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Adding Value to Services in a University Faculty by Employing Students

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Abstract

During 2008 a pilot scheme was initiated at Coventry University's Faculty of Engineering and Computing that involved employing students in different roles to enhance services and support to available to other students. At the centre of this initiative was the Faculty's Student Experience Enhancement Unit (SEE-u), founded in September 2008, with the appointment of Student Advocates. The Faculty also employed students in other roles, including a number of Graduate Interns for teaching support duties.

During 2008-9 about seventy students were employed by the Faculty. The scale of the operation was increased substantially from summer 2009, when the process began for appointing about one hundred and fifty student employees. As a result the requirement emerged for a more systematic approach to recruitment, appointment, training, supervision and management of the student employees.

Various studies have been conducted into how similar student employment schemes operating elsewhere were managed. Particularly influential information was collected through visits to several universities in the USA.

This paper reports on the strategy and experience so far of establishing, developing and managing SEE-u. There is an account of the on-going difficulties encountered, for example relating to the dual role of staff/student and perceptions of some permanent staff to employing students to work in sensitive areas. An evaluation is included of feedback from staff and students about the perceived value to all stakeholders of the enhanced services. The report concludes with a forward-looking view of plans for development of SEE-u and the graduate internship scheme over the next five years.

Keywords: Student employment, student advocacy, student experience enhancement, employability, soft skills development

Background, context, recent history

The English higher education sector has many external factors that influence priorities, including the introduction of "home" student tuition fee contributions from 1998 and various league tables that rank different institutions according to a range of metrics, mostly from publicly available data, with weightings decided by the league table compilers. The comparison with other institutions and the shift in perception of "students as customers" has increased the focus on the "student experience" and led to greater attention to factors such as "employability" that were not hitherto seen as critical to on campus provision. The term "student experience" has different meanings depending on context and

although it somewhat overused, it serves well for this paper in its broadest sense, referring to students' overall vision of their life as a university student.

Like other UK universities Coventry University has been compelled to respond to external pressures and to ensure that public data about the University accurately represent the best viewpoint. This has generated an empowering effect for student experience issues and in turn influenced policy for student support at faculty level. From about 2005 the decision was taken by the Faculty of Engineering and Computing explore ways to improve all aspects of student life within its sphere of influence. Part of the strategy was to make effective use of students' skills by employing them in various student-facing roles.

Student employment

There is evidence from a recent study of UK universities that peer support and mentoring schemes are being widely adopted as an effective way of enhancing student learning (Hampton and Potter 2009). Sullivan suggested that UK universities can learn from other parts of the world, particularly the USA about other roles for student employees (Sullivan 2008).

Typically full-time students are required to study for about forty hours each week during term time, but the number of formal classes varies greatly across countries and cultures. In most UK universities students are only required to attend between 10 and 15 hours of formal tuition each week, which may be lectures, tutorials, laboratory work or seminars. Additional study activities may include reading and research, using library resources or on-line materials and undertaking practical exercises either working in groups or individually. Students organise the remainder of their study time to suit their other commitments.

Almost all students studying in English universities are required to pay tuition fees. The more fortunate students can rely on parents or sponsors to cover at least some of their fees and living costs. Student loans are available for UK and EU students to help to defer these expenses. However many students have to supplement their available funds by taking part-time paid employment during term time. At Coventry University it was estimated from surveys in recent years that roughly 70% of students have some form of paid employment and other reports (Sullivan 2008) suggested that about 60% of English students work part-time.

Most term-time student jobs are hourly paid casual work in bars, restaurants and shops, often at evenings and weekends. Pay rates are usually at or just above the UK minimum wage (£5.93 per hour in October 2010). However the recent economic situation in the UK has reduced the amount of casual work available for students, because they are in competition for such vacancies with rising numbers of unemployed people.

Creating a customer service ethos

In common with many universities, students are employed on campus at Coventry University in various roles, for example working in the Students' Union bars and catering services, helping with open days in the role of Student Ambassadors. However the number and range of internal appointments and roles for student employees have grown substantially in recent years. As a result of this trend, student employees are making an increasingly important contribution to the University's operational effectiveness.

