates.

Students

- One of the most important attributes required of a student is the necessity to be able to take responsibility. We can start this process at university by building into the curriculum elements where the student takes such responsibility for his/her own learning. We need to empower the students and enable them to do this. We can ensure that they become co-creators of their own pathway through the learning and involve them in the design of the curriculum. This can be done in numerous ways such as by learning contracts. We have a responsibility to the students for providing this and providing them with a learning environment that encourages this - less spoon-feeding and more independent thought. Cater for those who want to improve as well as those failing.

Technology

- We should respond to student needs by utilising technology more effectively and more prominently. There cannot be anyone who has not encountered the internet and if there is, it is probably about time that they learned how to use it - it is not going away. Although online work can be a major transition for students, it will be beneficial in the long term to understand how to use it and, indeed, will probably be beneficial to tutors too. It can be used for multi-role

purposes such as PDP, teaching, research, support.

- There are many ways we can utilise technology such as using virtual learning environments (VLEs), putting materials online, using online information, involving social networking sites, using podcasts and blogs and wikis. The use of text alert systems on mobile phones and memory sticks to provide information on feedback, or MP3/audio feedback, are all possibilities. It can be used for pre, on and post-entry and for collaborative learning. More use needs to be made of these and various other emerging technologies.

Support

- We need to recognise that support requires to be academic, practical, social and emotional and that we need to consider the diversity of intake. We need to build support that caters for such a wide range: transition difficulties, differing requirements of disciplines. We should build into the support offered a diagnostic support needs tool so that early intervention can be made. Students can assess their own needs and wants (not necessarily the same thing) and in a creative and supported academic environment set their own goals for completion, including a development needs analysis.
- Offer blended support to students; a combination of joined-up support from both support and academic staff. It is recognised that not all support can be anticipated, but much can, so steps need to be taken to build in support to courses, leaving ad hoc support available for those who need it. It should be flexible so that student can opt in or out as appropriate, depending on their own particular needs.
- Building in study skills to courses and offering advice sessions was seen as important by many. Provide students with their own home pages with support and learning skills materials, and staff should also be creating opportunities, outside of the formal meetings, to talk and engage with their students such as in the coffee shop. In these meetings, guidance on module choices in line with personal goals can be discussed.
- Identify at-risk/new/vulnerable students and be proactive in helping them. Provide a one-stop-shop/advice place so that students know where to go for help. Attendance monitoring and follow up may be important. Early intervention, academically and socially may be beneficial here. Don't forget international students and students in residences - perhaps visit them personally (not academic staff, but certainly support staff).
- Develop induction programmes that are more embedded and extended throughout the academic session. Include help with library and searching/library inductions and make them mandatory. There is a need for a significant amount of information, so provide this in a variety of formats, but don't forget to reinforce and refer to them throughout the year. Monitor services and use feedback to improve. Ensure you provide help, not just information.

Emerging and continuing issues

Many of the issues identified in this paper are not emerging as they have been around for a considerable time. What is interesting is that they are still of concern and have not yet been mastered by the sector. There were glimmers of good practice throughout in dealing with these issues, but far from full acknowledgement of these, nor indeed consistent practice. The continuous issues need to be developed and progressed as well as taking account of the more emerging contexts, but the issues are contestable.

Throughout the workshops there appeared to be very little consideration given to the challenging of the student academically and student's own responsibility; questioning the abilities of students who come to HE, their rationale for being there and the government agenda on access to HE; responding to staff needs in responding to student needs; or being innovative and creative. Each of these though, is a consideration for the future of HE.

Much of what was discussed in the workshops was about assisting and helping students get through their course or in understanding their course, and, although it was not said explicitly, there was almost a tacit understanding that the students are not quite up to HE requirements when they embark on their learning career and so need sustained help. It would appear that there needs to be some discussion around this issue, as much of the time, effort and resources that we have is being expended in supporting students to come up to the standards required, rather than on learning. There is perhaps an issue about what has happened to the students before arriving at the doorstep of the HEI.

