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Glendinning, I. and Dunn, I.

Author post-print (accepted) deposited in CURVE October 2011

Original citation & hyperlink:
Glendinning, I. and Dunn, I. (2010) Supporting learners through the development of a student experience enhancement unit. Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, volume 12 (1): 74-80.
http://wpll-journal.metapress.com/content/pjn8m402183415w7/?p=56e6ae34349f403ba107421466baeb7e&pi=5

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Publisher statement: © I. Glendinning & I. Dunn, 2009. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 12 (1), p.74-80, 2009. http://wpll-journal.metapress.com/content/pjn8m402183415w7/?p=56e6ae34349f403ba107421466baeb7e&pi=5

Supporting learners through the development of a Student Experience Enhancement Unit

Co-Authors: Ian Dunn and Irene Glendinning
Email: i.dunn@coventry.ac.uk, ireneg@coventry.ac.uk
Faculty of Engineering and Computing,
Coventry University,
Coventry,
England,
CV1 5FB

Abstract

This paper describes the development of a support unit within the Faculty of Engineering and Computing at Coventry University that is designed to enhance the experience of students. The service is staffed by a team of Student Advocates who are trained to work with their peers and assist in the resolution of issues as diverse as academic matters, timetables, finance, accommodation, disabled student support and many others. The Student Advocate role provides a hybrid student/staff view of faculty operations, which serves well for exploring and researching aspects of university life affecting the student experience. The team collects and analyses evidence by conducting surveys and focus groups often at the request of academic staff to enhance course design and development and improve systems and services. The paper presents a review of operations and activities to date and reflects on future directions.

Ian Dunn is Associate Dean (External)
Irene Glendinning is Academic Manager for Student Experience

Key words

Introduction

This paper explains the vision that led to the creation of a student experience enhancement unit (SEE-u), how that unit has operated to date and the next phases of development. In many ways this can be considered to be an attempt at defining customer service for students.

The Faculty of Engineering and Computing at Coventry University is a large multi-disciplinary faculty of technology with a significant interest in the management of technology. The Faculty comprises over 200 full-time academic staff, supported by 100 professional staff. The 'established' staff are assisted by an increasingly important employed student population. The Faculty student population is 4800, comprising undergraduates, postgraduates and research students. More than 25% of the students are international.

The Faculty has been refining its approaches to student support and pedagogy based on excellent practice observed in universities throughout the world. It has developed an approach to learning that is being coined as Activity Led Learning (ALL) aimed at developing professional skills alongside technical learning. Developing a modern and mature view of student experience has become a cornerstone to the direction of travel for the Faculty. The Faculty vision is to provide a cohesive and supportive study environment where student activities are central to the learning process. SEE-u was conceived and established during 2007-8 as part of this vision.

The employment of students to operate SEE-u was influenced by similar support structures observed in universities in the USA.

Student Employment

There is a growing body of evidence (Sullivan, 2008) suggesting that employing students within a university can have very positive effects for the institution and the students. If a student needing to earn money for living costs can work during the day for the university between classes, this is clearly less disruptive than more traditional student employment. Evidence from Northwest Missouri State University (Sullivan, 2008) suggested it was possible to finance the employment of a large proportion of students through fee income derived from improved retention. The benefits to students include enhanced employability through skills development, coupled with better motivation and institutional engagement.

The role of Student Advocate was established during 2008 and is fundamental to SEE-u. The Faculty policy adopted from September 2009 is that the student advocacy service should be the first point of contact for all student queries. Also currently about 60 postgraduate students are employed as Graduate Interns within the Faculty, largely undertaking teaching support duties.

A team of about 25 advocates is based in the Faculty Registry, running reception desks in different Faculty buildings, maintaining student data and undertaking general duties. A second team of 20 supports the advocacy service, assisting with complex student queries and problems and also undertaking a range of other duties and research into matters affecting Faculty students. Advocates are assigned to other areas across the Faculty including the marketing and finance teams.