When the Faculty of Engineering and Computing began employing students to help in various duties, these were often European exchange students typically involved in marketing and recruitment activities, earning much needed extra cash to support themselves during their year in the UK. Their hours were fitted around their study time and the hourly pay rate was set comfortably above the statutory minimum pay rate. It soon became clear that this workforce was a potentially very valuable resource than could allow additional services to be provided to benefit the Faculty and could be deployed to enhance support for other students.

The Faculty's Debt Officer, one of the authors of this paper, was appointed in 2005 to try to recover some of the £1 million of unpaid student fees due to the Faculty. However his duties rapidly evolved

to encompass a more general support role for Faculty students. Having initially consulted him about financial problems, if their funding had not arrived from a sponsor or if an invalid fee invoice had been received, they would then ask him for support with other problems, or refer friends, sometimes from other parts of the University. Within one year the debt was reduced to £0.5M and has been steadily decreasing since, but in addition many students also received helpful advice far beyond their financial concerns.

At about the same time it became apparent through other factors, including the external pressures such as league tables and student empowerment mentioned earlier, that there was need and desire to improve the support services provided for Faculty students. On reflection it became apparent that many of the systems across the University and Faculty had been designed and were being operated for the convenience of University staff, with little acknowledgement of any need for “customer” service ethos. It was agreed that changes were needed.

Several student employee roles were created, including graduate interns (GI), student advocates and student assistants. Their purpose was to add value to the Faculty by offering new services or support not previously possible, or by supplementing existing services at times of peak loading. GI appointments were for postgraduate students, employed on fixed-term salaried contracts of either 2 years (master’s students) or 4 years (doctoral students). The associated duties involved teaching support functions and payment was through a combination of contribution to course fees and salary. At the date of this paper there are approximately sixty GIs employed in the Faculty. The advocate and assistant roles were hourly paid and appointees could be undergraduate or postgraduate students. These roles are described in detail below.

The idea for a Faculty-based Student Experience Enhancement Unit (SEE-u) emerged from the debt recovery activities described earlier. The SEE-u team initially consisted of the Academic Manager for Student Experience (academic support), Debt Officer (finance support) and Assistant Registrar (admin support), reporting to an Associate Dean (senior management support). When SEE-u became operational from September 2008 they were joined by a team of hourly paid student advocates and assistants. The two student roles have since been consolidated as student advocates (SA). The initial cost of setting up the Unit and employing the SAs was more than covered by the savings through the debt recovery operation. It is anticipated that the on-going costs will continue to be justified by keeping Faculty debt to a minimum, plus increased student retention resulting from improvements generated by SEE-u to the student experience.

SAs receive significant training, where possible in advance of their appointment, followed by on-going seminars and workshops to add new skills and knowledge as opportunities and needs arise. At the date of this paper there are about 50 SAs actively employed by SEE-U in various roles and duties within the Faculty. Some SAs are designated to very specific roles, for example finance or marketing assistants and others have more general duties, for example supporting the departmental administrative teams in the Faculty’s Registry.

The major visible difference to the Faculty is that SAs now operate the main student/staff interfaces by running the reception desks in Faculty buildings, liaising with the back-office staff as required to answer queries and provide relevant information to students. All advocates are trained in customer service skills and receive regular updates through workshops, aiming for a culture of continuous improvement to the service provision. The permanent administrative staff were supportive of this policy to remove them from service duties at the reception counters, because this allows them to focus more on their core activities with less distraction.

SEE-u also operates a student advocacy service managed by a team of student advocates. This is currently based in a designated office within the main Faculty building, but with the long term plan of integrating this service with a central Faculty reception when more space becomes available. The advocacy service allows for one-to-one guidance for students with complex issues that can take considerable time to resolve. The aim is not to duplicate existing University services, but rather directing, connecting, advising and mediating as appropriate to help the student “client” to reach a conclusive outcome for all aspects of their concerns.

SAs often operate in teams to conduct research and investigations surrounding student experience issues, which may emanate from requests by staff or may be initiatives generated internally by the Unit, perhaps in response to concerns being identified through student representatives or SEE-u activities. Recent survey themes include exploring reasons for low achieving students and finding how to improve communications within the Faculty. The collected evidence is then available for developing and justifying process and service improvements.