The question of student abilities and government agendas has been a concern for some time and we should question the rationale for 'pushing' young people to come straight to HE from school, whether or not they have the ability, the intellect, the standards, the attributes, or indeed the goals and motivation to succeed. There may be an element of 'square pegs in round holes' going on and perhaps what we need to be concentrating on is providing young people with the opportunities to do what is right for them. Perhaps the widening access agenda needs to be re-examined to determine if it is effective, and there is an element of our academic value system that needs to be addressed as that also reflects the underlying support that we need to provide.

Responding to staff needs was only given a cursory consideration, but staff attitude and behaviour will dictate how successful the response to student needs will be, so there is concern that their needs must also be examined in this context, so that they are prepared and happy, in turn, to respond to their student needs. The need for us to think creatively and innovatively in responding is also crucial. We talk about what students should do, know, and so on, but there is little emphasis on how we should be reacting and responding. Staff attributes appear under the emerging issues category, but I think this point is different. This is about allowing ideas within the organisational structure to be encouraged and acknowledged and of breaking down some of the barriers that HEIs find themselves with, therefore conforming to what has been, rather than saying collectively, 'how can we do this better?'

Continuous issues

Many of the issues identified fall into the continuous category. Issues such as flexible delivery, peer work, PDP, progressive development of attributes, progressive and embedded induction all seem to me to be ongoing. These issues have been around for a long time and are still very relevant to what we are doing today. Many of them should probably be reignited with a new impetus, perhaps renaming them to avoid the stigma that appears to be associated with them, in an attempt to get the benefit from them. These are vital components in responding effectively to the needs of students and perhaps they just need a creative new look to be taken towards them.

Emerging issues

This is an interpretation of what was found out from the workshops mixed with personal experience and wider reading.

Creative assessment/assignments and students' involvement in own learning

The area of Lifespace Learning is an interesting development. Students in this mode of learning design and develop their own programme of learning, including choice of assessment criteria, choice of assignment type, choice of study mode, learning outcomes, resources used, and so on. It not only develops knowledge bases, but skills, attributes and qualities in students, supported by a proactive academic. This emerging issue is one that could be developed quickly as it addresses many of the issues discussed throughout the workshops. It does require a change of attitude on the part of academics, but it has proved to be beneficial to both students and academics alike. This creative style of learning also allows attributes developed in the cocurriculum, and from wider life experience, to be captured.

Challenging the good student with high expectations?

We should consider how we are responding to this area. Students with high expectations and high ability can be disappointed by what they get when they reach their chosen institution and their expectations are not met. This could be as a result of a mismatch of institution or course and may come down to pre-entry guidance (which we also can affect) but we need to reassess our higher level support for the able and ambitious student in conjunction with how we respond to those who need greater basic support.

Whose needs and what attributes?

We need to consider whose needs we are actually addressing in our institutions. Are student needs actually being addressed or is it institutional needs? With the wide array of students accessing our institutions are we addressing this variety of needs or are we still trying to address the needs of the set of students that we think we have or indeed want to have? Have institutions adapted to the current student intake or government agendas on inclusion, access, equality? Are employer needs being addressed? Is work-based learning being catered for? Do we cater for the internationalisation of our students? As far as attributes is concerned, questions that arose for me during this work were:

- Should development of attributes be compulsory despite student needs?
- Who should be dictating what the attributes should be - the institution, the department, the discipline or the students?
- Are employability attributes the same for HN and degree students in view of the range of career roles they might inherit?

There have perhaps been too many assumptions made about graduate attributes and these need to be examined before we progress further.

Need to educate students to understand and appreciate

This point related to issues such as feedback, language and terminology, assessment criteria, attribute development and making students aware of the attributes they are developing and how they will be useful. This is an interesting concept and relates to what we include in our programmes and courses and, indeed, our perception of our job role as academics and support staff. It also relates back to assumptions that we might be making about our students, especially of their skills when they first come to university.