Training and Management

The authors and two colleagues have oversight of the operation of SEE-u and line management for the advocates. Currently about 80 advocates, a mixture of undergraduates, postgraduates and research students, are employed in the Faculty, rising from about 50 in 2008.

The key to the effectiveness of the advocates is careful recruitment, selective deployment, followed by effective training and induction. This enhances the capabilities of the team, but also serves to motivate individuals in their approaches both to advocacy duties and towards a cohesive team spirit in the unit. The essential characteristics for appointment are experience of team-working, ability to communicate well face-to-face and in writing, mature and calm approach backed by a good academic record.

Initially training was provided through seminars, workshops, meetings with staff in the Faculty and agencies and offices around the campus. Providing the same level of training for individuals who joined during the year proved problematic. Consequently a more formal training programme was established, first running intensively in September 2009 before term began, since then operating through a rolling cycle of weekly seminars and workshops.

Even with the small teams during the pilot year it became apparent that having a team-leader was desirable for day-to-day operational coordination. A Graduate Intern has been appointed to supervise the advocacy team and activities of the Registry team are coordinated by an "established" staff member.

Activities to date

During 2008 the priority for SEE-u was to raise awareness about the unit and the services provided both within the Faculty community and elsewhere in the University. This was achieved through a series of papers to internal groups and committees, meetings with central service teams and presentations to students. This was followed up by posters, web site launch, leaflets and presentations to colleagues, some by invitation to senior staff in other faculties.

At the start of each academic year the main demand was to support confused new students and late arrivals. However there were also many students presenting with routine requests and some with serious, complex personal issues. The advocates rapidly developed their knowledge and skills for dealing with specific requests, supported by the permanent team members, central services and professional expertise as required. Serious cases ranged from student finance and fees to health and disability matters.

Frequently these related to complex combinations of issues and involved multiple consultations.   All queries were followed up to the point of resolution of the problem.

Advocates were regularly involved in running surveys, interviews and focus groups to capture information about student experience, attending meetings and boards of study, aided retention monitoring by making contact with students with poor attendance.

The unit is largely concerned with supporting individuals, but activities often generate useful information about poor systems and services. Pro-active investigations have been undertaken to gather, analyse and evaluate supporting information in order to influence positive change. This is the most difficult part of the unit's role, but potentially any resulting changes could have far-reaching impact. Many areas have been identified already with less than optimum service quality, typically because they are not focused on the needs of students, but rather designed for the convenience of staff. In particular, the Faculty system of learning support for disabled students has been redesigned.

Activity Led Learning

SEE-u is key to providing high quality customer service that will become the expectation as students and staff move into their new home in 2012. The new Faculty building has been extensively researched in order to provide spaces that will be suitable for the next forty years and particularly to accommodate the ALL approach. The technologies that the building employs in its operation are fully made visible and indeed integrated into the learning process. A key element of this is to provide three essential support services

> tutorial assistance service, within the central heart of the building through which everyone must pass
> timetabled academic and pastoral tutorials in very small groups (five or six people) to allow the student to feel comfortable with the surroundings and the learning experience.
> excellent customer support facility that has published performance standards and resolves student questions in an efficient and timely manner.

The customer service model for the new building is being piloted in current buildings from September 2009, based on experience drawn from high street banking. The specialist services sit behind a front of house staff, who are able to provide the level of service demanded from 90% of customers and then to call on the specialists for the final 10%. It is also clear that this service should be provided directly for the student rather than the traditional response of passing on the problem and the student to the next office.

Alongside the building development is the Faculty's adoption of the ALL pedagogy in which the activity is the focal point of the learning experience and

the tutor acts as a facilitator. This differs from Problem Based Learning and similar approaches in that an activity can be a problem, project, scenario, case-study, research question or similar in a classroom, work-based, laboratory-based or other educational setting and for which there are a range of possible solutions or responses. Activities may cross subject boundaries, as activities within professional practice often do.

The ALL approach was piloted during 2008-9 in a number of areas of the Faculty and comprehensively evaluated. From September 2009 all first year undergraduate students in the Faculty undertook a six week ALL activity, building on the lessons learned from the 2008-9 pilots (Wilson-Medhurst, 2009). These activities are currently being evaluated.