A small number of GIs and postgraduate student proctors are engaged in senior roles such as supervision and training for SAs, coordinating disabled students' learning support services and supporting academic staff teaching disabled students.

Based partly on the successes experienced in the Faculty of Engineering and Computing, other faculties and service divisions across the University are being encouraged by senior management to employ more students in similar roles. Several other universities both in the UK and internationally have consulted the Faculty about the strategy and operation of SEE-u.

Lessons from elsewhere

The concept and organisation of SEE-u was greatly influenced by good practice observed in Universities in the USA. They provided great inspiration and key evidence to inform the establishment and later refinement of the Unit. Visits to Boston University in 2008 and Northwest Missouri State University in 2009 provided excellent examples of students advocating on behalf of other students. Both universities entrusted their student employees with serious responsibilities, for example controlling campus safety, and allowed them to work in areas requiring high confidentiality, including financial services and handling results and assessment. However it was made clear at a meeting at San Francisco State University in 2009 that tight restrictions were placed on the locations where their student employees were allowed to operate and the duties they could undertake.

At PACE University in New York City in 2008 there was an interesting management regime with more senior student employees supervising other students. They had very efficient systems for handing over duties and intelligence between student shifts. San Francisco State University's "one stop shop" for student services demonstrated highly effective collaboration across administrative divisions of staff and student front-line employees, resulting in an almost seamlessly joined-up set of student support services.

Many innovative practices were observed through studying the management of Northwest Missouri State University's (NWMSU) student employees, particularly their Career Pathing Program (McLain 2006), which developed through feedback from a student employee satisfaction survey. There is further evidence of the effective management practices at NWMSU in Sullivan's paper, including a description of their Talent Development Center (Sullivan 2008).

In all the USA universities that were studied during the visits in 2008 and 2009 the excellent practices were successfully implemented because of commitment from the highest level of management. At NWMSU in particular the President Dean Hubbard was one of the first people to employ students. His success in employing students to help run his own office set an example for the whole University. The NWMSU publicity states that "approximately 1000 [of the 7000] students have jobs on campus or in the Maryville community" (Hubbard 2009).

Many useful ideas observed at the USA campuses were directly applicable or could be adapted for use in our Faculty-based SEE-u. Some of these have already been applied, particularly ideas for training student employees, and others are being considered for forthcoming enhancements.

How value is added

The policy of employing students in our faculty aimed to supplement the existing workforce to enhance the provision through adding to existing services and support as required or by providing new services. It proved difficult to provide convincing reassurance to permanent staff (academics and administrative staff) in the short term at least that employing students was not a serious threat to their job security.

In the first year only a small number of students were employed in specific roles. It was also a time of major changes to the permanent administrative staff in terms of personnel, structuring and roles, which resulted in many of the immediate benefits being negated by the impact of the upheaval. However after more than two years' operation the gains are now beginning to emerge and people are becoming increasingly more comfortable about the new regime.

One of the key factors in building an effective student workforce is through the recruitment and selection process. Formal job descriptions were established for all posts and evaluated through the standard human resource management procedures at the University. At our most recent recruitment round in June 2010 the SA vacancies (to replace some graduating SAs) were advertised through our student portal. These appointments were restricted to students who would be enrolled on courses in the Faculty during the period of their appointment. The short-listing criteria included an excellent academic record and good personal motivation as evidenced through the personal statement on their written application. From about 130 applicants 20 candidates were shortlisted and formally interviewed. The quality of the selected candidates was remarkable and all were offered employment.

Even after careful selection of student employees, delivering a broad and appropriate range of training and development was critical to ensure they could be useful and productive. However, particularly with front-line roles, confidence is another essential ingredient that needs to develop gradually as a result of familiarity with the necessary knowledge and processes. For the SAs one week's training was scheduled in late August, in order to avoid any conflict with study commitments and also to allow some time for job shadowing and further specific duty experience during September. As a result there was a skilled workforce ready by the start of the academic year on 27th September 2010.

