Hearing the student voice

Promoting and encouraging the effective use of the student voice to enhance professional development in learning, teaching and assessment within higher education

An ESCalate-funded project involving Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, UCE Birmingham and the University of Westminster

Final report

Written by

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The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Education ESCalate

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Preface

NUS Scotland has long been challenging the assumption that students' sole contribution to their learning is to passively absorb the information deemed fit to be given to them by their teachers.

The concept of students as active participants, as stakeholders and partners in the process of learning is fundamental to how we take forward higher education in the 21st century. Students become engaged in the process of learning when they are allowed the opportunity to engage and given the responsibility to shape their own learning.

However, this approach can only develop if teachers and administrators alike hear the student voice and allow students to become co-creators of their curriculum. In this regard, it is useful to note the work of *sparqs* (Student Participation in Quality Scotland), www.sparqs.ac.uk, who deliver training and support for student representatives as well as advice to institutions on how to engage students within their quality processes.

I hope you enjoy reading this report as much as I have done, and take onboard the clear message, that engaging students and hearing the student voice has positive benefits for institutions, teachers and students alike.

James Alexander
President
NUS Scotland

Introduction

> Good teaching means seeing learning through the learner's eyes
> (Ramsden, 1988)

Students can have a powerful impact on academic professional development aimed at enhancing learning, teaching and assessment practice. By providing qualitative insights about the nature of their learning experience, students can bring both valid and valuable viewpoints and motivate staff who are engaged by the students' perspective and often admire their perspicacity.

This report records the progress and achievements of the Hearing the Student Voice project, funded by the Higher Education Academy ESCalate Subject Centre to promote and encourage the use of the student voice to enhance the effectiveness of academic professional development in learning, teaching and assessment practice and ultimately the learning experience of students. The report has been written by the team representing the four universities who collaborated on the project. Our observations and conclusions are amplified by voices throughout – those of staff and students involved in our case studies and those of participants and presenters at our project events.

We are grateful to:

- the Higher Education Academy ESCalate Subject Centre for funding and supporting the project
- the presenters who contributed to the project events
- the individuals who supported the project events
- those involved in the case studies who have (and are) using the student voice in imaginative ways to enhance academic practice
- the many participants at our dissemination seminars
- colleagues within our own institutions who supported the project in many and different ways
- all of the students who lent us their voices.

Fiona Campbell, Napier University

Liz Beasley, Leeds Metropolitan University

Jenny Eland, UCE Birmingham

Ann Rumpus, University of Westminster

Hearing the Student Voice website www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices/.

Summary

1. The Hearing the Student Voice project aimed to promote and encourage the use of the student voice to enhance the effectiveness of academic professional development and ultimately the learning experience of students. See *Project aims* and *Project achievements.*

2. The project was funded through the Higher Education Academy ESCalate Subject Centre development grant scheme (see www.escalate.ac.uk/2222) and commenced in February 2006. The project was collaborative and was carried out by a project team representing four universities. See *Project team.*

3. The project was based on previously funded work which investigated the nature and extent of usage of students within academic professional development in the sector through a literature search and email survey and discovered that students were used rarely in this capacity but, where they were used, the experience was valuable to both the students and staff involved. See *Background to the project.*

4. The project team investigated effective ways of enabling the student voice to be heard in academic professional development to allow staff to engage with the students' perspective through the development and evaluation of eight innovative case studies which included different mechanisms, media and contexts. The case studies are explored under the *Case studies* section which includes a summary of the case studies together with an analysis of the approaches covered and themes which arose. Each of the developed case studies (comprising the developer's commentary and student and staff evaluations) are provided in *Appendix 4.*

5. The project plan, outcomes and case studies were shared with the sector through a range of dissemination methods described under the *Dissemination of outcomes* section. Events included three seminars held in London, Leeds and Glasgow which were well attended and details of participation, programmes and inputs are provided in *Appendices 1 – 3*. Other dissemination included publications and the Hearing the Student Voice website www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices/.

6. As a result of undertaking the case studies and through discussions at the meetings of the project team and at the dissemination seminars, a number of issues arose and these are explored in the *Student involvement issues* and *Wider issues* sections.

7. To encourage staff to use the student voice within their own practice, guidance has been provided as a ten-step approach within the *Guidance for staff on how to capture and use the student voice to enhance academic practice* section. The guidance together with the project Case study forms (available to download from the project website) will enable staff to develop, implement and evaluate their own activities involving students and, if they wish, contribute these to the project.

Staff can also download, complete and submit the Survey form reporting brief details of relevant institutional activity.

8. The work of this project can be extended in many ways to enable the student voice to be captured and heard for other purposes including shaping the curriculum. Other areas for investigation could include the use of electronic means to capture the student voice. See *Future direction.*

9. The project team has concluded that using the student voice in professional development is a valuable strategy which impacts on both the staff and students involved. In order for this to be effective:

    - meaningful opportunities have to be provided which enable students to reflect on their experiences and speak freely

    - appropriate professional development interventions have to be provided which enable staff to be engaged by hearing the student voice and motivated to make changes to academic practice as a result.

    - there is a need to capitalise on the significant interest shown in this project – and the wider groundswell of activity relating to student engagement which supports it – in order to encourage cultural change within higher education to enable hearing the student voice to be valued as a means to enhance the student experience. See *Conclusions.*

10. The *Bibliography* contains details of literature relevant to this project.

Project team

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(April 2006–October 2006) formerly Head of Educational and Staff Development Unit, Staff and Student Development Department, UCE Birmingham,
now Associate Director, Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Seattle University

Ann Rumpus
Head, Educational Initiative Centre, University of Westminster

Project aims

This project aimed to promote and encourage the use of the student voice to enhance the effectiveness of academic professional development in learning, teaching and assessment practice and ultimately the learning experience of students by:

- raising the profile of using the student voice as a professional development strategy in higher education
- equipping educational and staff developers with the skills and confidence necessary to employ the student voice effectively within professional development in learning, teaching and assessment
- widening the use of this professional development strategy by building a community of practice comprising staff and educational developers within higher education.

Background to the project

Initial work in this area – carried out with funding awarded by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) small grants fund in 2004 – aimed to investigate the nature and extent of usage of students within academic professional development in the sector. Tools used included a literature search and an email survey of educational development units in UK universities and elicited the following main results:

- Very limited use of students directly in any form of professional development. Main uses tended to include using students through participation in surveys, committee representation.

- Very limited use of students in professional development concerned with learning, teaching and assessment. Main usage tended to be in corporate professional development in areas such as students' association presentations at staff induction. An observation concluded:

> Bringing together of faculty and students for discussion of the *process* of teaching and learning in which they are jointly involved (rather than the usual focus on the *content* of the curriculum) is as rare as it is valuable.
>
> (Asmar, 1999)

- Despite the above, there was much enthusiasm from the sector regarding the benefits of this approach coupled with a realisation that students were a rich and often untapped resource. When asked if they used students within academic professional development typical comments included:

> I had never thought about this before and can't believe we use students so little.
>
> No, but we might think about it now!

- A limited number of very interesting examples of effective usage in academic professional development. These were judged to be successful by the educational and staff developers and by the academic staff involved who were engaged by hearing student views of their learning and teaching practice. Typical staff comments included:

> Great idea having a student on the team.
>
> I felt the process was from the bottom up not the top down.
>
> Students' input was invaluable, students must be included in the process.
>
> Quoted in Ballantyne *et al* (2000)

> It made the whole thing much more concrete and immediate to have the students there expressing their views and telling of their experience. It helped to translate some of the things I had been thinking/writing about into the domain of practice.
>
> The thing that struck me most profoundly was the comments of the students. I found it very enlightening.
>
> Quoted in Asmar (1999)

- Students were also engaged by the process:

> I gained a feeling of accomplishment and relevance; people listened to what I had to say.
>
> Quoted in Ballantyne *et al* (2000)

Further examples are provided in Campbell (2007).

Case studies

This project aimed to capitalise on the investigative findings described in *Background to the project* and the experience of project partners through the development and dissemination of case studies featuring in-depth examples of good practice. The case studies were developed by members of the project team and other collaborators to meet needs within their institutional contexts but also to have wider transferability. The project delivered eight completed case studies from six institutions which have together shown that the student voice can be a powerful force in the development of both staff and curricula.

A summary of the case studies follows and the full case studies including evaluative information from both students and staff are provided in *Appendix 4*.

The case studies employed differing methods and involved diverse staff and student groupings. An analysis of the approaches used in the case studies and the common themes which emerged are explored later within this section.

A ten-step approach to developing a case study is provided in the *Guidance for staff in how to capture and use the student voice to enhance academic practice* section. The case studies were written up using a common template and this – together with the student and staff evaluation forms and the student permission form – is available to download from the project website.

Summaries

Supervising Master's Degree Research

Staff attending an accredited programme for Masters supervisors were joined in the final session by research students in a session to enable supervisors to hear first-hand and in a non-threatening environment how students react to supervision at various stages in the cycle. The session brought to the fore the importance of establishing and building relationships and helped supervisors see the impact of this on their students' progress. Other benefits for staff included seeing the process from the students' perspective and considering students' dilemmas and concerns. Students also benefited by seeing that some of their experiences were common rather than individual and by meeting other postgraduate students to share ideas and build networks to help with their studies.

David Green and Jenny Eland, UCE Birmingham

Voices off? Using student voice for reflective staff development

This case study aimed to contribute to the development of a more holistic evaluation culture which centred on the student voice. Student views on what helps or hinders their learning were sought within a whole programme review process and the resulting honest and thoughtful feedback was used to support reflective staff development at both the individual and departmental level. This approach, in relation to more conventional evaluation approaches, led to the creation of a richer picture of the student experience

and how teachers affect this, a greater awareness of development needs and much more engagement and enthusiasm from students in the process.
Phil Verrill, University of Chichester

Sharing experiences: staff and students working as peers

The Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) Subject Centre has involved students in its educational development work in various different ways for several years. This case study focuses on an event in which students and staff came together to discuss issues within higher education with the aim of sharing perspectives and backgrounds and assessing how these affect interactions, facilitating networking, identifying areas of miscommunication and how relations and interactions can be improved. The event was a positive experience for those who attended and enabled staff and students to break down their assumptions about each other and to see the world from each others' perspective.
Helen King and Sian Evans, Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) Subject Centre

Using the student voice in staff development to progress a pilot Personal Development Planning module

In this case study, students were involved in contributing to the course development process for a new pilot module. Students were recorded in conversation about their experience as first-year full-time undergraduate students on a PDP WebCT Vista module. The conversation was led by a member of staff from outside the main teaching team. The depth of insight and range of perspectives that emerged were significant and extensive and, following analysis, were grouped into six key themes. A staff development session was held which explored each of these themes and featured key student quotes relevant to each to stimulate discussion. The inclusion of voices was considered by colleagues to have been valuable and raised awareness of the student-centredness of this approach.
Liz Beasley, Leeds Metropolitan University

Student perspectives on how we can improve social integration for overseas students

Overseas students face particular difficulties in integrating with students from the UK and other countries. In this case study overseas students participated – in person and through video commentary – in a professional development session for academic staff which aimed to find practical and achievable strategies for strengthening social cohesion both in the classroom and through encouraging participation in university-led activities. The workshop was successful in enabling staff to discuss practical mechanisms that they could adopt to discover the needs of international students, encourage integration and to promote a two-way exchange between cultures.
Alison Varey, Napier University

‘My first year experience’: constructing student video diaries

Student voices were captured and used to inform and engage staff on the experience of students in their first year at university. To maximise impact and avoid exposing individual students to scrutiny, authentic student views were captured from internal surveys and developed into scripts for ‘video diaries’ for four different student profiles at key points within the year. Using student ‘actors’ and digital media students as filmmakers, video diaries were recorded onto DVD and used at the start of a staff conference. The video diaries engendered much engagement and debate about the issues first-years face. Staff were very engaged by the immediacy and realism of the video diaries and their effectiveness in highlighting the challenges which different types of students face at different times in their first year and which carried clear implications for academic practice.

Fiona Campbell, Napier University

‘How we like to be taught’: recording student views to support staff development in student-centred learning

To support the university’s strategic commitment to student-centered learning, student views on what is helpful in motivating and supporting their learning and what teaching approaches they find useful were captured with the aim of using them in staff development to engage staff. The student views were video-recorded on a vox pop basis across the university campuses by a journalism student and then edited to form a 20-minute DVD presentation. The DVD was used in a staff development session on student-centred learning to prompt discussion on how students learn and shown to groups of relevant and senior staff. Staff found the DVD a compelling expression of students’ views on effective teaching and a very powerful development tool.

Ann Rumpus, University of Westminster

‘What we really think’: focus group reflections on an MA course

Current and past students of an MA course took part in focus groups facilitated by a neutral member of staff to provide feedback – anonymously – on the curriculum design and delivery over and above that provided by the module questionnaires. The student discussion was developed into a written narrative – including verbatim phrases – to enable staff to have an open debate about the issues raised to further develop the course. The student views expressed were considered, positive and honest and stimulated good discussion among staff who felt that hearing the students’ verbatim views generated more reflection than other forms of feedback.

Ann Rumpus, University of Westminster

Approaches

The project aimed to discover effective ways of enabling academic staff to improve their practice by listening and responding to students' views on their learning experiences. The approaches chosen to achieve this were selected by each institution as being the most appropriate to their purpose and target groups and as such have provided a richness and depth to the case studies developed.

Three of the case studies produced DVDs to be used in wider staff training and development sessions (Westminster – *How we like to learn*: Napier – *Social integration*: Napier – *The first year experience*). These studies ensured that students' perspectives on learning and teaching were both seen and heard. Although in the two Napier examples the 'real' voices were portrayed by 'actors' the impact and immediacy of effect on staff participants was the same. For those participating in the session interacting with the student voice, albeit via a screen, this ensured that not only was the voice heard but it was also listened to and required thoughtful responses and actions.

