

University of Worcester
11th Annual Learning and Teaching Conference
19th June 2012

Student Academic Representatives: we did it our way

Sue Barnes and John Gardener
Worcester Business School

Worcester Business School (WBS) responded pro-actively to the University led changes to the StARs system and the introduction of Institute Reps. The move to City Campus flagged up the possibility of a period of isolation and detachment for the students. Staff therefore took a pro-active approach in ensuring that the student voice was heard loud and clear. WBS therefore instigated a system whereby there would be a dedicated academic contact for the undergraduate StARs irrespective of their course of study. The University actively encourages feedback from students so we are keen to ensure the results of this feedback are relayed back to the other students, effectively closing the loop. This session will outline our approach taken since 2010 in an attempt to avoid any bottlenecks in future communication. It is envisaged that this session will result in a portfolio of good practice for dissemination across Institutes.

The following text is a summary of the presentation at the conference. It concludes with comments from the audience who were asked to respond to questions and offer their suggestions for good practice.

The facts

In September 2010 WBS moved to City Campus. The former home of Worcester Royal Infirmary had been adapted to include teaching space, social learning space and offices. Worcester Business School moved en masse, together with some of the other university functional areas. The university had re-launched the student representation system as Student Academic Representatives (StARs) the previous year and now added the role of Institute Reps (senior StARs). At this time WBS also celebrated an increased in undergraduate student numbers. However, existing students were reporting feelings of anxiety about the impending move to their new base. They anticipated a period of 'detachment' from the rest of the university. Staff also voiced some anxiety about the move including concerns about communication and feelings of isolation.

WBS response

There was recognition of the importance of seeking out and listening to the student voice at this critical time for WBS. A new role was created to co-ordinate student liaison. Whilst still based at the St John's campus feedback to and from students was sought via meetings within mandatory modules. The student liaison co-ordinator visited such modules on a regular basis to update students on events and news and held Q & A sessions. Following the re-launch of the StARs system, the StARs were asked to provide this link via the modules on which there were registered.

Our reflections

During the 2010-11 academic year the authors had taken part in a project, together with two StARs, to audit the communication channels utilised by WBS to hear the 'student voice'. This had culminated in recognition that the correct channels were being used, but that students were selective about what they might use within the university setting. This audit emphasised the need to close the communication loop and ensure that both staff and students were aware of both questions posed and answers given. The importance of ensuring that such communication included messages 'from StARs to students' and 'from students to StARs' as well as 'from staff to students' and 'from students to staff' should not be underestimated. Following the move to City Campus WBS were fortunate enough to have dedicated social learning spaces (also later at Riverside) which engendered a feeling of community. There was always a buzz of activity and opportunities for staff and students to drop in with messages or questions. However, bottlenecks still existed: the students had access to StARs emails but StARs were unable to email groups of students without the help of the admin support staff. Initially City Campus lacked notice boards. This was later rectified and the student liaison co-ordinator was successful in obtaining one in a prominent position. Facebook, Twitter and Blackboard were all utilised but there was a perceived danger in missing an opportunity to contact a wider student audience as messages were not linked to all three social media.

Action

With regard to Institute Reps, on first launch StARs were invited to consider the role in recognition of their commitment to the university, to WBS and to the student body. Two were successfully appointed for the year 2010-11. The same arrangement of appointment was used the following year, but for the forthcoming academic year a new system was instigated university-wide. The Student Union invited all StARs to consider the role of Institute Rep. Those who applied would be appointed following a vote by the student body for their Institute. Two applied from WBS and therefore on this occasion a vote was not held as there were two vacancies. Students therefore left for their summer vacation not knowing that new Institute reps had been appointed, although StARs were informed.

Regarding the appointment of StARs, new strategies were put in place by the Student Union to advertise vacancies towards the end of the academic year. New appointments were made at the beginning of the New Year and an active campaign was launched for the new cohort of students during Induction week. However, this year there has been a low uptake of new StARs at the end of the academic year but existing StARs were asked to consider their continuing commitment for the forthcoming year.

Our response

There follows an overview of the current role of the student liaison co-ordinator, admin support staff, Institute Reps and StARs:

Student Liaison Co-ordinator

- Proactive approach to making information available
- Messages and documents posted on Blackboard WBS folder
- Regular face-to-face forums with the StARs
- Meetings with Student Union and representatives from other Institutes
- Activities reported to WBS Quality Committee
- Attends WBS Learning and Teaching Committee meetings
- Participates in SU annual training for new StARs
- Writes annual report following feedback from StARs on their activities
- Response to course relevant comments received via Question and Suggestion box

ASU

- Maintain Twitter for updates and events
- Forwards emails to groups of students via mandatory module class lists

Institute Reps

- end of year report for the Student Union
- utilised noticeboard to advertise StARs and display photographs
- developed Facebook presence for exchange and updates
- attend university, SU and WBS meetings to ensure the student voice is heard
- email StARs to disseminate meeting outcomes and future events

StARs

- spoke to groups of students within their modules for feedback and updates
- reported issues with modules to tutors
- helped international students 'settle in'
- attended meetings such as Course Management Committee
- StARs Invited to help at Visit Days
- attended StARs forums
- participated in Facebook discussions

Audience participation

Towards the end of the presentation the audience were asked for their opinion via the following questions:

Q Do you think that advertising the fee payable to Institute Reps is important for the recruitment drive?

- Not initially – they should show an interest first
- The value of being an institute rep should be communicated first
- Value to their own career enhancement should be outlined

Q Should the university advertise StARs and Institute Reps systems to employers for interview questioning?

- Academic tutors should ensure details are mentioned when writing a reference
- Include on the university website so that potential employers know what they do – particularly institute reps
- Ensure students add details to their PDP
- Draw out experiences so that students understand the importance of what they have achieved

Q What else would you like to see happen? Do you have any suggestions for good practice?

- Include in modules and assignments such topics as collaboration, communication and other relevant skills
- Embed additional skills such as leadership
- Advertise and encourage the Worcester Award
- Investigate whether there are any other qualifications obtainable as part of the process.