Central or local advocacy service?

The advocacy services at US universities on which SEE-u was modelled were central support units. A question remains about whether a local faculty-based system has advantages over a central support unit.

The arguments in favour of a localised service are

Location: the advocates provide the front of house service in Faculty buildings, so are ideally placed to support Faculty students.
It is estimated that over 90% of Faculty Registry queries and 50% of advocacy queries related to academic and subject-specific issues, for which a central unit would have difficulty responding to;
queries about financial problems were resolved by SEE-u advocating and negotiating with the centrally-based finance service, in full knowledge of the student's circumstances;
about 10% of complex requests concerned academic and subject support for disabled students,

Local level knowledge has been crucial to the resolution of most problems encountered to date. The evidence accrued from all queries is being used to justify much needed reforms in the Faculty and centrally.

A central advocacy service may have benefits when the need arises to influence central policy, systems and processes. However, it could be argued that a coordinated group of locally-based units like SEE-u would have the potential to create even greater impact than a single central service when mediating about central issues.

Future developments

The experience, knowledge and skills gained by the advocates are very much in keeping with the spirit of ALL. Student advocates often operate in project teams completing specific tasks and duties. Such activities provide opportunities for learning and evidence of personal development. If possible

the personal development should be acknowledged and rewarded and made apparent to future potential employers.

Conclusions

SEE-u has emerged with a clear vision of how to develop in the longer term to more appropriately serve the future needs of the Faculty.

The unit is serving a novel and useful purpose, not duplicating existing services, but providing bridges and links across the campus to connect people to available expertise. The ultimate measures of the value added by SEE-u will be improvement in student retention rates and higher student satisfaction ratings. However there are many conflicting factors beyond the control of the unit that can influence both these metrics.

Many sceptical colleagues were initially concerned about the prospect of giving "students" access to sensitive information, for example about student records and student finances. However although this has proved not to be a problem, there are still some barriers to break down regarding the acceptance of students as colleagues by some staff both in the Faculty and in central University services.

It is encouraging to report that dissemination activities about SEE-u continue to generate interest from both within and outside the University.

Advocates gain in many ways from the experience of being employed by the Faculty and being part of the SEE-u team. The final words of this paper are reserved for the student advocates themselves.

Working in a group under this unit has helped me to learn how to communicate with people, listen to people's views and this taught me how to accommodate others irrespective of their views;
This has helped to manage my time in between my studies, work and other things;
This has helped me to build my research skills, in the areas of how to set research objectives, conduct a research, analyzing data and writing a report.
This has greatly helped me in learning some leadership skill e.g. setting time frame for work, motivating others to accomplish a purpose, mediating among people and bringing out the best in people.
We are personally proud of our work and the guidance provided motivated us to work on more diverse issues. This experience has led us to more extensive learning and knowledge of the systems existing here in the university and the students' ability to understand them. Working with experienced staffs here had led us to share their expertise and

knowledge which we deploy in various tasks.
I would like to express my sincere thanks to all of our heads who dedicated their valuable time and energy. They encouraged and challenged us throughout our new work experiment.
Being Student Advocate is the post that allows me to gain financial stability and independence
This job role is perfectly suited to my constantly changing timetable and I'm able to chose and amend the hours assigned to me on weekly basis
Being Student Advocate helped me to integrate more with the University, better utilise its facilities and learn how to behave in corporate environment, while dealing with complex cases that spanned across multiple divisions
Working in multicultural environment helps to prepare me for challenges of future career
Experience gained in the academic environment gives me some sort of continuity, helping me to reconcile duties of being a student and Student Advocate;   People who are my lecturers, tutors and all the University authorities became my colleagues – we share anecdotes, life stories and daily problems
I would say working in a SEE-U unit I have come to know that being an advocate is a challenging job. Our unit is working on improving the services for students as well as staff. Also our unit is constantly working improving student experience at all levels from being an applicant to a graduate. So I feel proud of being a team which is working towards a good change

Table 1: Feedback from Student Advocates 2009

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