The method used by Leeds Metropolitan also allowed the voice to be heard and to be an integral part of module development. In order to complete an evaluation of a new module the students were recorded in conversations about their experiences. Selected parts of the tapes were then played to the module team and specific questions raised for discussion. Again this enabled a real voice to be heard underlining the student-centredness of the approach which achieved a valid developmental advance to evaluation and planning.

The bringing of academics and students together to effect professional development was employed in the GEES and UCE Birmingham case studies. In both studies staff were able to meet with and hear first-hand in a safe, non-threatening environment, the views of students and to understand their reactions to the process of learning. Using students' voices in 'live' events ensures that you are hearing real views (and not making assumptions) which can utilise common concerns to feedback into self and curriculum development. There can be more risks in using this approach but if prepared and facilitated well the benefits can be tremendous.

Chichester made use of a very detailed face-to-face student evaluation procedure which was then fed into the professional development process. The student voice was employed within a 'whole programme' approach to evaluation and the observations collected were used in professional development and to facilitate reflective practice at the individual and departmental levels. Mechanisms were used to encourage students to be confident of 'speaking their voice' regarding how teaching helps or hinders their learning and the staff to be confident enough to 'hear' that voice, crucially reflect and, where appropriate, act. The approach proved to be a positive experience for those involved with students clearly enthusiastic about this approach to evaluation and staff.

Westminster also used a focus group method to aid in course review and development. Here current and past students were interviewed by a neutral member of staff with the student discussion developed into a written narrative making use of verbatim phrases. The student views expressed were considered and stimulated good discussion among staff.

It became evident from the case studies that many of the methods used to gain students' views took up a significant amount of administrative time and effort in setting up the 'event'. So even though the approach might have been inexpensive in terms of materials and other direct costs there was still quite a high resource demand in terms of staff time. This could also apply to student time. Most of the studies relied on the goodwill of both staff and students.

The low cost, non technological activities were heavier on administration in particular where transcripts were typed and analysed and limited administrative support could mean an increased workload for facilitators. One case study was off campus and so involved additional costs (the hiring of the venue, catering etc) although the neutrality of the environment produced a rich experience for all. The production of DVDs/videos was demanding on both time and money, particularly in filming and editing, but this was balanced by an output that had an extended life and can now be utilised in many arenas.

The lead time to develop case studies was greater than expected, and this was often influenced by the need to fit to institutions' academic calendars, and to involve students at an appropriate time in terms of their workloads and other activities.

Themes

In the development and implementation of the case studies a number of themes emerged which are explored below.

Recognising the importance of hearing the 'real voice'…
An important theme found in all the case studies was the physicality of actually hearing a voice. It is clear that the use of the student voice is a powerful approach; this was commented on in a majority of the case studies and through the dissemination events. For example two responses to the question '*One of the things I liked most about the day was':*

> Hearing the student voice through DVDs/video diaries.
> (Participant – London seminar)
>
> The opportunity to hear all views – students and staff discussing mutually beneficial approaches to developing teaching and learning.
> (Participant – Leeds seminar)

Also:

> Powerful stuff! Rang true. Brings issues to life.
> (all from Napier case study: The first year experience)

As Liz Beasley notes in the summary of her case study '*the inclusion of voices was considered by colleagues to have been valuable and the process raised awareness of the student-centredness of this approach'.*

There was a general perception that the students were being honest and insightful, something that is easier to judge when you hear a voice. The sound of a human voice expressing views had a real impact producing comments such as:

> The impact of a 'live' student beats the books anytime.
>
> More immediate and effective in getting the message over than having a member of staff presenting anecdotal evidence.
>
> I thought the authenticity was good – could relate to what the students were saying, it 'rang true'.
>
> Adds immediacy and realism.
>
> The student involvement caught my attention and made me listen to what was being said.
>
> (all from Napier case study: The first year experience)

This physicality contrasts with the more common ways students are asked to contribute their views – through module evaluations, induction surveys, end of year questionnaires, employability surveys, the National Student Survey etc. The methods used for these purposes seem to lessen the impact of the voice:

> Actually seeing and hearing responses carries a veracity that reading through piles of module feedback comments never can.
>
> (Westminster case study: How we like to be taught)
>
> Good to 'hear' what they thought, you can lose context with the written word.
>
> (Leeds Metropolitan case study: Personal development planning)

…and being heard

Alongside staff hearing student voices was the importance to students of actually being heard and a sense of being able to make a difference. Students noted that:

> It created some form of platform to spell out the situations that I have undergone.
>
> I hope that my contribution today will help other students to benefit as I have.
>
> (both UCE case study: Research Supervision)

> Shows what students think and what can be changed.
>
> Next year tell year 2s that we made the changes.
> (both Leeds Metropolitan case study: Personal development planning)
>
> Great to hear that the university is concerned.
> (Napier case study: Social integration)

Questioning the authenticity of the voice
Although many of the studies note the benefits resulting from the authenticity and validity of the voices, there were some concerns as to how representative the student groups really were. Some of the studies considered the difficulties in getting students to participate and the small numbers lead some to question the outcomes:

> How representative are they?
> (Napier case study: Social integration)
>
> Not sure about how representative the views are about the learning experience.
>
> Entirely anecdotal. No idea whether views are representative of general opinion.
>
> Unclear what the implications are. Small sample, selection may have reflected willingness to provide response, other footage may have been discarded
> (all from Westminster case study: How we like to be taught)

Also in one case a student noted:

> Felt that I should agree as was asked to do so by my supervisor.
> (UCE case study: Research supervision)

See also *Student involvement issues: representation* for further discussion of this issue.

Providing opportunities for reflection and change
The use of the student voice to reflect on and consider the implications for practice and change underpinned all of the studies. As Phil Verrill noted in his case study based at the University of Chichester '*we wanted the students to be confident of 'speaking their voice' and the staff to be confident enough to 'hear' that voice, crucially reflect and, where appropriate, act'.*

Within the feedback both staff and student participants noted the opportunity the process gave them for reflection. In the Westminster case study it was noted that the students' verbatim comments generated more reflection than other forms of feedback.

Almost overwhelmingly participants in the case studies found the experience worthwhile and were positive about their experience and the impact it would have on their practice:

> Excellent – this will enable me to review and reflect on current practices and conventions…with a view to improving the experience for all.
>
> It has motivated me to change my approach.
>
> The 'student voice' segment of the course was invaluable and will certainly lead me to change and modify certain aspects of my supervisory style. Fab.
>
> (all from UCE case study: Research supervision)
>
> Gave me confidence to continue to refine my teaching.
>
> I will try and be more aware that small comments/actions of mine can be very important.
>
> (both from Napier case study: The first year experience)

However some who felt little had been or would be achieved:

– when asked if employing the student voice would make a difference said:

> Nothing new was said.
>
> (Napier case study: The first year experience)
>
> Nothing new that I was aware of. I think most staff are aware of student views.
>
> I'm not sure how relevant the feedback is to the courses for which I am responsible.
>
> (Westminster case study: How we like to be taught)

– when asked if the exercise was likely to be valuable said:

> Hope it has an impact – depends if put in practice.
>
> (Leeds Metropolitan case study: Personal development planning)

Establishing and building relationships

There seems to a consensus that the case studies have highlighted the importance of establishing and building relationships and the positive impact this has on both students and staff. The activity has laid the foundations on which to build further interactions that can feed into design and development:

> To discuss issues face to face with students did not introduce any new ideas, but helped to raise my awareness and made one think in terms of practical ways to adjust my approach that would benefit them.
> (UCE case study: Research supervision – staff comment)
>
> I found the interaction between staff and students very beneficial.
>
> It has given me an appreciation that lecturers also at times struggle with supervision and with interpreting criteria.
> (UCE case study: Research supervision – student comments)
>
> I feel that I better understand the process that the students are engaged in terms of personal and academic development.
> (UCE case study: Research supervision – staff comment)
>
> I gained a fuller appreciation of the responsibilities and commitments of the lecturers.
> (GEES case study: Sharing experiences – student comment)
>
> A benefit is that we have a richer picture of the student experience and how teachers affect this.
> (Chichester case study: Voices off? – staff comment)

Dispelling assumptions and appreciating perspectives

In most social interactions there is a tendency to make assumptions about the various participants and to proceed on that basis rather than verifying them. The case studies highlight how, through actively listening, we can avoid making assumptions through learning about each other's perceptions and viewpoints. For instance, staff at Napier University expressed surprise at the difference between the assumptions they had made about the experiences of first-year students and the reality portrayed. The GEES study also notes that their event was a positive experience and enabled all those participating to break down their assumptions and see things from another perspective. At Chichester they were able to note that a benefit of the work was a greater awareness on the part of teachers of how students view their teaching in relation to how it helps or hinders learning:

> I was not aware of the extent to which they expect their supervisor to 'motivate' them. I found this very revealing.
>
> The students saw value in making lecturers more aware of the students' feelings and perspectives and …commented on the fact that their experiences were common, rather than individual.
>
> We need feedback from students to know what are their concerns and needs.
> (all from UCE case study: Research supervision)

Essential to ensure that we address students' problems, not just what we think they are.

They provided ideas and thoughts we as staff may not have thought of or come across before.

Without student involvement the staff would be discussing the matter in a vacuum.
(all from Napier case study: Social integration)

Lecturers can't guess how students feel and this activity gave both sides an opportunity to voice concerns and beliefs of what is important to each other.
(GEES case study: Sharing experiences)

Without empirical evidence we're left with guess work and even if our guesses are good, we can't know all the ways that students experience their first year.
(Napier case study: The first year experience)

Useful to hear student feedback and reassuring that their comments reinforce my own ideas of what is needed for effective teaching and learning.
(Westminster case study: How we like to be taught)

Student involvement issues

As a result of undertaking the case studies, through the meetings of the project team and at the dissemination seminars a number of issues relating to student involvement arose relating to participation, representation and protecting their interests.

Participation

It became evident through the case studies that it can be difficult to secure students' involvement, particularly for broad cross-institution approaches. Several planned approaches could not be delivered within the timescale of the project due to the difficulty of recruiting the students at the right time in the academic year. It also emerged that although collaboration with a university's students' union might be a very helpful approach (and certainly experience showed their willingness to engage with such work) in the event they might have no better ways of getting to broad groups of students. It appeared to be easier to target students for focus groups, face-to-face sessions etc if working within the confines of a particular course. One conclusion that the project team drew is that ready engagement of students requires a change of culture and context within universities so that seeking student views (other than through questionnaires) is more 'routine'. This was reinforced by the seminar discussions:

> Changing perceptions on value of student voice involves long term and cultural change.
>
> (Participant – London seminar)
>
> Raises many issues about how we change many entrenched views in our own institutions.
>
> (Participant – Leeds seminar)

Indeed the project team had to work hard to involve students in the project seminars; this was very worthwhile as having them at the sessions was highly appreciated. This would argue for a higher profile of students in such cross-institution developmental events, as well as activities within an institution:

> Good to have students involved in this.
>
> (Participant – Leeds seminar)
>
> Very useful having student so much involved in the workshop.
>
> (Participant – London seminar)

The reasons for the difficulty in involving students are probably complex. Part of this difficulty is that there's no clear 'best time of year'; students are either working hard and reluctant to put their time in, or not on campus. They also have other priorities in their lives. There may also be some reluctance to be exposed in sharing critical views.

Students simply may not see this as their role. However, none of the students we have engaged with have found it a waste of time, and some commented very favourably:

> I would like to give and share my experience to help following fellow students.
> (Napier case study: Social Integration)
>
> Lecturers can't guess what students feel and this activity gave both sides an opportunity to voice concerns and beliefs of what is important to each other.
> (GEES case study: Sharing experiences)

It is clear that anything which is undertaken needs to be an efficient use of students' time. There was also a shared perception that many students might be reluctant to engage because they perceive that feedback collected from them using traditional methods is meaningless:

> Just tick the boxes – doesn't let you explain. Doesn't give you the opportunity to express yourself.
> (Chichester case study: Voices off?)

Students also feel that feedback they provide is not acted on:

> Sometimes I feel nothing will improve from our feedback – nothing will.
> (Chichester case study: Voices off?)

It is also the case that students may lack the terminology with which to describe their teaching and learning experiences and this may be a barrier to their input:

> Our discourse of teaching and learning is not one that students necessarily have.
> (Participant – London seminar)
>
> [How do we] give the students the language and understanding of teaching and learning?
> (Participant – London seminar)

The need to listen carefully to students and to later inform them of the outcomes of their comments must become part of any such activity, whether or not those outcomes result in change. It is not just 'taking' the voice, but we also need to be seen as 'engaging' with it:

> Students need to see the value of what is being done and to see the feedback being used.
>
> (Participant – Glasgow seminar)
>
> In involving students and staff, important also to manage their expectations: some things are not possible.
>
> We should be discussing listening to the student voice not hearing it: we must listen and act upon it.
>
> (Participants – Leeds seminar)
>
> I feel that you are listening more to our feelings and queries.
>
> (Chichester case study: Voices off?)

The issue was also raised of whether some value might accrue to the student as a result of participation. One approach might be to pay the students or to offer a 'reward' (eg Amazon® tokens). Possibly the expression of the voice could be built in some way into the curriculum and the students' overall development. There would seem to be significant potential in using students' participation in such project work as an element of work-based learning, an opportunity for reflection on their own capabilities which could involve contribution to their personal development planning (PDP) file or a chance to benefit from involvement in a case study by seeing how interviews/evaluations were undertaken.

