An exploratory study of the relationship between student perceptions and experiences of excellence in teaching and supporting learning:

An Undergraduate Perspective
Introduction

With the publication of the UK Professional Standards for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education (UKPSF, November 2011) all higher education establishments have placed emphasis upon ensuring that Teaching and Supporting Learning is of high quality and aligned to national standards.

The University Centre Grimsby has been focused upon embedding the UKPSF into internal practices to ensure that the quality of teaching is high and provides the best possible learning opportunities for our students. Teaching and supporting learning at the Institute is of the highest priority and demonstrated by the publication of the Institute’s HE Teaching, Learning and Scholarship strategy that emphasises the focus upon development of excellence in teaching and supportive learning activity.

With changes to the higher education funding system, students will expect that those teaching them have an appropriate level of skill in teaching. Institutions should do this through recognition that teaching in higher education is diverse and that a one size fits all ‘licence to teach’ is not appropriate (Browne, 2010). Innovation, excellence and differentiation in teaching strategies that are scholarship and/or research informed should therefore be a significant focus within HE teaching and learning. (Grimsby Institute’s HE Teaching, Learning and Scholarship Strategy, 2011). At present, the Institute’s annual observation of teaching and learning (OTL) is the primary method of evaluating teaching and learning quality. The OTL process for the last two academic years has invited student feedback on their learning experience through the dissemination of a questionnaire that focuses upon the impact of teaching on specific modules upon the students’ academic, professional and personal development. However, as the higher education sector continues to focus upon the quality of teaching and learning and the development and sustaining of student engagement, there is little doubt that institutions such as The Grimsby Institute must continue to actively seek opportunities for student researchers to obtain the views and experiences of fellow students to inform enhancement in quality of provision.

This booklet is the Institute’s third publication that has seen the collaborative working of HE staff and student reviewers, and the dedication and support of the reviewers has again been exceptional. The themes, conclusions and areas for improvement highlighted within this report will provide the Grimsby Institute with insight into areas for improvement and recommendations to implement these especially in relation to our strive for innovation and excellence in teaching and learning. Many thanks to all of the reviewers who have been involved from the onset of the project.

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Following a call for volunteers to be involved in the student reviewer project, and initial meetings with the HE Quality and Standards Department, ten undergraduate student reviewers were initially appointed with nine seeing the project through to its completion.

The reviewers were all self-nominated and their rationales for being part of the project varied. One student reviewer commented prior to the project being undertaken that they viewed the project as “…a great opportunity within my final year to work with the university centre before I leave. I feel also apart from giving me something extra to add to my C.V that I would view this as a very interesting investigation on how the college gathers data and as a student would be even more intrigued on how other students engage with the criteria and role out of teaching.” The reviewers represented students from level four to six of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and a wide range of curricula including:

> BA Counselling
> BA Fine Art Practice
> BA Business Management
> FdSc Health Related Fitness and Exercise
> FdSc Social Care
> BA Professional Writing
> BA English
> BA Psychological Studies

Student reviewers were briefed on the purpose of the project; the specific aim being to ascertain the student collective experience of teaching and learning at the Institute and their opinions on what constitutes as excellence in teaching and learning practice through student led focus groups.

The broader aim of the project was to enhance the student voice through more innovative approaches. It was explained that the focus of the project was particularly important with the publication of the UKPSF (HE Academy, 2011) and the Institute’s embedding of these professional standards in a range of internal processes.

A series of briefing and training sessions were delivered and student reviewers were also provided with electronic information relating to the national standards and expectations around standards of teaching and supporting learning in higher education including the link to the UK Professional Standards framework for teaching and supporting learning in Higher Education (2011).

Communication of information was provided in a variety of forms including classroom based sessions, email correspondence and through the use of a student reviewer closed group on Facebook. Additional training was given relating to how to deliver effective focus groups and the design of appropriate questions and prompts.

Opportunities for reviewers to share their initial ideas and to work together to agree standardised research questions was facilitated in class and through the social networking ability of the Facebook group.

Following initial discussions and preparatory work, student reviewers subsequently met in pairs to better prepare for a shared, professional approach to holding their respective focus groups.
Student reviewers were briefed regarding the nature of the focus groups to be held and understood that:

- They would need to capture students’ perceptions, opinions and experiences of teaching and supporting learning.
- No focus group should take longer than 50 minutes.
- Group sizes would likely fall between 8 and 15 students.
- Tutor anonymity was to be encouraged at all times.
- Questions should not be leading or provoke disharmony.
- Examples of good practice and recommendations for enhancement needed to be captured.

Administrative support was provided to each pair of student reviewers via a transcriber. Transcribers were staff from the HE Quality and Standards and HE Admissions teams.