Dissemination of good practice

This was an area that caused concern across all the workshops; how to disseminate good practice and how to get it heard and implemented? There were practical suggestions given about how to do it, for example hold cross-school sessions, but the really difficult part is getting staff to accept that it needs to be done, that there is something valuable to share, and that information gained, if implemented in their own area, could be really beneficial. This then also relates to staff attitudes and once again what they see as their job role and associated responsibilities.

Lecturers/academic staff

In responding to student needs, we need to have academics and support staff who want to respond. If they do not, then the whole thing will be ineffective. Staff attributes have been under discussion in some of the workshops. The skills, attitudes and qualities, including knowledge aspects, of staff are vital if the support, academic or otherwise, is to be successful. Issues raised, also involved monitoring of the services, which would include satisfaction with staff, staff training in communication, feedback writing, counselling and teaching assessment. Many staff may object to these issues, but could hardly deny that they are real and should be considered.

The relationship aspect with students was also a major issue throughout, with almost all participants saying that this has to change. How we speak to and deal with our students, both in and outside of the classroom, can make or break a student's learning experience. It could be said that staff who nurture their student relationships, who value their students, who are open and visible and welcome ideas and discussion from and with their students, are probably likely to have a better and more successful student cohort and be able to respond to their student needs more successfully because they will 'know' them.

Types of institution

This may be an emerging issue or simply an ongoing but largely ignored one, but is it the issue of the different types of HEIs and the different types of students they take in? Institutional attitude, culture, structure and ethos will have a huge effect on how students are responded to. There is a difference in older versus new institutions, or institutions where HN, then degree levels, are taught, or research versus teaching institutions, so we need to consider the effect that this has on responding to student needs and the mix of attributes that will be developed. Questions that are raised for me are:

- Should all institutions have the same graduate attributes?
- Do we want all our graduates to be clones of each other, whether from the same or different institutions?
- What makes us stand out from the crowd (particularly important when looking at international recruitment and development)?
- Do we need HEIs to work more closely together?

Technology

This is an area that was prominent in the discussion and which has yet to be explored and utilised effectively. The technology change is fast and innovative and academia has only started to catch on. There are wonderful examples of where the most obvious technological innovations are being used but we need to think more creatively as to how we might use this in our programmes, courses and modules to make them more exciting, more accessible and more useful. In general, the younger generation are used to technology and we need to ensure that they experience a similar, if not better, technological environment in places of higher education as they face in their daily lives.

Working together/culture

A good mix of academic and support staff is required to ensure effective and apposite response to student needs. The culture of organisations and how the types of staff regard each other and work with

each other are therefore important issues. The value systems in universities and the attitude of, and to, staff categorisation needs to be investigated. Silos and ego systems need to be challenged.

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

We need to be proactive and collegiate in making our response to student needs work. There were many good ideas and suggestions put forward from these workshops and many of them easily implemented if we worked more effectively together both from an academic and a social, personal support need perspective. Such working together also includes management, since they are the group who can provide the finances for improvement, but they should bear in mind that the ideas put forward are not always expensive to implement and some may even be able to be implemented at very low cost. That said, where money is required serious thought should be given to considering the options, weighing up the long term cost in addition to the short term and immediate cost. Things have to get worse before they get better, but in the long term the benefits may be greater. The university sector contains some of the best brains in Scotland so it should not be inconceivable that a solution to many of the problems identified can be found.

Recommendations

Recommendations from what has been gleaned from this work is that we continue to investigate new ways of responding to our students' needs and we attempt to stop categorising issues into small silos. Responding to student needs is an overarching concept that straddles the research, the teaching, the development of attributes, the first to fourth years, the delivery mechanisms, and the employability agendas. Responding to the needs in all of these areas needs to be considered, but it needs a joined-up approach. We should continue to investigate what is going on elsewhere in the world but shouldn't lose sight of the ability with our own sector and own institutions. Perhaps we could take the lead rather than following the herd! We have the ability to do so.