Representation

Concern was also expressed by staff in the case studies and at the seminars as to whether the students engaged in the case studies were representative. Several staff saw this as a serious issue:

> The fact that there was no way of knowing how generally applicable the criticism and praise was both in terms of numbers of students and the numbers of lecturers to which it applied.
>
> (Westminster case study: How we like to be taught)
>
> We need to find ways of judging how typical these personal accounts may be.
>
> (Napier case study: The first year experience)

In almost all cases the student group was a subset of the appropriate student population, and had volunteered to participate; hence they cannot be seen as fully representative. As such it must be recognised that the comments made provide a body

of evidence for consideration (alongside other sources of feedback), to promote staff reflection, and to initiate debate. The students' comments should not be taken as a complete 'truth' which could automatically mandate any given action. However this caveat would apply to most forms of feedback from students. Indeed in his keynote at the Glasgow seminar, Norman Sharp, Director of the QAA, Scotland, addressed this issue by saying that full representation is never feasible: student feedback is only truly representative if each and every member of the student body provides their views.

What is important is that how representative the students involved are should be made clear to staff from the start so that they can judge for themselves the validity of their input.

Any attempt to manipulate the student sample to make it truly 'representative' would probably be spurious, as students can be classified in so many different ways; however there remains the issue of attempting to draw in as wide a range of students as possible:

> Is there one student voice? It is difficult to recruit the student voice and there is a danger that a limited number of individuals are seen to be the student voice. We do need to take it as it is although we should perhaps talk about student *voices*.
>
> (Participant – Glasgow seminar)

One of the issues that has been raised through the project is the difficulty of recruiting the voices of those who are reluctant to participate as these may be just the voices that are needed:

> Essential that we reach the students who are not present: how do we reach students who don't engage, don't turn up or who drop out?
>
> (Participant – Leeds seminar)

Protecting their interests

It is clearly essential that the interests of students need to be protected in order to ensure that they feel free to make comments which are both constructive and critical if necessary. This may be a problem if asking students to engage in face-to-face discussions with staff, particularly recognising that staff have influence over students' success, and students may find this inhibiting. There is also the possibility that staff might become inhibited in expressing their views in full if students are present at any debate, although this did not emerge in these case studies.

Whilst not discounting the impact of direct face-to-face conversations between students and staff who teach them, it was recognised that this brought potential problems. Sometimes it can be helpful to 'script' students' comments, in order to get a coherent overview for working with staff; this is more useful for making generic points, but loses

the vitality of providing direct quotes from students to staff who teach on their courses and modules. A successful solution is to ask students to present views following a student-only group discussion to staff, rather than individuals presenting their own views. Another approach was the use of 'actors', with a script generated from real student comment, for any visual representation; this loses some immediacy in relation to '*my students said this'*, but has been shown to be successful for generic issues.

The use of independent facilitators for focus groups was also seen as a positive way to safeguard the interests of the students, as the origin of the comments are confidential to the facilitator, whom the student see as neutral, but again this loses the impact of direct reporting to staff. It is important that the students trust and have confidence in the facilitator, and a solution might be to use a student to do the facilitation. This in itself can lead to an increased impact on staff, and could be a valuable self-development activity for the student:

> Freshness – useful to hear from the students discussing issues with a fellow student.
>
> (Westminster case study: How we like to be taught – staff comment)

Encouraging openness will also depend on the way the groups are managed so as to create a climate of positive input, although of course the need to structure any session also leads to concerns that the facilitator may be influencing the debate in some way, and this needs to be guarded against:

> Important to collect the voice in structured way – or risk an 'incoherent babble', but is this leading the discussion?
>
> Essential for environment to be constructive: 'how could things have been done better?'
>
> (Participants – London seminar)
>
> It can be difficult to hear critical comments from students – essential to provide the right culture to enable this to happen and to be used constructively?
>
> (Participant – Leeds seminar)

Throughout the project there has been a focus on ethical issues, which included the necessity, or otherwise, of putting the activity to a university's ethics committee. There was not a strong consensus on this as it appeared to be influenced by the local institutional culture and the precise nature of the activity. What was universally agreed on was the priority of ensuing that students were not disadvantaged by their participation, which by its nature cannot always be anonymous. It was also important that students were aware of the purposes for which their comments would be used, and that any such undertakings were consented to and adhered to. These issues were reflected in several of the seminar discussions:

> We must be aware that there is a power relationship between staff and students and so important for student voice to be collected – and used – ethically.
>
> (Participant – London seminar)

Wider issues

In the course of the project work some wider issues for consideration were highlighted – particularly during the discussions at the dissemination seminars – and are explored below; and are grouped under a series of headings, for convenience, although recognising that many of these issues are inter-connected.

Purposes

The purpose of this project was the use of the authentic student voice as a tool in professional development; however during the project, and particularly at the dissemination seminars, a much wider agenda emerged of using the student voice as a source of information for a range of purposes.

The seminar discussions in particular raised a range of purposes for which the student voice can be used, and hence the need to be clear about this purpose in designing the activity and engaging the students. Purposes might include the traditional use of student input into research projects, the use of feedback to initiate enhancements to course provision and the student experience, and the potential for using student input directly to shape the curriculum rather than simply reacting to their views. Additionally there may be some balance between using students' views to inform developments (which may be their expression of critical views) or to reinforce good experiences.

> How can we encourage dialogue about learning experiences within the classroom?
>
> (Participant - Leeds seminar)

Furthermore there may be a role for the use of such material as a publicity vehicle, or as a way of engaging new students. What was common in participants' views (and those who were involved in the case studies) was the force of the voice in expressing qualitative comment, rather than the perceived more sterile approach of quantitative questionnaire feedback data.

> Actually seeing and hearing responses carries a veracity that reading through piles of module feedback comments never can.
>
> (Westminster case study: How we like to be taught)

It also became evident throughout the project that using the student voice in professional development can actually apply to a potentially very wide range of Continuing Professional Development opportunities, for example in induction for new staff, staff meetings, formal professional development sessions, in courses for inexperienced staff etc. It also potentially provides a vehicle for asking other students to interact with the material as a means of confirmation or extension of the initial views

expressed. In meeting these wider uses the individual who instigated the work may need to recognise that they may have less direct control over the use of the material. Again this is a consideration for the design of the activity, and indicates a need for clarity over the purposes to which the student input might, or can, be put. Care might also need to be exercised over the 'shelf life' of any comments and this might in itself influence the design of the activity.

Currency

In undertaking the case study work, presenting it, and through the dissemination seminars it became evident that this attention to seeking the student voice was part of a groundswell of activity, and that it was seen to be of high importance:

> I've never been involved in this sort of seminar before and it's good to know there's a dedicated effort to involve the student voice.
>
> (Participant – Glasgow seminar)
>
> The more student involvement the better in respect of a student-centred approach.
>
> (Leeds Metropolitan case study: Personal development planning)

The project team has questioned why this has come to what appears to be increased prominence at this time, although of course recognising that there has always been a level of student engagement:

> Reminded me of work I did ten years ago that I could revive.
>
> (Participant - London seminar)

Reasons might include the public impact of the National Student Survey, and the perceived need to improve the students' feedback to this and hence the standing of the institution. It could also be related to the consciousness of the increase in fees and the feeling that there is an element of needing to provide 'value for money'. It might relate to the current increased QAA emphasis on quality enhancement rather than the previous concentration on quality assurance. There may also be some feeling amongst staff that there is a lack of connection with students in this era of mass provision and with students spending much longer out of the university at paid work. Perhaps staff feel they have less time or opportunity to informally talk to students, a lack of 'conversation', which these activities can ameliorate. Indeed staff commented that the ability to get direct comments from students via a DVD or in a group session had quite a motivating impact, and perhaps the direct involvement with students as part of capturing their voice could in itself be a 'reward' for staff:

> Good to see students involved in the production of the DVD. I found it inspirational. It reminded me what we are here for!
>
> (Westminster case study: How we like to be taught)
>
> Memorable portrayal of some first year student voices.
>
> (Napier case study: The first year experience)

Methods

The choice of a method for gaining, capturing and using students' views clearly has to be a decision based on fitness for purpose, whilst acknowledging that resource constraints might also play a part in this, and that the context in which the activity was taking place would be important:

> Are we not so good in encouraging the voice? What is then the best step? For each purpose there is a need to find the best mechanism and the students themselves can help in this. We need to be very specific in what we want.
>
> We need to be open to using different evaluations methods and to use a range to give a wider picture. We should hear the voice through qualitative means to give a clear and honest analysis.
>
> Complex area and only by trialing case studies and talking to staff and students can it work. There probably isn't a one size fits all answer, there is a need to consider fitness for purpose and to bring all ideas together.
>
> The voice is an important part of the student identity therefore we need multiple ways of voicing and listening.
>
> (Participants – Glasgow seminar)
>
> Different methods of using the student voice might be appropriate for different disciplines.
>
> (Participant – Leeds seminar)

The benefits of focus group discussions where students discuss topics with their peers was mentioned:

> I found it much more valuable and easier to voice my opinion in group meetings.
>
> (Chichester case study: Voices off? – student comment)

It was also raised at the seminars that asking students to make comments should include recognition of the need for reflective 'space', and there was a consensus on this. Comments which arose through the seminars included:

> Students could be encouraged to express their views by providing a reflective account of their experience of the process eg submitting the 'story of my essay' along with the essay itself.
>
> (Participant – London seminar)
>
> We should leave time to hear the voice. If you show that you really want to hear the voice: be quiet and give thinking time. We need to compensate for the reticent by giving them more time and listening harder.
>
> There is a link to reflective practice and this needs to be seen as a part of learning and therefore an active process – if it is integral to the process then it will be easier to hear the voice.
>
> (Participants – Glasgow seminar)

It was also recognised that there is some balance between high profile, generic approaches and those which are more immediate and local in nature. The use of high-cost, high-impact approaches (such as DVDs) might have a greater longevity and be used with higher numbers of staff, but will of necessity be more generic in nature, addressing institution-wide issues. More immediate interactions (such as face-to-face contact between staff and students, focus groups) might have a great short-term impact, and be more suitable for 'local' interactions in specifically addressing issues at course or module level, but are less likely to reach high numbers of staff, or be used over an extended period. Clearly this is an aspect of the issue referred to above around fitness for purpose.

The issue of probity in the use of the students' comments has already been raised above, but some other issues emerged during discussion within the project team. There was some concern when using a mediated process (eg a facilitator who would then report to a staff group) as to whether all the student quotes should be recorded and transcribed, or whether it is acceptable to make written notes at the time. It was considered that in effect this would probably be context specific, as the costs involved in transcription might be high, and disproportionate to the outcome required. However this raised the issue of whether in taking these notes there was a danger of selectivity of the students' comments included, and the risk of bias being introduced to support a previously held view. This could equally apply to the selection of extracts to place on a DVD. Pragmatically we drew the conclusion that a degree of professionalism and self-awareness in operating the process is the best solution, given the fact that most of this work is likely to be carried out under time and resource constraints which preclude more elaborate procedures of employing independent staff to undertake the work. However we appreciate the necessity for transparency:

> Of course you have to be selective in using extracts – but you must be clear that you have been selective.
>
> (Participant – SEDA conference workshop)

As touched on above a student view may not always be 'right' and is only part of a range of sources of evidence to inform provision for students. Hence there must be a mechanism for staff to debate the outcomes from students, or with them, and to counter certain comments as appropriate. A frequent source of input from students, which was mentioned surprisingly little throughout the project, is the course committee or staff-student committee. It may be that this approach has been found less effective due to some of the issues about openness of comments at such meetings, as indicated above; possibly the fact that such meetings are normally a required part of formal quality assurance processes may have 'diluted' their impact. This was an issue which was raised in one of the seminars:

> But there could be a danger of the student voice being hijacked by the QA agenda and for it be used for unintended purposes. Listening to the student voice will become a different thing if institutions are forced to use it for QA purposes.
>
> (Participant – Leeds seminar)

However, sparqs (www.sparqs.ac.uk) work to enhance the impact of student voices within university committees by delivering training and support in Scotland for student representatives as well as advice to institutions on how to engage students and enable them to contribute effectively to university fora.

Dissemination of outcomes

Dissemination has been a key part of the project with the aim of sharing the outcomes of the project to facilitate the building of a community of practice interested and equipped to use the student voice as professional development strategy to enhance academic practice. Dissemination strategies have included events (both project and external), publications and the project website.

Events: project

One-day project dissemination seminars were held in:

- London (at University of Westminster) 1 March 2007
- Leeds (at Leeds Metropolitan University) 23 March 2007
- Glasgow (at Marriott Hotel) on 9 May 2007.

These sessions attracted a total of 140 staff representing 56 universities and 6 organisations. Details of these universities and organisations are provided in *Appendix 1*.

The outlines and programmes for each seminar are provided in *Appendix 2*. All the seminars included:

- plenary presentation introducing and discussing the ideas behind the project and the plans – see PowerPoint® presentation on the project website at www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices/download/FC090507presentation.ppt.

- optional workshops focusing mainly on case studies developed by the project team and others – see summaries in *Appendix 3*. Each seminar differed by featuring some case studies developed locally. Many of the presentations are provided on the project website at www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices/events.htm

- a plenary discussion session exploring issues relating to the aims of the project and wider issues. Despite being at the end of the day, participants stayed for these sessions and contributed to them engendering a very useful debate. An analysis of the issues discussed in these sessions is contained within the *Wider Issues* section of this report.

Additionally:

- at the London event the day was introduced by Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas (Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Westminster) who welcomed the initiative and discussed how students have much to say about their experiences at universities and will find their own mechanisms to air their views if their institutions do not find satisfactory ways to facilitate this and to respond to students' input.

- at the Leeds event, Professor Sally Brown (Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Leeds Metropolitan University) introduced the day by discussing the university's support of the project within the wider context of the centrality of the student voice at the university. This was illustrated by a number of initiatives which are encouraging students to contribute their views.