The project brief was approved through the Grimsby Institute’s ethical approval process at local level. As a form of convenience sampling, 7 focus groups were scheduled across a range of programmes including:

- BA Games Design
- BA Psychological Studies
- BA Commercial Photography
- BA Criminological Studies
- BA Fine Art Practice
- BA Performance
- FdSc Social Care

The transcribers attended each focus group and recorded feedback given to the reviewers within each session. In the event of reviewer difficulty, the transcriber was briefed to step in and provide support to ensure student groups were not unsettled. No student reviewers were permitted to review a programme on which they were enrolled.
Findings

• Student reviewers reported that the students’ experiences of teaching and learning in higher education at the Grimsby Institute had been positive. It was reported that the tutors are confident in their practice and professional in their approach. One of the main positive comments reported around teaching and learning at the Grimsby Institute was the support provided by tutors to students. It was reported that tutors were helpful and provided excellent support, guidance and feedback. Another positive theme emerging from the feedback centred around the teaching approach of tutors. Teaching was described as exciting yet relaxed. “I never get bored, the tutor speaks at an interesting level ...is bouncy.” “The tutor is so enthusiastic and keeps us motivated.” It was also reported that the tutor guidance on how to achieve module learning outcomes and summative assessment was well explained, that assessments were well explained, deadlines for assessment were provided in a timely fashion and information about the module was helpful. Feedback suggested that teaching was directed at the correct level and aimed at achieving the learning outcomes for the session and the module as a whole.

• Student reviewers reported that the students’ experience of higher education at the Grimsby Institute had exceeded their expectations. Students felt that the support provided by having smaller groups in comparison to higher education provision at universities was positive. Students commented that they have experienced more input and a personal approach from tutors. At first students expected their experience to be lecture based, and feel that the teaching techniques that they have experienced are much more varied and focused upon students’ own independent learning techniques. “The programme is better than I expected, I’m getting a lot of input as a first year, but I understand that this will get less as we progress.” It was reported that the experience of higher education was very different to that experienced previously in either school or further education. Some groups did not expect the emphasis on independent learning; or expect the amount of work that is required to complete a higher education programme. However, the differences in comparison to past educational experiences and comparable provision were viewed holistically in a positive light with students commenting that they had more freedom, more support, and a more personal approach.

• When discussing the learning opportunities available beyond the classroom environment students in the first instance discussed the variety of trips available across different programmes. In discussing these experiences, students valued the worth of such trips and saw them as integral to their learning experiences. These included visits to:
  • Eurogamer, London
  • Spurn Point
  • Ferens Art Gallery
  • Conferences
  • Lightworks
• Discussion with regards to opportunities beyond the classroom was largely negative. The students collectively felt that communication of activities outside of their programme curriculum was limited in comparison to communication that they received from partner universities. The students felt that programmes such as the Enjoy programme organised by the Institute were difficult to access due to being delivered during class time. Students also felt that there was a limited number of guest speakers available, and that the opportunities to participate in visits and trips was hindered by the amount of paperwork that tutors individually have to complete in order to gain approval. Students also believed that careers advice and guidance was limited for those completing programmes in higher education.

  “We need careers advisor., When you go to see the careers advisor here they focus on the FE road…”

• It was reported that students felt that the role of the tutor was to support and guide, be approachable and be up to date and current in the material that they deliver. Students discussed the role as one that is ‘guiding’ that provides guidance towards the achievement of learning outcomes and to deliver and provide the support required to do so. Students emphasised the importance of tutors researching to ensure currency in their material and felt that this was a strength of tutors at the Grimsby Institute. Students also stated that in ensuring currency, tutors were also encouraging students to research current information relevant to their programme of study. Student also highlighted the difference in personalities and teaching approaches of differing staff and believed that having this mix was a positive experience.

  “You can go to them if you are struggling. They want you to do well.”

  “The role is to be that bridge to success, it’s like being scared of heights and a tutor is just like a harness to support you.”

• Student reviewers reported that excellence in teaching and learning was a practice that was supportive but at the same time allowed the student to grow independently. It was reported that excellent teaching and learning was interesting and exciting; that it made the student want to learn for themselves and that the tutors’ methods of teaching were extremely important in allowing this to happen. Some students reported that the staff at the Grimsby Institute were excellent in providing support and help with specific learning needs and ensuring that students are aware of the support that is available to them. What was extremely apparent in discussions about excellence was the students’ comments about techniques that allow for independent development of knowledge and skills.

  “Excellent teaching is a two way proces., Tthey don’t just tell you stuff, you question. It is a 2 way system of learning.”

  “Quality is excellence. Knowledge is excellence”

• It was reported throughout the focus group questions that students felt that they had a positive experience of teaching and learning at the Institute when they were treated as adults. The opinions expressed by students regarding what they felt ‘Excellence’ in teaching and learning was mirrored their previous comments about their experiences within higher education at the Grimsby Institute. For example, the importance of support, guidance and feedback and the ability to motivate through interesting and enthusiastic teaching techniques were emphasised throughout.
Teaching and Supporting Learning

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Conclusions & Recommendations

• For HE tutors to work with FE curriculum leaders to discuss the relevance of a bridging programme for progressing students to prepare students in HE academic and study skills
• Improved career guidance for HE students
• To improve communication methods that promote activities outside of the classroom
• Review the paperwork associated with visits and trips to ensure ease of completion for tutors wishing to take students to external venues

• To promote the quality of teaching and learning at the University Centre Grimsby via the Grimsby Institute website
• To provide tutors with opportunities for dissemination of excellence in teaching and learning through a peer review process
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