Newly appointed GIs received training from their academic mentor and also were required to enrol on a postgraduate level module Introduction to Teaching in Higher Education, carrying 10 ECTS credits. Depending on study programme, this could be taken either as part of their scheduled studies or as an extra-curricular study module. In addition this module could provide credit towards a professional teaching qualification and professional body membership.

There are many valuable aspects of employing postgraduate students as graduate interns to enhance the experience for Faculty students and staff, for example

- Improvements to learning by having a graduate intern supporting students in academic support can mean smaller teaching groups and more personal learning support, even one-to-one mentoring is possible with less time pressures than academic staff would have.
- If well organised, academic staff assigned support from a graduate intern should be able to free more time for their research or course development activities

Student Advocates have important roles to play for making sure the services within the Faculty are operating well, including the following

- Student Advocates enhance services and support at a local level for resolving both simple and complex queries. This is particularly important for a large campus, where students will difficulties can feel isolated and unsupported. The local subject knowledge can help to set context; Student Advocate support can seem less threatening than approaching permanent staff. Patient SAs well-trained in listening skills can aid greatly in understanding and advocating on behalf of another student, providing connections to existing services and expert help.
- SAs can capture important information and intelligence from other students that permanent staff would find more difficult to reach, for example by running surveys and focus groups.
- As SAs involved in front-line duties are also customers receiving the services, they have a clear understanding of what level of service is acceptable, but understand that the target is excellence. They learn from, but also input a great deal to, the regular customer service training and development activities.

Costs and benefits

Table 1 lists the many benefits of employing students, considering different perspectives. This list was collated from information collected from staff and students through surveys and interviews. It is clear that all parties involved have some advantage from a well conceived student employment policy: the student employees, permanent staff, the student community, university management within the faculty and centrally and ultimately future employers.

Normally the first questions when briefing other parties interested in the operation of SEE-u or on the GIs are about costs and how to sustain these activities in the longer term. The costs are not insignificant as close examination of Table 2 indicates. A serious and long-term commitment is

needed to ensure that sufficient budget and time is allowed acceptance of ideas and maturing and refinement of operational arrangements. The expenses and resource requirements are likely to rise over time as the schemes expand. However the costs may be offset by corresponding reductions in many areas, including some, such as improved retention and lower student debt, which may not be perceived to be directly linked to the initiatives.

Introducing a relatively large number of extra staff can be seen by the existing workforce as a direct threat to job security. It is important to manage the process carefully and ensure that staff are fully consulted beforehand about the reasoning behind the changes. If resentment and insecurity persists it can affect the integration of student employees and make their deployment less effective. Since the Faculty's policy was not to directly replace any permanent staff with student employees, this should have been relatively easy to manage, but despite this some staff were initially resentful and unhelpful. Even if the changes are managed well productivity and efficiency gains may not be realised for some time, because part-time employees naturally will take longer to assimilate into their roles than full-time staff.

Evaluation, reflection

Staff surveys were conducted in July 2009 to capture observations and opinions about the value of introducing student employees. The anonymous results contained largely positive and supportive comments, which reflect the evidence presented earlier in this paper. However the survey also revealed several strongly worded negative statements. This was very useful knowledge, which motivated the drive to ensure perceived problems were addressed and misconceptions were challenged. A second staff survey is planned shortly, after which a detailed analysis will be conducted to ascertain any possible changes in attitudes arising from the experience of the second year of operation.

Looking back on the first two years of the Faculty's experience of introducing student employees there are many lessons to share with other people interested in adopting this type of initiative, some are common sense but others perhaps less obvious.

- Start with small numbers and gradually expand;
- Training is vital for both role preparation and team cohesion;
- Plan some training in advance and schedule this outside term time;
- Identify and carefully manage risks associated with this activity;
- View this as a long-term strategy, it will take time to see the full benefits;
- Investment is needed, it should not be perceived as a cost-cutting measure;
- Ensure that permanent staff understand how they will be affected;
- Try to ensure that most of the permanent staff support this change;
- Put in place day-to-day management and supervision arrangements in advance;
- Allow and plan for workspace and resources to accommodate the extra part-time employees;
- Follow normal selection and appointment procedures when appointing student employees
- Use standard employment terms and contracts if possible;
- Require student employees to sign confidentiality statements and reinforce through training;
- Set up disciplinary and dismissal procedures and ensure these are understood;
- Carefully consider and manage the at risk areas for conflicts of interest in student/staff roles;
- Manage working hours of student employees, ensuring study commitments are prioritised;
- Plan for succession and regular turnover of student employees.