- at the Glasgow event, Norman Sharp (Director, Quality Assurance Agency, Scotland) gave a keynote in which he addressed the importance to higher education of hearing the student voice and discussed the QAA Scotland's unique initiative in involving students in external institutional review which has proved an outstandingly positive experience for both the institutions, staff and students involved.

Evaluations of these events suggested they were valuable and worthwhile with comments including:

London:

- Particularly useful to have the space/time to range around issues
- Useful, interesting and stimulating conversations
- This is such an exciting and potentially valuable theme, and to be able to consider it so *interactively* was very useful
- Lots of food for thought
- Lively atmosphere
- Challenging and diverse ideas
- Gave me some good ideas, sparked off some plans for action, thanks
- Room for everyone to express their views
- A chance to share, reflect, be stimulated and challenged by others
- Stimulating discussion with colleagues (following valuable input) which has generated ideas for lots of positive action when we return to our institutions
- Lots of information along with hearing how people 'hear the student voice' has made it a very worthwhile day
- More please
- I would be fascinated to read more about the project. Please keep me posted!
- An impetus for teaching and pause for reflection.

Leeds:

- Much food for thought and ideas generated
- Interesting, informative
- Good to share experiences with others
- All good
- Has given me an idea for research project
- Fun and interactive
- Focus on intellectual as well as practical issues and that matters
- Thought provoking
- Enthusiastic speakers
- Communicated the power of capturing an authentic student voice

- Opportunity to discuss the issues and network across professions/disciplines/institutions
- Exchange and sharing of ideas and methods of improving how we capture what students need/want to get from experiences at university
- Some good enthusiastic ideas balanced by good analysis and criticality of ideas
- Hearing evidence already gathered
- Opportunity to hear all voices – students and staff – discuss mutually beneficial approaches to developing teaching and learning
- Collaboration with other staff from other universities. We were given this opportunity by all speakers and this was good.

Glasgow:

- Valuable
- Useful for stimulating ideas
- Good practical ideas gained
- Sharing was wonderful – issues raised were enlightening
- Finding out about good practice
- Focused me on how I hear and listen to the student voice
- Presented an opportunity to begin to understand the complexity of this topic
- Good to know there's a dedicated effort to involve the student voice
- Awesome examples and passion
- Fascinating insight into benefits of bringing staff and students together for joint activities
- Best thing about the day was meeting, sharing, listening, learning, talking.

Events: other

Project team members have also contributed to other events:

- Workshops have been run at the Staff and Educational Development Association Conference (Liverpool, June 2006) and the International Conference of Educational Development (Sheffield, June 2006)

- Presentations have been given at in-house conferences including Manchester University (May 2007) and Thames Valley University (June 2007)

Some of these presentations are also included on the project website at www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices/events.htm

Publications

Paper
An article on the project was published in *Educational Developments* (Issue 8.1, March 2007). Further details of this Staff and Educational Development Association publication are available at www.seda.ac.uk/educational_developments.htm

Posters
Two posters developed by the project team are available to download in PowerPoint® format from the project website at www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices/

Website

A project website has been developed at www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices. The site is structured around a number of sections to inform visitors about the project aims and progress. It has proved invaluable as a means to disseminate information about the project, to give up-to-date information about events and to include many of the presentations from them. It is also a first point of contact for interested individuals who can use it to make contact with the project team or contribute relevant examples of practice from their own institutions.

The website also allows the opportunity to download and adapt as required the following forms devised by the project to facilitate the development of case studies:

- Survey form
- Case study form
- Case study – student evaluation
- Case study – staff evaluation
- Student permissions form.

Guidance for staff on how to capture and use the student voice to enhance academic practice

The Hearing the Student Voice project aimed to:

- equip educational and staff developers with the skills and confidence necessary to employ the student voice effectively within professional development in learning, teaching and assessment

- widen the use of this professional development strategy by building a community of practice comprising staff and educational developers within higher education.

These guidance notes seek to fulfill these aims by providing guidance to staff who wish to employ the student voice. Through a ten-step approach staff are guided to plan, implement and evaluate the involvement and impact of the student voice while ensuring that student involvement is both appropriate and protected.

The guidelines have been developed as a checklist but staff can also usefully refer to:

- the *Case studies* section

- the project case studies contained within *Appendix 4* for more information about how some of the approaches discussed in the checklist have been used

- the discussion within the *Student involvement issues* and *Wider issues* sections.

The staged process aims to encourage staff new to this activity, ensure consistency within the emerging community of practice and assist staff keen to develop their own case study for the project.

The ten steps are:

1. Establish the purpose of the professional development intervention where the voices will be heard
2. Proceed ethically to protect students' interests
3. Recruit students
4. Confirm permission from the students to use their voices (Permissions form)
5. Provide meaningful opportunities to capture the student voice
6. Evaluate the process with students (Student evaluation form)
7. Prepare the voices for the professional development session and plan the delivery
8. Evaluate the process with staff (Student evaluation form)
9. Feedback to students
10. Write up the findings (Case study form).

The ten-step approach

1. Establish the purpose of the professional development intervention where the voices will be heard.

As this project has a focus on professional development in learning, teaching and assessment it is important that you consider the professional development needs as a first step. The needs which have been addressed in the case studies developed may give you ideas. The needs which you have identified will influence the voices that would be of particular use in enhancing the professional development planned. For instance, if you have identified that there is a need for professional development focusing on formative assessment it would be appropriate for you to use voices of students who have already been on a course for a year or two, and include the voices of students on courses where you know that there are particularly strong examples of formative feedback. If the purpose of the professional development was to enhance a particular module or course, your inclusion of students directly involved would be most appropriate. When the development need has been established, using the student voice will support and enhance the activity you have planned and provide rich data for discussion.

2. Proceed ethically to protect students' interests

As universities vary in terms of processes for ethical approval of research projects and activities involving students, it is important to establish early on, prior to any data collection, what the processes are and if approval will be required for the work you are planning in your institution.

The ethical issues can be complex in some projects, in particular where students are close to those staff hearing their voices, such as their tutors, and they may be talking about specific experiences. There are many ways you can ensure anonymity of voices, and some of these have been used in the case studies such as:

- joint group letters that are read by an actor
- direct, anonymous quotes used rather than actual voices which could be identified
- questions or views generated by one student are asked by another student.

However, in some instances, such as discussions about assessment approaches and preferences where there are no particular links to individuals, it may be appropriate for you to invite students to a shared session as the ethical concerns are limited.

For further discussion see *Student involvement issues: protecting their interests*.

3. Recruit students

Once you have decided on the appropriate student population that you have an interest in, they can then be approached for involvement. If it is a specific group, then it may be possible to recruit during a face-to-face session where volunteers are requested for a particular time and place. For a wider population, such as all year one students, it may be better to recruit through individual invitation or using posters inviting applications for involvement.

It is important to encourage wide participation by explaining the need for the voices and how they will contribute to the planned development. In order for the process to be seen as useful the students need to know the outcomes of their involvement so you should commit to feeding back at the end of the intervention – and do so! (See 9 below.)

The value of participation may be enough to encourage involvement. Some students who have been involved in the project case studies recognised the value to them of participation but it may also be worth offering a small incentive, such as lunch or a book token which both shows that you value their time and recompenses them – if only modestly – for their contribution.

You may find it difficult to include students who, for one reason or another, are reluctant to come forward and volunteer – and these may be just the voices you need. You may want to consider imaginative ways to collect these student voices.

For further discussion see *Student involvement issues: participation* and *Student involvement issues: representation*.

4. Confirm permission from the students to use their voices

Prior to any recording or direct student involvement in professional development sessions or similar, the permission form agreed in your ethics proposal should be signed by all students involved. Many universities have a standard format. If yours does not, you could use and adapt the project Student permissions form, available to download from the project website. Once signed, these forms need to be stored safely.

5. Provide meaningful opportunities to capture the student voice

You need to provide a safe, secure and non-threatening environment with experienced and, if appropriate, neutral facilitators to ensure that students feel confident to reflect deeply and speak freely.

Recording the meeting/interview can take many forms, such as video, note taking, recording to tape or digital recording but needs to be fit for purpose.

If using technology you should ensure that it is not intrusive as it can change the atmosphere. For instance, a digital camera could be placed in position on a table top or an audio recorder could be placed out of sight.

Quality is also an issue you should consider. If you just want to include short clips of data for use in PowerPoint® slides you could make your own digital recordings which are then relatively straightforward to transfer.

If you want to create a DVD for playing to large groups in large venues you should ensure near broadcast quality by using appropriate equipment and a professional team. Consider using students for this purpose: many digital media, film or journalism students are often keen to carry out project work for their portfolios and will produce a very professional result. Involving the students in case studies during the project in this way proved to have added benefits as they often contributed ideas to the project and related well to the students being recorded.

However, whoever you use it is important that you brief them fully to ensure you get the content and finish you seek.

For further discussion see *Case studies: approaches* and *Wider issues: methods*.

6. Evaluate the process with students

Following the interviews or other form of collection of voices, you should gather feedback from the students about their involvement. The project Student evaluation form, available to download from the project website, is a useful template that can be used flexibly to suit the needs of the project. The purpose is to gather views about how the students felt about their involvement and what the value of the experience was perceived to be. This is important to support future work so that we can establish how best to encourage involvement in the future. Collect the evaluation immediately after collecting the voices: you want student recollections of their impressions of involvement before they have dimmed plus the students can be hard to trace at a future date.

7. Prepare the voices for the professional development session and plan the delivery

In many instances the voices collected will provide far more data than can be used in a professional development session and there is a need to reduce it to small chunks. The selection process will vary depending on the focus of the professional development. In order to try to find representative voices for use, it may be worth transcribing what has been said and establishing themes. Once key themes are identified then representative samples might be chosen. Where the voices are anonymous then transcriptions or letters might be recorded with student actors.

Be aware there may be concerns about the representativeness of the voices you use in the development sessions with staff so ensure that you are transparent about the students involved and the selection you made.

For further discussion see *Student involvement issues: representation*.

In the delivery of the session, the voices may be included as part of a PowerPoint® presentation, or as a DVD, or they may be included as paper-based letters. If students are not pre-recorded and are involved in the session then they will need briefing before the start about what to expect.

8. Evaluate the process with staff

Following the professional development session where the voices have been heard and used with the purpose of enhancing the learning, it is important to evaluate with those attending. The project Staff evaluation form, available to download from the project website, as with the student form, can be used for this purpose. The results should enable you to evaluate the value of the voices used in the professional development session and help inform future work involving students for this purpose.

9. Feedback to students

You should feedback to students at this stage what the outcomes or plans are relating to the issues raised in their contributions. It is important for them to know what action will be taken as a result of their contribution and, if no action is possible, to be advised why not. Students welcome this feedback and are often more engaged with their courses when they can see that their views are valued and, particularly, where they see a direct benefit of their involvement.

For further discussion see *Student involvement issues: participation*.

10. Write up the findings

Once the session has been evaluated the project Case study form, available to download from the project website, provides a useful template for writing up the findings and your perspective on the process in a concise and structured way. The use of the form encourages consistency to facilitate sharing. If there are several people in your faculty or university using the student voice you could use it as a basis to form a community of practice to discuss and share issues.

The Hearing the Student Voice project team is keen to receive evaluated case studies from the sector and can facilitate wider dissemination of your work through the project website. In the first instance please contact us (contact details on page iii) to discuss or complete and submit a Survey form, available to download from the project website.

Project achievements

The project has promoted and encouraged the use of the student voice to enhance the effectiveness of academic professional development in higher education and ultimately the learning experience of students by:

- raising the profile of using the student voice as a professional development strategy through case study development, dissemination activities and discussion of student involvement and wider issues of relevance

- equipping academic staff and educational developers with the skills and confidence to use the student voice in their own work by developing guidance for staff and models of practice through the case studies developed

- developing a community of practice of staff interested in using the student voice to enhance the effectiveness of academic professional development through the project dissemination activities and the opportunities extended for the sector to contribute their own ideas and examples of good practice.

> Great initiative!…I found it inspirational. It reminded me of what we are here for.
>
> (Westminster case study: How we like to be taught)

Future direction

From the interest generated by the project it is evident that the scope of the work can be extended.

A logical 'next step' is the extension of these approaches within the institutions such that a wider range of staff consciously seek the student voice in their curriculum developmental work, for instance in schools, departments and course teams. Opportunities for individual academics to hear more clearly the voice of the students they are teaching could also be explored.

> Teaching and learning involves the development of well-rounded people and participation by students should become common practice as part of this process.
>
> (Participant – London seminar)

In addition to professional development – the main focus of the project – there are a wide range of purposes for which capturing the student voice could be a valuable approach and are discussed under *Wider issues: purposes*.

It has been suggested that it would be useful to give comments from one set of students, to another set of students, to encourage their reflection; this could be done on a year-to-year basis, by taking generic comments and seeking views from specific student groups, or by looking at different contexts of delivery.

There are also opportunities for activity in inter-sector work such as easing the transition between FE and HE or in other sectors

> Valuable to be aware of activities in HE environments which might be adapted for FE use in HE programmes within the organisation.
>
> (Participant – Glasgow seminar)

The project team also recognises that there is potential for the use of new electronic media in capturing the student voice, an approach which has not been explored within the scope of this project, and which was surprisingly little discussed at the seminars. Possibilities for individual and group collection could include blogs, wikis and digital video capture.

Conclusions

- Using the student voice in professional development is a valuable strategy which impacts on both the staff and students involved.

- Students involved appreciate the opportunity to contribute their perspectives on issues which impact on their learning. They value doing this in meaningful ways – often in collaboration with their peers – which encourage reflection unlike more common ways employed to gather their feedback. Through the provision of a safe environment – often with neutral facilitation – students freely contribute constructive, valuable and fresh perspectives with clear implications for academic practice.