References and further reading

Australasian Survey on Student Engagement (AUSSE) (2009) *Developing institution-wide approaches to student engagement*, available from:

http://ausse.acer.edu.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=4&Itemid=3

Benfield, G and Francis, R (2008) *A Mapping of Graduate Attributes for a Digital Age at Brookes*, Centre for Learning and Teaching, Oxford Brookes University, available at:

<https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/download/attachments/10062425/A+Mapping+of+Graduate+Attributes+for+a+Digital+Age+at+Brookes.doc?version=1>

Blair, M (2005) *Accreditation of Lifelace Learning: Achieving academic qualifications utilising Lifelace Learning, including work-based and work place learning, as a valid part of the Scottish higher education curriculum*, Prof D Thesis, Glasgow Caledonian University

Croft, W and Mihaly, E (2005) *Responding to student needs: Trialling a 'blended environment'*, a paper presented to the Online Learning and Teaching 2005 Conference, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 37-54, available at: http://eprints.qut.edu.au/2195/1/OLT_conf_papr.pdf

Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2009) *Building higher level skills for a digital Britain in Digital Britain Final Report*, available at: <http://interactive.bis.gov.uk/digitalbritain/report/research-education-and-skills-for-digital-britain/building-higher-level-skills-for-a-digital-britain/>

Edgar, J (2007) *Responding to Undergraduate Students' Needs: The Department of Academic Success*, Adelphi: University of Maryland University College, available at: <http://deoracle.org/university-showcase/classes-programs/responding-to-undergraduate-students-needs-the-department-of-academic-success.html>

Harris, M (2008) *Lifepace Learning*, Glasgow Caledonian University, available at: www.icll.gcal.ac.uk

Harris, M (2010a) *Graduates for the 21st Century - Classroom-based response to student needs*, Glasgow: QAA, available from: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/21stCGraduates/outcomes.asp

Harris, M (2010b) *Enhancing the learning experience to support HN to degree transitions*, in *Institutional reports for activity and outcomes, 2009-10: Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes*, Glasgow: QAA, available at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/documents/G21C/Institutional_reports_June10/UHI.pdf

Harris, M (2010c) *Graduates for the 21st Century Responding to Student Needs: The First Year and Beyond*, QAA, available at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/StudentNeeds/outcomes.asp

Harris, M (2010d) *Little Things That Make The Difference*, Glasgow: QAA, available from: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/StudentNeeds/outcomes.asp

Hart, J (2010) *The State of Social Learning Today and Some Thoughts for the Future of L&D in 2010*, Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies and Internet Time Alliance accessed 19/1/10 at <http://c4lpt.co.uk/handbook/state.html> (see also www.c4lpt.co.uk)

Higher Education Academy (2010) *Student Engagement*, available at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/universitiesandcolleges/studentengagement

Metropolitan State University (2010) *Identifying Changing Needs of Students*, available at: http://metroportfolio2.project.mnscu.edu/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC={25532D23-17F2-4F48-BAA8-D649D3B74203}&DE={2B9478B6-7ABA-4143-8B6A-E628B6F30EE9}

Van den Eynde, J, Newcombe, PA and Steel, CH (2007) *Responding to learners' need for choice: Flexible learning modes for creating an e-learning community*, proceedings of the Ascilite conference in Singapore, available from: www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/singapore07/procs

All weblinks accessed 13 September 2010.

Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes

QAA Scotland
183 St Vincent St
Glasgow G2 5QD

Tel 0141 572 3420
Fax 0141 572 3421
Email enhancement@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk

All Enhancement Themes publications are available online at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk

Printed copies of Enhancement Themes publications are available from:

Linney Direct
Adamsway
Mansfield
NG18 4FN
Tel 01623 450788
Fax 01623 450481
Email qaa@linneydirect.com

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2010