Future plans

The number of GIs has been maintained for the 2010-11 academic year. In addition over 20 early career post-doctoral academics are being recruited as Teaching Assistants (TAs). The longer term plan is for every academic in the Faculty to have a GI or TA working with them to help to support their teaching duties and allow them to focus on their research activities. The mandatory teacher training module bearing academic credits has been introduced for GIs and TAs from September 2010.

Towards the end of the 2009-10 academic year there were about 70 SAs employed in SEE-u. Although this was a suitable number of employees at peak times during terms, at other times and particularly during the summer months when SAs had more time available to work, it proved impossible to provide enough resources or activities to match the availability of the appointed SAs. The decision was taken to control the replacement of SAs for the start of the 2010-11 academic year in order to reduce the overall number of SAs to about 50, but keeping the option to expand slightly if necessary during the year. The hourly rate of pay was increased from £6 per hour to £7.09. This ensured that each SA had a viable income and number of working hours each week, normally between 10 and 20, to make it worthwhile working for the Faculty. The formal supervision of SAs was consolidated to provide a single line manager for all SAs, supported by local team leaders. This helped with day-to-day management, including duty rotas and timesheets, and ensured that requests for activities were handled effectively. At the time of writing this paper SAs are being deployed widely across the Faculty's operations and are locally supervised on a day-to-day basis by team leaders (an experienced student advocate or a permanent staff member) according to where they are based.

SEE-u has been supplemented by a team of staff from across the Faculty, known as Diversity Champions. Currently the Champions are all academics, but the plan is to recruit some non-academics to join the team. Champions received training during 2009-10 covering a range of issues surrounding the diversity of the Faculty student population and, with the help of the student employees, they are developing ideas for how to more effectively support the range of different types of student categories in our midst. These individuals will provide a two-way channel for the five academic departments and other administrative areas of the Faculty, about the work and values of SEE-u in improving the student experience. This initiative is only just beginning and all the student employees have key roles to play in helping to bring about some important cultural and practical changes.

Student advocates are subject to regular individual performance reviews, in line with normal practice for University employees. The outputs from this process include personal action plans for activities and personal development, but these reviews are not linked to remuneration. The advocates have agreed to their review feedback being made available anonymously to contribute to the Unit's research into student employment and student experience matters. Analysis of this data will be the subject of a future paper.

Although SAs do not currently have the option to gain academic credits as a reward for the significant learning that results from their employment experience and training, there are plans to investigate this option for the future. This has been on the agenda since the foundation of SEE-u, but it is quite a complex problem to find a neat way to deal with the study fee costs and integrate new credit-bearing options into all levels of the Faculty's study programmes.

The activities of SEE-u and the role of the GIs have been confined mainly to the early and central stages of the "student journey" as defined in an earlier paper (Glendinning, 2008). There is evidence from some recent research by SEE-u that there could be great benefit from exploring how to improve services and support for former students, graduates and alumni, at the far end of the student journey. There is currently a strong focus employability of students, highlighted by results from the UK National Student Survey of Student Satisfaction (<http://www.thestudentsurvey.com>). A team of SAs is now working on procurement of placements and also investigating the needs of Faculty students in different types of placements for study or work experience.

In 2012 most of the Faculty's staff and students will move into a new £55 million purpose-designed building. This will provide suitable accommodation and resources for all the student employees. As explained by Medhurst-Wilson and Glendinning (2009), the establishment of SEE-u and the integration of the student employee workforce, including GIs, is part of the Faculty's overall strategy in the transition to a culture of Activity Led Learning in the Faculty.

SEE-u will continue to work with other interested parties from within the University and elsewhere, who have similar ideas, cultures or interesting student support and employment models. We would welcome contact from anyone interested in finding out more about our approach to student empowerment through employment and development.

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