- When students perceive that their views are valued by their institution and, particularly, when they see a direct benefit of their contribution there is evidence that there is increased engagement with their courses (QAA, 2005).

- Hearing the depth and clarity of the student voice surprises, engages and motivates staff. Hearing the spoken word itself often also moves staff as it builds an emotional connection between speaker and listener. When the student voice is employed within appropriate professional development contexts staff often find this a positive experience and identify – and commit to – changes in academic practice as a result: the two criteria identified as measures of the impact of professional development interventions by Rust (1998).

- Despite the efficacy of this approach as a professional development strategy it has been rarely used to date although the significant interest in the project evidenced from the dissemination activities suggests there is currently a wider groundswell of activity relating to student engagement which will both support and benefit from the student voice work.

- There needs to be a change of culture within higher education to enable the student voice to be valued as an effective means to enhance the quality of the student experience.

- The work of the project lays the foundation for other work involving the student voice for other purposes such as curriculum development and using other mechanisms such as electronic capture.

- A key outcome from the project, as far as the project team is concerned, is that the process of participation in the project activity has in itself provided strong professional development, and valuable time and opportunity for the exchange of ideas and for reflection; this could be mirrored by the extension of the work within institutions.

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Appendix 1: Project seminars – combined attendance

Hearing the Student Voice seminars – institutions and organisations represented

Anglia Ruskin University
Bath Spa University
De Montfort University
Foundation Direct
Grand Valley State University, USA
Grimsby Institute
Higher Education Academy – GEES Subject Centre
Higher Education Academy – History, Classics and Archaeology Subject Centre
Institute of Education, University of London
Kingston University
Lancaster University
Leeds Metropolitan University
Lincoln College
Liverpool John Moores University
Middlesex University
Napier University
Newcastle College
Northumbria University
Nottingham Trent University
Oaklands College
Oxford Brookes University
Quality Assurance Agency, England
Quality Assurance Agency, Scotland
Roehampton University
Royal Holloway College, University of London
Sheffield Hallam University
Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs)
Thames Valley University
Trinity College of Music
University of Central England
University of the Arts, London
University of Bradford
University of Brighton
University of Bristol
University of Chichester
University of Derby
University of Dundee
University of East Anglia
University of East London
University of Gloucestershire
University of Highlands and Islands

University of Hull
University of Kent
University of Leicester
University of Lincoln
University of Newcastle
University of Paisley
University of Plymouth
University of Portsmouth
University of Salford
University of South Australia
University of Southampton
University of Surrey
University of Sussex
University of Teeside
University of Wales
University of Warwick
University of the West of England
University of Westminster
University of York
York St John University
Viterbo University, USA

Appendix 2: Project seminars – outlines and programmes

Outline

Employing student voices can have a powerful impact within academic professional development aimed at enhancing learning, teaching and assessment practice in higher education. By providing qualitative insights about the nature of their learning experiences, students can bring both valid and valuable viewpoints which motivate staff who are engaged by the students' perspective and by the depth and clarity of their opinions.

This seminar will provide an opportunity for participants to learn of current work investigating the student voice involving the development of case studies which will be showcased and to explore the relevance of this strategy to their own situation. The session will be of interest to educational and staff developers, teaching and learning coordinators and academic staff. The seminar is organised by the Hearing the Student Voice project, a collaborative project involving Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, UCE Birmingham and the University of Westminster and funded by the Escalate subject centre.

The seminar will:

- discuss the value and effectiveness of using the student voice within academic staff development
- feature case studies of innovative practice developed by the project team and others and involving students
- provide opportunities to explore what works best through interactive opportunities provided for participants and a discussion of relevant issues
- enable participants to share their experiences of using the student voice
- involve students.

Programme: London

Thursday 1 March (10:00-3:30)

University of Westminster

10.00 Coffee and registration

10.20 Introduction and welcome
- Hearing the Student Voice: Fiona Campbell, Napier University
- 'How we like to be taught': Ann Rumpus, University of Westminster

11.30 Case study workshops (3 parallel sessions)
- Using student voices in reflective staff development:
  Phil Verrill, University of Chichester
- Student participation in *Supervising student research* staff workshop:
  Jenny Eland, UCE, Birmingham
- Good learning and teaching:
  Ann Rumpus, University of Westminster

12.30 Lunch

1.30 Case study workshops (3 parallel sessions)
- Using the student voice in staff development to progress a PDP WebCT Vita module:
  Liz Beasley, Leeds Metropolitan University
- The first-year experience: developing student video diaries:
  Fiona Campbell, Napier University
- Student-led workshop on seeking the student voice.

2.30 Coffee

2.45 Plenary discussion:
Hearing the student voice: experiences, issues and best practice

3.30 Close

Programme: Leeds

Friday 23 March 2007 (10:00–15:30)

Leeds Metropolitan University

10:00 Coffee and registration

10:20 Introduction
- Welcome – Liz Beasley, Carnegie Director of Assessment, Learning and Teaching
- LeedsMet approach to ALT and the student voice – Professor Sally Brown, Pro-Vice-Chancellor

10:40 Student centred change: a new student voice group for the university (with podcast) – Julia Davidson

10:50 The student Wiki (with demonstration) – Dave Griffin

11:00 Hearing the student voice – Fiona Campbell, Napier University

11:30 Case study workshops (3 parallel sessions)
- Good learning and teaching:
  Ann Rumpus, University of Westminster
- Seeking the student voice:
  Professor Phil Race, Leeds Metropolitan University
- Using the student voice in staff development to progress a PDP WebCT Vista module:
  Liz Beasley, Leeds Metropolitan University

12.30 Lunch

13:30 Case study workshops (3 parallel sessions)
- People in my mind, voices in my ears, changes in my practices: social learning and personal (and academic) development:
  Dr Yvonne Turner, University of Newcastle
- The first year experience: developing student video diaries:
  Fiona Campbell, Napier University
- Thinking critically about ‘student voice’:
  Professor Sue Clegg, Leeds Metropolitan University

14:30 Coffee

14:45 Plenary discussion:
Hearing the student voice: experiences, issues and best practice

15:30 Close

Programme: Glasgow

Wednesday 9 May 2007

Glasgow

10.30 Coffee and registration

10.50 Plenary sessions

- Hearing the Student Voice
  Fiona Campbell, Napier University
- Keynote
  Norman Sharp, Director, QAA, Scotland

12.00 Case study workshops (3 parallel sessions):

- Good learning and teaching
  Tim Taylor & Sunaina Gulati, University of Westminster
- Peers, projects and placements: working with students in the Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) Subject Centre
  Helen King & Sian Evans, GEES Subject Centre
- Using the student voice in staff development to progress a PDP WebCT Vista module
  Liz Beasley, Leeds Metropolitan University

1.00 Lunch

2.00 Case study workshops (3 parallel sessions):

- 'Silent' academic literacies: interpreting student perceptions of academic writing
  Lesley Gourlay & Janis Greig, Napier University
- Student participation in *Supervising student research* staff workshop
  Jenny Eland, UCE, Birmingham
- The first year experience: developing student video diaries
  Fiona Campbell, Napier University

3.00 Coffee

3.15 Plenary discussion
Hearing the student voice: experiences, issues and good practices

4.00 Close

Glasgow seminar leaflet

The seminar information leaflet for the Glasgow seminar is available to download as an Adobe® Acrobat® pdf document from the project website at www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices/events.htm

Appendix 3: Project seminars – summaries

Using student voices in reflective staff development
Phil Verrill, University of Chichester
This session will explore how the student voice may be used in staff development and reflective practice by outlining a 'whole programme' approach to engaging with the student experience and how the resultant information can be used at both the individual and departmental level. The approach challenges us to see the student voice as a powerful tool in staff development for our learning and teaching practice.

The session will explore the benefits, drawbacks and transferability of this approach. In particular, participants will be invited – in teams – to consider and plan how they might make effective use of these practices to impact on staff development in their own disciplines and across their institutions in light of local circumstances and organisational culture and what benefits might accrue. Outcomes of these discussions will be summarized and published on an online discussion forum relating to the student voice to be set up after the seminar and also forwarded directly to participants to remind them of their plans devised at the seminar.

Good learning and teaching
Ann Rumpus, Tim Taylor and Sunaina Gulati, University of Westminster
Participants in this workshop will view a segment of the DVD 'Student Voices' which expresses students' views of the teaching and learning provision in the University. The workshop will stimulate a staff development session in that participants will watch this and identify aspects of teaching and learning which students find helpful. They will then draw this into a statement of what this tells us about student-centred learning. To this point the activity has mimicked a real-life staff development session delivered as part of the project.

Participants will then evaluate the usefulness of the authentic student voice in this session, and can compare their views with those of the 'real life' staff.

The session will end with a debate on the range of situations in which such DVD material could be used, and also the limitations of this approach. Participants will contribute any experience they have of using such materials in staff development.

Peers, projects and placements: working with students in the Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) Subject Centre
Helen King and Sian Evans, GEES Subject Centre
The GEES Subject Centre has involved students in its educational development work in various different ways for several years. Being a UK-wide organisation mainly focused on providing learning and teaching support and resources for staff, we feel that it is important to find ways of making connections directly with students. In this session we will discuss the variety of ways in which we have worked with students including running joint staff-student professional development workshops, allowing business students to use our organisation as the basis for their dissertation projects and talking on full- and

part-time placement students. The session will be relevant to all colleagues whether in academic departments, educational development units, CETLs or other Subject Centres.

Using the student voice in staff development to progress a PDP Web CT Vista module
Liz Beasley, Leeds Metropolitan University
In this case study, students were recorded in conversation about their experience as first year full-time undergraduate student on a PDP WebCT Vista pilot module. The conversation was led by the researcher who was a member of staff from outside the main teaching team.

The depth of insight and range of perspectives that emerged were surprising and required analysis and selection prior to use. Selected parts of conversations were played to colleagues and specific questions raised for detailed discussion. The inclusion of voices was considered by colleagues to have been valuable and raised awareness of the student-centredness of this approach – something we are keen to encourage.

This session will illustrate the use of the voices and explore some of the issues that arose including how to capture the voice electronically and in a real context, selecting voices and sharing them, permissions and ethics.

'Silent' academic literacies: interpreting student perceptions of academic writing
Lesley Gourlay, Napier University
This session will give an example of how the student voice may be used in staff development, drawing on research interview data.

A series of student interviews (N=30) were conducted at Napier University in semester 2 of session 05/06 as part of the wider research project investigating student perceptions surrounding academic conduct and academic writing. The interviews provided a rich data set which sheds light on a range of issues related to assessment practices, academic literacies and student identity. Subsequent analysis has focused on, among other points, emotive themes arising from the data. It will be argued that this type of qualitative data, in addition to being desirable in research terms, contains features of immediacy, nuance and personalisation (in particular in unsolicited narratives) which offer much to the developer in a range of contexts.

Giving examples and using an interactive approach, the workshop will explore how extracts from these interviews in conjunction with questionnaire data (N=600) have subsequently been used to facilitate institutional change, and also to augment and 'populate' staff development events with the voices and emotions of the students, breaking the 'silence' of student struggles centred on academic literacies.

Student participation in *Supervising student research* staff workshop
Jenny Eland, UCE, Birmingham
The Staff and Student Development Department (SSDD) at UCE Birmingham created a new SEDA-accredited programme for Master's supervisors in 2005. The programme

consists of three full contact days, spread between May and late September to coincide with the typical cycle of Master's dissertations and allow reflection on supervisory styles and approaches between the sessions. On the final morning of the programme we bring together all the participants and a group of their students to discuss issues to do with the supervision experience. Supervisors and students split up and while the supervisors examine a series of supervision dilemmas, students consider the things they wish they had known or understood earlier in the process. These are then prioritized by the student group and turned into questions to pose to the supervisors in the subsequent session. Supervisors are therefore responding as a group to a series of issues or dilemmas, having already warmed up with their own dilemmas activity. Students pose questions which they did not individually raise, so the whole activity is anonymised and safe. This in turn leads to productive and open discussion with a clear sense of how supervisors might improve their communication with students, as well as how to encourage future students to take greater responsibility both for their learning and for familiarity with the structure and parameters of their study. This session enables you to hear and discuss the initial findings from this study and to participate in an activity simulating the student experience.

The first year experience: capturing the student voice for different purposes
Fiona Campbell, Napier University
The student voice can be effectively captured and employed in many different ways to enhance learning, teaching and assessment practice in higher education. Focusing on the first year experience, participants will have an opportunity to:

- evaluate an example involving the recording of first year student video diaries and their use within academic professional development
- work in groups and with different scenarios to devise innovative ways for staff to hear what students have to say about their leaning experiences in first year
- consider issues including staff engagement, student involvement and investment (time and resources) and the relevance and transferability of using the student voice in the ways devised in the group discussions within their own institution

Seeking the Student Voice
Professor Phil Race, Leeds Metropolitan University
After participating in this workshop, you should be better able to:

- Choose from several ways to go about seeking the student voice;
- Work out what to find out from students about their experience;
- Use assessment opportunities to find out what students think of their progress.

We'll ask the students participating in the workshop their views on all of these, and find out what they think we should be asking them about, and work out how best to respond to their views and ideas. In particular, we'll look at some of the limitations of such processes as standard module evaluation pro-formas (however well designed they are), and think about ways of opening up richer channels of communication between students and ourselves than these.

We will then explore how we can get students to make use of their own voice – not least in reflective contexts such as their personal development profiles.

People in my mind, voices in my ears, changes in my practices: social learning and personal (and academic) development
Dr Yvonne Turner, University of Newcastle
This session will make a reflective account of research activities drawing on the experiences of Chinese students and the impact they have had on my attitude towards international students and my academic role in the past ten years. The session will include discussion of interview extracts and a discussion of the narrative changes that take place during the process of interview analysis and transcription and activities based around changes in practice that can arise from student stories. I will also discuss the relationship between social learning, drawing on student voices, and formal educational development to enhance the development of 'existential internationalization' (Sanderson, 2004) within university communities.

Reference
Sanderson, Gavin (2004), 'Existentialism, Globalization and the Cultural Other', *International Education Journal*, 4: 1-20

Thinking Critically about 'Student Voice'
Professor Sue Clegg, Leeds Metropolitan University
This session will provide the opportunity to subject the idea of the student voice to critical scrutiny by asking questions about the idea of 'voice'. I will explore some of the radical origins of voice in feminism and critical pedagogy and ask whether a collective voice is possible. The aim of the session is to pose some questions about the power dynamics involved in attending to student voices and address some of the difficulties of interpreting multiple voices drawing on my own experiences of analysing and collecting qualitative data. There will be space for participants to engage, and draw on their own experiences. The overall aim of the session is to open up questions for debate rather than come to definitive conclusions or reach a consensus.

Appendix 4: Project case studies

The eight case studies below are detailed on the following pages.

page

Supervising Master's Degree Research **67**
Jenny Eland, UCE Birmingham

Voices off? Using student voice for reflective staff development **77**
Phil Verrill, University of Chichester

Sharing experiences: staff and students working as peers **85**
Helen King and Sian Evans, Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) Subject Centre

Using the student voice in staff development to progress a pilot Personal Development Planning module **101**
Liz Beasley, Leeds Metropolitan University

Student perspectives on how we can improve social integration for overseas students **111**
Alison Varey, Napier University

'My first year experience': constructing student video diaries **125**
Fiona Campbell, Napier University

'How we like to be taught' : recording student views to support staff development in student-centred learning **141**
Ann Rumpus, University of Westminster

'What we really think': focus group reflections on an MA course **151**
Ann Rumpus, University of Westminster

Supervising Master's Degree Research

Jenny Eland, UCE Birmingham

Hearing the student voice

Promoting and encouraging the effective use of the student voice to enhance professional development in learning, teaching and assessment within higher education

An ESCalate-funded project involving Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, UCE Birmingham and the University of Westminster

Case study

Title

Supervising Master's Degree Research

Institution

UCE Birmingham

Background

The Staff and Student Development Department (SSDD) at UCE Birmingham created a new SEDA-accredited programme for Master's supervisors in 2005. The programme consists of three full contact days, spread between May and late September to coincide with the typical cycle of Master's dissertations and allow reflection on supervisory styles and approaches between the sessions. Participants needed to have supervised at least one Master's student to successful completion before the course so that they had experiences to draw on, and they needed to have at least one current supervisee so that they could put new strategies into practice immediately. The programme has a maximum of twenty participants.

The challenge

What were the issues that led to this activity?
While a non-accredited course already existed for PhD supervisors, much of it focused on the University's procedures and regulations. Few academics at the institution reach the point of supervising PhDs and often they feel underprepared for any postgraduate supervision at all. In addition, as expectations of supervisors at Master's level differ according to their department or subject area, any discussion of procedures would be out of place and irrelevant for many participants. The University has also seen an increase in demand for Masters level courses which in turn maens that there is a need for more competent and skilled supervisors.This course was therefore designed with a strong emphasis on helping colleagues develop and adapt their supervisory style with confidence to nurture the relationship between supervisor and student.

Why was it decided to employ the student voice?
This emphasis on building a supervisory relationship meant that the involvement of real students at the end of the course was an essential means of pulling together the strands of the previous sessions into something more concrete, giving authenticity to the

experience for all. The session provided an opportunity for supervisors to hear first hand and in a non threatening environment how students react to supervison at various stages of the cycle. The design of the activities ensured that student coments were not attributable, thus aiding the safety and security of the environment. An additional bonus for us was that postgraduate students—often working full-time and isolated from other students at dissertation stage—would have chance to meet one another, share ideas to help them with their studies, and could also build social support networks they would not otherwise have.

Solution

Describe in some detail how the activity works…

How were students recruited for this activity?
The supervisors participating in the course firstly approached their students to see if anyone might be interested in attending the session. They then gave the students' names and contact details to the course organizers who wrote letters of invitation designed to be warm and welcoming, two months in advance of the session (July). The key wording is as follows:

- *'We intend for the session to be lively and interesting and we won't be 'putting you on the spot' at all! Altogether, there should be about 15 postgraduates present, so this is also a good opportunity for you to meet other students in the same position as you and to discover from one another a range of approaches to your studies which you might find helpful now and in the future.'*

The letter also made it clear that attendance was not compulsory and that refreshments and lunch were provided free of charge. If we received no reply by the end of August, we sent a follow up e-mail and asked the supervisors to contact their students, too. While we did not have a student for each supervisor (15 supervisors, nine students), we had enough to make the exercise worthwhile.

In what way is the student voice employed?
After an explanation of the morning's activities, we divided the group for an activity lasting one hour.

The supervisors worked in one room, looking at case studies of difficult supervisory situations and working out potential responses in groups, leading to a plenary discussion at the end of the segment with a facilitator from SSDD recording the key points on flip charts an eliciting further information to deepen the discussion.

The students worked in a different room and were given a series of prompt questions to respond to, such as:

- What do you most wish someone had told you earlier about Master's research?
- What do you think Master's supervision should be for?
- What do you think *supervisors* think Master's supervision is for?

Each of these prompts led to a discussion among the students, and the facilitator from SSDD recorded their responses. In the final twenty minutes, the students reviewed their key points, decided which were most important to them, and turned them into composite questions to pose to the whole group of supervisors. They agreed who would ask each question, and we ensured that no one asked a question which directly related to their own experience, so as to anonymize the subject and also to open out the discussion. Questions included:

- How beneficial for both parties do you think the mutual setting of ground rules at the start would be?
- How can supervisors resolve their own disagreement with a co-supervisor, particularly when they see it is confusing the student?
- How do you feel about having to motivate and encourage a student at Master's level, even though it's evidently not your own project, but theirs?

After the mid-morning break, the groups reconvened for an hour and a quarter, with students sitting among the supervisors, rather than creating an adversarial atmosphere. Students each posed one question to the whole group, and each led to considerable discussion between supervisors and students. Their responses were summarized on flip charts and subsequently e-mailed to all participants.

Results

Evaluations were completed by supervisors and students at the end of the session. After lunch, supervisors remained to complete the course and filled in a full course evaluation at the end of the day. In this afternoon session, time was taken to debrief with them, including relaying some of the students' feedback, anonymously. Both sets of feedback from the supervisors will be used in this section.

What have the results of this activity been?

Of the 15 supervisors, the main reaction of 12 was positive, one was neutral and two were negative. The neutral response felt the timing of the session would have been more productive if it had happened before dissertations had been marked; one negative respondent wanted a more open dialogue with the students, while another wanted supervisors to work alone with their supervisees at some stage.

Of the positive responses, the consensus was that the plenary discussion brought to the fore the importance of establishing and building relationships, and helped supervisors see the impact this could have on their students' progress. Comments included:

- *As I have limited experience in supervising, […] I feel this experience will help me in managing expectations and communicating appropriate information.*
- *Excellent – this will enable me to review and reflect on current practices and conventions within the [department] with a view to improving the experience for all.*
- *To discuss issues face-to-face with students did not introduce any new ideas, but helped to raise my awareness and made one think in terms of practical ways to adjust my approach to supervision that would benefit them. This exercise was very meaningful.*
- *It is very positive. We need the feedback from students and know what are their concerns and needs.*

Among the students, eight responded positively and one negatively. When asked what their main reactions were to participating, their comments included:

- *Very pleased. I think this session can be very useful and helpful for students and supervisors.*
- *It created some form of a platform to spell out the situations that I have undergone.*
- *I hope that my contribution today will help other students to benefit as I have from supervision.*

The one negative respondent raised an interesting question for the course organizers and supervisors to consider:

- Felt that I should agree as was asked to do so by my research supervisor.

This question of control and power is one which we will return to in this case study.

What is the evidence, if any, for the benefits of this activity?
Only two of the fifteen respondents did not feel there had been added value from the experience, and these are the two whose comments are recorded above. One of these felt the scenarios given to the supervisors when the groups were divided were not challenging and 'could have been undertaken in 15 minutes'. However, the course organizers quickly became aware of the fact that the relationship between this supervisor and student was going very badly and that the student felt seriously unsupported and abandoned. A question for the organizers here is whether this sort of activity could be improved to impel all supervisors to be more self-reflective, one of the key aspects of the course.

The added value for the other supervisors included such aspects as seeing the process from the student point of view, considering the dilemmas and concerns students have, remembering to take account of the students' life outside of their studies (many are professionals in full-time employment), hearing students' views first-hand, and developing a two-way communication which had not previously existed.

The students saw value in making supervisors more aware of the students' feelings and perspectives, and three specifically commented on the fact that many of their experiences were common, rather than individual. The only neutral comment to this question of whether the exercise was likely to be valuable for supervisors was 'Hope so'.

In what ways, if any, did employing the student voice make a difference?
Supervisors' responses were less uniformly positive here. While nine felt their practice would change as a result of the activity, six did not. Of those six, two expanded their answers to say:

- *No. Will bear in mind the comments that have been raised.*
- *No. Because I am not sure it is different from what we studied during this course.*

These two responses indicate that the learning intended for the session did in fact occur, even if their practice itself may not differ. More concrete intentions to change behaviour included:

- *It will make me plan and manage expectations.*
- *I might get them to reflect on the process – even partway through the supervision.*
- *It emphasized how important it is to set ground rules about the expectation and responsibilities between student and supervisor.*
- *I will pay more attention to planning supervision, particularly in the early stages of supervision.*
- *I was not aware of the extent to which they expect their supervisor to 'motivate' them. I found this very revealing.*

Supervisors also expressed further benefits to them, such as:

- *To empathise more with the student and think more about issues such as work/study balance.*

- *It has motivated me to change my approach in pragmatic ways.*
- *I feel that I better understand the process that the students are engaged in in terms of personal and academic development.*

For the students, the benefits were wide-ranging and individual:

- *An appreciation that lecturers also at times struggle with supervision and especially with interpreting marking criteria.*
- *Realising that supervisors are aware of student perspective and that common concerns exist.*
- *A fuller appreciation of the responsibilities and commitments of the supervisor.*

Hopefully, this raised awareness means that these students, many of whom had not yet completed their dissertations, would be in a better position to take a more active lead in developing their relationships with their supervisors.

Learning points

What were the key points for success?

A conducive environment is essential. By this third session, the course facilitators had built a good rapport with the supervisors and the group had developed a supportive and enquiring ethos. Introducing the students at this stage was uncontroversial given this setting. It also meant that supervisors who were less confident in their abilities had had time to reflect on them, to learn from their colleagues and the readings and handouts from the course and could therefore approach the task with less trepidation.

For the students, creating a welcoming and encouraging atmosphere was a priority. We hoped to demonstrate this in the wording of letters and e-mails, in the choice of an inviting venue off-campus, in providing refreshments throughout. While these may be small things, they make as much of a difference to academics as they do to students, and we feel they are important to enable participants to relax.

Maintaining a non-threatening environment is also key for the students, and we hoped that this would be achieved by splitting the two groups up. Only one student suggested the possibility of students and supervisors working together in small groups (specifically not with their own supervisor), so it would appear the format we used was more suitable for the majority of the students.

Finally, there had to be a clear link between the content of the course and the activity with the students. As the entire course focused on the student-supervisor relationship, the presence of students at the end as a reinforcer of many of the points raised in the previous two sessions was appropriate and logical to the supervisors.

What were the things you would do differently if starting again?

Many suggestions for alternative approaches came from the supervisors, and a few came from students. Two of the students had felt unsure about the objectives of the session, so we need to revise the wording of the initial letter so that it spells this out more clearly. We may need to do the same with supervisors so that we do not create expectations which we cannot fulfil. For instance, the supervisor who wanted time alone to work with the student would have known that the session was not intended to be in any way a quasi-supervision meeting.

Three supervisors wondered whether small mixed groups would have been better, and one wished the students had seen the same case studies as the supervisors to provide their own suggestions. One felt the students should have had the opportunity to state their own opinions in response to questions from the supervisors (i.e. 'What do you think on the issue of…'). Hoewever, we think this would be potentially daunting for the students and could backfire easily.

What were/are the main risks?
The very greatest risk in this activity relates to the question of power differentials in the supervisory relationships. In the afternoon session, students' concerns on this issue were read out to the supervisors:

- *Felt I whould agree as was asked to do so by my researcher.*
- *All university supervisors should attend such workshops as a refresher. But maybe not with their own students present.*
- *Perhaps it would have been better to invite students who have completed their dissertation, as they would have more freedom to express their issues or discuss their experience.*

The supervisors were genuinely surprised that the students saw them as 'having power', and for some, it helped explain the rationale behind the morning's activity as we had arranged it. Separating the groups, creating generalized questions, and having students pose questions which did not directly relate to their own experience were some of the ways we hoped to protect them from feeling in any way under pressure or on the spot.

Another risk for the facilitators is sharing information which was private to the separate groups. In this instance, the student group knew that one supervisory relationship was not working at all well and that the student was struggling to find a way forward; the supervisor group knew that one of the students present had failed the dissertation, but did not yet know. Ensuring confidentiality once the two groups reconvened was essential, and could pose a risk to the activity in future if it were not explicitly addressed with each group first.

Resources

What resources did the activity take in terms of time, money, goodwill and human resources?

The administrative element of the activity took some time as there was limited secretarial support available, but it was not overly onerous. Supervisors helped with reminders to students who didn't reply, which helped reduce the workload.

The course is run off-campus, so the costs involved hiring an extra room for the morning session and paying for the students' lunches. This is not cheap, but we feel it was very worthwhile.

Normally, there are two facilitators for this course; for this particular session, however, we had three members of SSDD present so that when the group split, one person could spend time with both groups to gain an overview, and if necessary, warn of potential difficulties. In this instance, the three facilitators became aware of both the problematic relationship and the student failure before the plenary session.

Support implications

What are the 'support implications' in terms of the resources required for this activity to continue?

Further information

Is there any further information you would like to provide?
One final note from a supervisor who was somewhat sceptical about the course and about students in general:

- *The 'student voice' segment of the course was invaluable and will certainly lead me to change and modify certain aspects of my supervisory style. Fab.*

Useful literature/weblinks

Are there any publications in the literature relevant to this development that you would recommend?
On supervision:

WISKER, G (2005) *The Good Supervisor: Supervising Postgraduate and Undergraduate Research for Doctoral Theses and Dissertations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave

CRYER, P (1996) *The Research Student's Guide to Success*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

ELEY, A R and JENNINGS, R (2005) *Effective Postgraduate Supervision: Improving the Student/Supervisor Relationship*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

PHILLIPS, E M and PUGH, D S (1995) *How to get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Are there any publications describing this development?
No.
Are there any relevant weblinks to follow up?
No.

Contact

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Voices off? Using student voice for reflective staff development

Phil Verrill, University of Chichester

Hearing the student voice

Promoting and encouraging the effective use of the student voice to enhance professional development in learning, teaching and assessment within higher education

An ESCalate-funded project involving Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, UCE Birmingham and the University of Westminster

Case study

Title

Provide a suitable title for your case study…

'Voices off?' Using the student voice for reflective staff development

Institution

Provide the name of your institution …

University of Chichester

Background

In about 100 words describe the background to this activity…

The factors influencing this activity include; the student as 'consumer'; quality assurance; student satisfaction survey and the recognition that although we have mechanisms for staff development, for example, central staff development programmes; postgraduate certificates in learning and teaching, peer observation an so on, what is often missing is a direct link between the student experience of learning and teaching and reflective staff development. Current evaluation methods tend to be more about our agenda as teachers rather than about the agenda of students, that is the 'consumers' of learning and teaching. We believe that the student voice should be the motor that drives reflective staff development and our aim was to provide a 'rich picture' of the student experience that would enable teachers to reflect more deeply on their own practice and the consequent effect on student learning

The challenge

What were the issues that lead to this activity?
Why was it decided to employ the student voice?

Much feedback tends to concentrate on what might be called the 'mechanics' of learning and teaching. What we were more interested in was tapping into the actual experience of our students as they progressed through the year. In particular we were interested in finding out who students considered to be the 'best' teachers, what students meant by the 'best' teachers and why. We are trying to create a more holistic evaluation culture which takes as its starting point the centrality of the student voice. In addition, many traditional evaluation methods, for example, questionnaires, seemed to us to often provide little data that could actually be used for reflective development on the part of teaching staff. Also, in evaluating every module, students seemed to be suffering 'evaluation burn-out' and as a consequence the quality and amount of data seemed to be declining. Within higher education, there is recognition that the student is becoming more of a 'consumer' and as such, their voice is increasingly important. However, this business approach to the student voice is not the prime motivator for us, rather it acts as an opportunity to discover the student voice from an educational standpoint, that is, the drive to enhance student learning through reflective staff development. What we wanted to do was to find a way of encouraging students to give honest and thoughtful feedback that they would value as much as staff would value. In other words, we wanted students to be confident of 'speaking their voice' and the staff to be confident enough to 'hear' that voice and, crucially reflect and where appropriate act.

Solution

Describe in some detail how the activity works…
How were students recruited for this activity?
In what way is the student voice employed?

At Chichester we employ a number of ways to access the student voice. For example, mid-module evaluation, end of module evaluation, student representatives, cross-module evaluations, cohort tutors (responsible for specific student groups)' personal interaction (the 'coffee and cigarettes' approach), students' union and, most recently, whole programme reviews (the subject of this case study).

The whole programme review process

The review involves a whole year group (typically 80 – 100 students) and is conducted face to face with students over a period of 2 – 3 hours. There are three elements to the approach. First, a questionnaire is completed during the first part of the session. This consists of questions related to four areas: aspects of the course that help students to learn; aspects of the course that prevent student learning; evaluation of current student evaluation methods and student expectations of the course and the level of fulfilment. In relation to the first two areas, students are asked to rank concerns in order of importance (for them). During a break in proceedings, these questionnaires are scanned for major areas of concern under each heading.

Second, after the break, discussion centres on issues raised in the responses to the questionnaires. In particular, this is an opportunity for clarification of issues and probing of student concerns in order to establish better validity and reliability of data. We were very careful during this probing and clarification stage to attain agreement from the whole group as to our interpretation of what was being said. In this way, we felt we achieved a reasonably accurate representation of the student voice.

The third element of the process involved students in 'rating' their teachers on a standard five point scale. To avoid an 'academic beauty contest' we asked students to concentrate of what teachers did that helped them to learn and what they did that tended to prevent them from learning. In other words we asked students to ***justify*** what they were saying about their teachers, in terms of student learning.

Results

What have the results of this activity been?
What is the evidence, if any, for the benefits of this activity?
In what ways, if any, did employing the student voice make a difference?

What did we do with the data?

Once we had analysed the data we produced a report for the head of school detailing the major issues for general learning and teaching development within the school. It should be noted that no data on individual teachers were revealed to the head of school.

Individual feedback to teachers on their student ratings was given, first, in the form of raw data which individuals took away and reflected on and second, through a follow-up session to discuss their thoughts on the data and any development plans they had made or support that they required.

We consider the benefits of this activity to have been:

1 a greater awareness on the part of teachers of how students view their teaching in relation to how it helps or hinders their learning

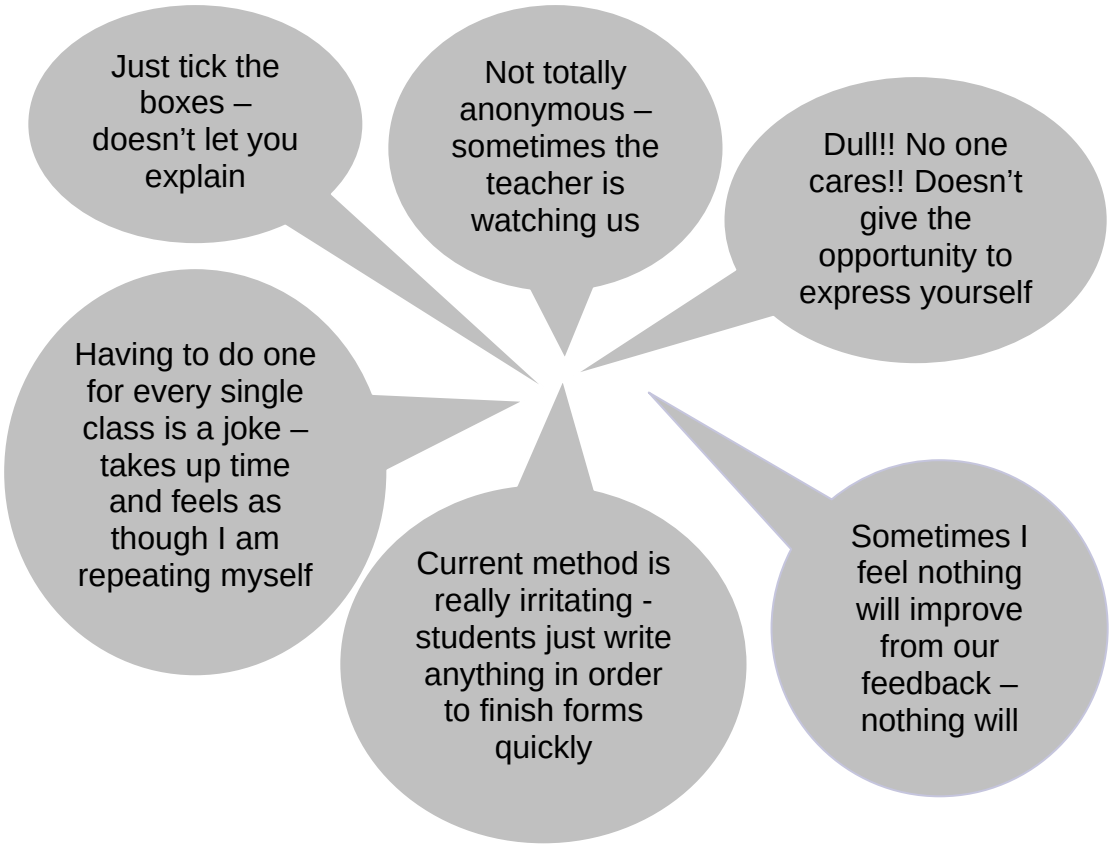
2 a greater awareness, for heads of school as to learning and teaching issues needing to be addressed (helps to construct school staff development programmes based on actual student experience of learning and teaching)

3 a richer picture of the student experience and how teachers affect this

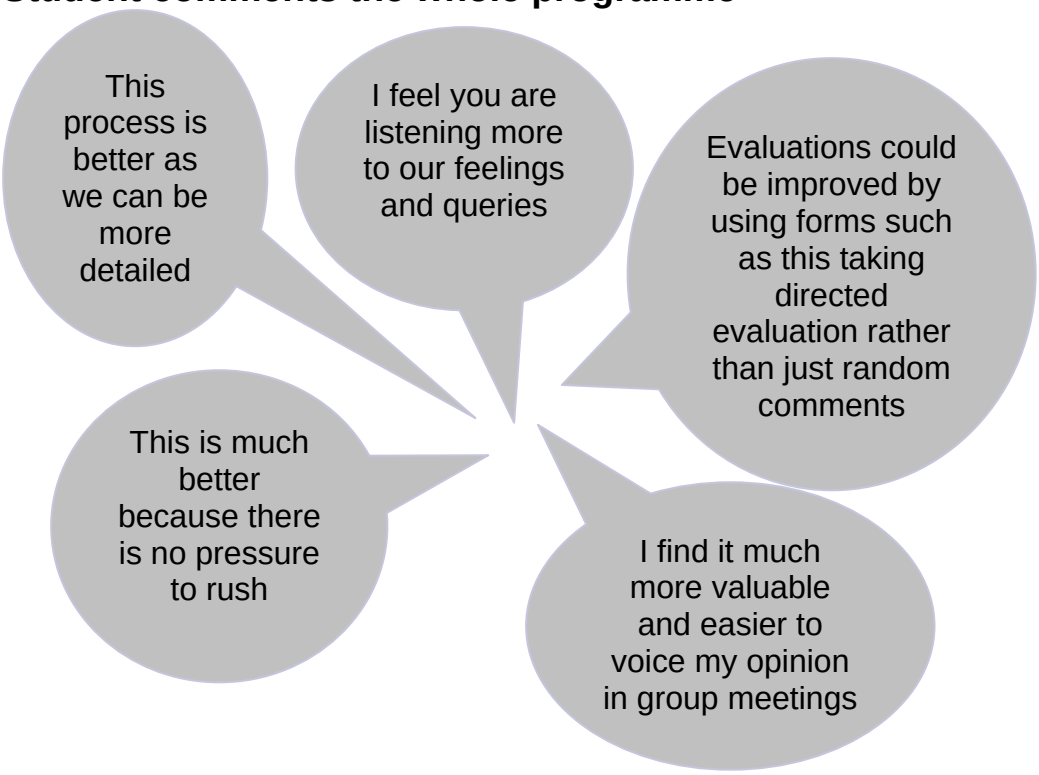
4 a greater engagement with evaluation, from students and a clear enthusiasm for this approach to evaluation.

5 In particular, a real sense that students' voices were indeed, being heard, and understood.

Student comments on existing evaluation process



Student comments the whole programme



Learning points

What were the key points for success?

Good facilitators – trained and empathetic – students and staff must have confidence in the facilitator
Related to development not performance
Advance planning
Ownership of the process by students
Ownership of the process by staff
Prompt feedback to students and staff
Mechanism for development

What were the things you would do differently if starting again?

Maybe abandon the 'ranking' system in some cases
Have a second person to capture data during the session
Train student evaluators to make process more time efficient

What were/are the main risks?

Time consuming
faculty/teacher engagement/'buy in'
depends on skill of evaluator
if uncomfortable, teachers might withdraw from process
possible misinterpretation of problems
danger of concentrating on 'ranking' instead of developing teachers' attitudes towards feedback
possible risk of pressure on evaluators to reveal data to management

Resources

What resources did the activity take in terms of time, money, goodwill and human resources?

The process was time consuming from the point of view of the evaluator but very time efficient from the students' point of view. The results seem to show, however, that this process can be very productive in capturing the kind of data that can be used to make real changes to programmes whilst also providing data for developing reflective practice. In these terms, the process can be seen as cost-beneficial. Achieving 'buy in' from both students and staff was surprisingly easy. This was probably because the process was both transparent and confidential and in the case of staff, detached from any managerial agenda relating to performance.

Support implications

What are the 'support implications' in terms of the resources required for this activity to continue?

Major requirements are for a second person with whom to run the evaluations, time for data analysis and report writing, training for student evaluators, developing further, the mechanisms for reflective practice.

Further information

Is there any further information you would like to provide?

We have started an online discussion group to take this work forward.

evaluationforumgroup-subscribe@yahoogroups.co.uk

Useful literature/weblinks

Are there any publications in the literature relevant to this development that you would recommend?
Are there any publications describing this development?
Are there any relevant weblinks to follow up?

evaluationforumgroup-subscribe@yahoogroups.co.uk

Contact

Contact name and details …

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Sharing experiences: staff and students working as peers

Helen King and Sian Evans, Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) Subject Centre

Hearing the student voice

Promoting and encouraging the effective use of the student voice to enhance professional development in learning, teaching and assessment within higher education

An ESCalate-funded project involving Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, UCE Birmingham and the University of Westminster

Case study

Title

Sharing Experiences: staff and students working as peers

Institution

Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Geography, Earth & Environmental Sciences (GEES)

Background

The GEES Subject Centre has always been keen to hear the student perspective in order to support academic and curriculum development and, previously, this had been achieved through undertaking pedagogic research. We first had the opportunity to directly work with students in January 2004 when we ran a pilot residential event on enterprise and entrepreneurship with delegates including 15 staff and 15 students from the GEES disciplines across the UK. The success of this event led us to run a further three joint events on different themes (corporate social responsibility; environmental ethics; and 'sharing our experiences'). This latter event (which will be the focus of this case study) was organised by our placement student, Sian Evans, who represents one of the other ways in which we ensure we stay in touch with the student voice (we currently have one full-time placement for a year, and four students on placement for 80 hours as part of a third year geography module).

The challenge

What were the issues that lead to this activity?
Through running joint events for staff and students we increasingly noticed the different perspectives and, sometimes, misconceptions they had of each other. We felt that this might be a symptom of the rapidly changing world of HE, in that most staff are the successful products of a traditional learning approach and find it hard to put themselves in the shoes of students who learn in different ways to themselves and, in the case of direct or recent school leavers, who have grown up with a different technological and education culture (e.g. GCSEs and coursework compared with O levels and dominantly final exams). Similarly, we felt that the students might not fully appreciate that the role of their lecturers is very different from that of their school teachers and that most lecturers have other aspects to their job in addition to teaching.

Why was it decided to employ the student voice?
We wanted to get a better handle on these differences of experiences and perspectives. We felt that many curriculum design decisions were made on the basis of what we thought would be appropriate for students, rather than actually asking them about their learning experiences. We wanted to get away from making assumptions about students and actually ask them directly. Through leading by example we also hope to encourage academic colleagues to consider ways of involving students in curriculum design.

Solution

Describe in some detail how the activity works…
On the 27th November 2006 the GEES Subject Centre held a Student and Staff discussion group meeting to give both communities an opportunity to discuss issues within higher education (specifically related to learning and teaching in geography, earth and environmental sciences. The objectives of the event were as follows:
- Facilitate networking between and within groups of staff and students;
- Identify areas of miscommunication between lecturers and students;
- Compare the different backgrounds between these two groups and assess how these affect their interactions and work; and
- Identify how relations and interactions can be improved.

The event was facilitated by two members of the GEES Subject Centre team (Sian Evans and Helen King), in addition two other colleagues were recruited to take notes from some of the discussions. The programme for the day was as follows:

11:00 – 11:20 Introductions and quick exercise to get to know one another

Each person was asked to go around the room and ask as many people as possible questions which were provided in a grid to highlight that not only were there differences between staff and students but also many similarities.

11:20 – 12:20 Feedback, Guidance and Support

Students and staff were put into separate groups and discussed separately what they felt the strengths and weakness in these areas are. The results from these discussions were then fed back to the plenary and a discussion followed.

12:20 – 13:00 Lunch

13:00 – 13:30 Youth Culture

The culture and society that we grow up in affects our perceptions of education. On top of this universities have also changed greatly, this affects students' knowledge prior to university, their requirements from university and their expectations of university. Students and staff were paired up and asked to discuss a variety of issues within higher education from both their perspectives, these pairs were then put together, forming two large groups to open up discussions, finally these were then opened up to the plenary.

13:30 – 13:45 Coffee

13:45 - 14:15 Foundation Knowledge

Students and staff were separated into two groups and asked to pick out which topics they felt were their top 5 threshold concepts. These were then compared to, to see if staff and students had chosen the same ones.

14:15 – 14:45 Advice

Everyone wrote down advice they would pass on to a new member of staff or new student and few of the most popular were shared with the plenary.

How were students recruited for this activity?
The event was advertised through the usual GEES Subject Centre channels (website and JISCmail newsletter), these are targeted at HE staff and they were invited to attend and bring along one or more of their students.

In what way is the student voice employed?
The outcomes of the event were written up and are to be published in a one-off staff-student publication together with other materials and resources gathered over the year.

Results

What have the results of this activity been?
What is the evidence, if any, for the benefits of this activity?
In what ways, if any, did employing the student voice make a difference?
The event, although small, was a great success. Several colleagues who could not attend asked for a copy of the programme so that they could run it within their own institution. Some interesting insights were gained into the world of staff and students from each others' perspective. An icebreaker exercise was used to help participants feel more comfortable with each other and there was a lot of open discussion and debate. Because the purpose of the event was to explore staff and student perspectives there was, necessarily, a segregation between these two groups – however, the atmosphere was positive and even where there were differences of opinion there was no animosity. This may have been due to the event being facilitated by people from a different HEI than the participants (the facilitators were from the GEES Subject Centre, participants were from four other HEIs).

In particular, the event provided an opportunity for staff and students to break down their assumptions about each other and to see the world from each others' perspective. Verbal feedback from the participants indicated that this was a really useful process. It also provided the GEES Subject Centre with information to pass on to GEES departments throughout UK HE via its staff-student publication; thereby encouraging colleagues to further consider the student perspective.

Learning points

What were the key points for success?
Having external facilitators who were not linked with the participant staff and students. An friendly atmosphere from the beginning. A good lunch and paying travel/subsistence expenses.

What were the things you would do differently if starting again?
Advertise it earlier to ensure larger numbers of participants. Try to arrange the seating so that staff and students were mixed up for the plenary discussions.

What were/are the main risks?
Participant numbers – persuading people to attend, what's in it for them.
Potential friction between staff and students.

Resources

What resources did the activity take in terms of time, money, goodwill and human resources?
The activity was held in a room at our institution, hence the only cost was catering. We also chose to pay the travel costs of the participants (as they were coming from other institutions). The general organisation of the event was included within the remit of our graduate student placement (Sian Evans) and took a total of approximately three days (including writing up the notes afterwards). Our two colleagues who took notes during the discussions did so on a good will basis, this took 2 hours of their time.

Support implications

What are the 'support implications' in terms of the resources required for this activity to continue?
This activity was a one-off event as part of a wider project on gathering information about the student learning experience. It is hoped that this information will be added to on an ongoing basis through the Subject Centre website.

Further information

Is there any further information you would like to provide?

Useful literature/weblinks

Are there any publications in the literature relevant to this development that you would recommend?
Are there any publications describing this development?
Are there any relevant weblinks to follow up?
A report on the event can be found on the GEES website at
www.gees.ac.uk/pubs/student/dgroupreport.htm

Details of the staff-student publication project can be found at
www.gees.ac.uk/pubs/student/contents.htm

This publication is due to be circulated early in the 07-08 academic year. Hard copies will be sent to all UK GEES HE departments and educational development units in their institutions. A pdf version will be available for free download from the GEES website (www.gees.ac.uk); additional articles that could not fit into the hard copy will also be made available on the website.

Contact

Contact name and details …

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Sian.evans@plymouth.ac.uk

Helen King (GEES Subject Centre Assistant Director)
h.king@plymouth.ac.uk

NB Both Sian and Helen will be leaving the GEES Subject Centre in late 2007; queries from September 2007 onwards should be addressed to Jane Dalrymple (jane.dalrymple@plymouth.ac.uk) our Subject Centre administrator.

Hearing the student voice

Promoting and encouraging the effective use of the student voice to enhance professional development in learning, teaching and assessment within higher education

An ESCalate-funded project involving Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, UCE Birmingham and the University of Westminster

Case study evaluation: student

Thank you for participating in this case study. It has been developed as part of a larger project designed to find effective ways of enabling lecturers to improve their academic practice by listening and responding to students' perspectives on their learning. We are calling this '**hearing the student voice**'.

To enable us to analyse the value of this case study, we would appreciate your feedback through completion of this form. For further information about the project, please visit www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices

Case study title

Hearing the Student Voice

Institution

GEES

Reaction

What were your main reactions to BEING ASKED to participate in this activity? Pleased to be able to contribute to an exercise with the aim of closing the knowledge and understanding gap between students and staff What were your main reactions to participating in this activity as a student? That the 'gap' is different for different institutions and different staff and students

Added value

Do you feel student involvement made this activity more valuable for lecturers?

Yes/ No

(please circle)

If yes, state how…

Lecturers can't guess how students feel and this activity gave both sides an opportunity to voice concerns and beliefs of what is important to each other

Impact

Do you think the student involvement in this activity will make a difference to the way lecturers work with students? **Yes**/No

If yes, state how…

For those that were present maybe a change in practice may occur

Benefit

What was the best thing that you will take away from this experience?

A greater understanding of the pressures and commitments that lecturers have to the student 'experience'

Format

If the student voice was presented in a different way, would it enhance the effectiveness of this activity? **Yes**/No

If yes, state how…

The conclusions now need to be disseminated

Changes

Could changes be made to the student involvement to make this activity more effective?

Yes/**No**

If yes, state how…

Although too high a student to staff ratio

Involving students in professional development

In what other ways could the student voice be used to help lecturers improve their academic practice?

More information for and by students on what they identify their needs as being and evaluation on a/ whether those needs have been met and b/ whether those needs materialised as being appropriate. (Students don't always know what they want and need before and event and expectations change)

Involving students in learning and teaching

In your current experience of learning and teaching, do you feel that your lecturers take account of the student voice in their work? **Yes**/No

In what other ways could the student voice be used in learning and teaching?

Module feed back forms need to have more emphasis on their importance and the questions more generic to teaching needs and explanations given as to a/ how to complete and b/ evidence given for changes made as a result. (There tends to be a sense that these are an accounting exercise.)

Further information

Are there any other comments you would like to provide?

Please provide contact details if you would be happy for members of the project team to contact you

Name .....

Programme .....

Institution .....

Email .....

Hearing the student voice

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Case study evaluation: staff

Thank you for participating in this case study. It has been developed as part of a larger project designed to find effective ways of enabling lecturers to improve their academic practice by listening and responding to students' perspectives on their learning. We are calling this '**hearing the student voice**'.

To enable us to analyse the value of this case study, we would appreciate your feedback through completion of this form. For further information about the project, please visit www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices

Case study title

GEES Subject Centre Staff-Student Event 27-11-06

Institution

University of Plymouth

Reaction

What was your main reaction to the student involvement?

I thought it was the most important aspect of the event

Added value

Did you feel the student involvement brought added value to this activity?
Yes Yes/ No
(please circle)

If yes, state how…

It's vital to understand the student viewpoint and experience

Impact

Will the student involvement in this activity make a difference to your practice?
Yes Yes/No
If yes, state how…
The major thing I took away from the event was that students don't always have a view of the bigger picture at a university. I'm now deliberately explaining procedures and other activities of the department to students. Much of their dissatisfaction with courses or programmes can be explained away with an understanding of why things are the way they are.

Benefit

What was the best thing that you will take away from this experience?
See above

Format

If the student voice was presented in a different way, would it make this activity more effective? Yes/No
Maybe
If yes, state how it should be presented
I found the us and them scenarios, with groups of students v groups of staff a bit confrontational.

Changes

Could changes be made to the student involvement to improve the effectiveness of this activity? Yes/No

If yes, state how…
More students from a wider range of institutions.

Involving students in professional development

In what other ways could the student voice be used in academic professional development? ?

Involving students in learning and teaching

Do you employ the student voice within your own practice? **Yes** Yes/ No In what other ways would you consider employing the student voice?

Further information

Are there any other comments you would like to provide?

Please provide contact details if you would be happy for members of the project team to contact you

Name	.....
Role	.....
Institution	.....
Email	.....

Using the student voice in staff development to progress a pilot Personal Development Planning module

Liz Beasley, Leeds Metropolitan University

Hearing the student voice

Promoting and encouraging the effective use of the student voice to enhance professional development in learning, teaching and assessment within higher education

An ESCalate-funded project involving Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, UCE Birmingham and the University of Westminster

Case study

Using the student voice in staff development to progress a pilot Personal Development Planning module.

Leeds Metropolitan University, Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education

Background

'*We must ensure that the learning opportunities we offer are positive, enabling, knowledge-building and, at best, life changing. To achieve this, we need well-trained, resourceful and proactive staff who are fully committed to best practices in teaching, linking this with underpinning pedagogic scholarship*.' (Assessment, Learning and Teaching (ALT) Strategy, 2005-2008, Leeds Metropolitan University)

The Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education began an extensive ' Teaching Smarter' programme for all academic staff in January 2006 with the clear purpose of embedding the recently introduced ALT Strategy. Colleagues have been encouraged to consider module rationalisation and alternative approaches to assessment, learning and teaching that maximise learning while optimising contact time with students. Some responses to this have included the use of WebCT Vista in arriving at an appropriate blend of learning opportunities.

This challenge led to the development of a new Personal Development Planning (PDP)module. The module was developed using high level expertise from across the university with many colleagues contributing learning experiences or 'objects'. The module delivery involved a significant change to previous PDP modules with a reduced number of lectures, a focus on field week teaching and increased formative assessment alongside a focus on ethics. This was seen as a pilot across a significant number of courses involving around 390 students. The particular focus of the case study involves first year students on the BSc(Hons) Sports Coaching degree.

In this case study, students were recorded in conversation about their learning experience.

The depth of insight and range of perspectives that emerged were significant and extensive. They required analysis and selection prior to use. Selected parts of conversations were played to colleagues and specific questions were developed and posed for detailed discussion.

The evaluations outlined later in the paper indicate that the inclusion of voices was considered by colleagues to have been valuable the process raised awareness of the student-centeredness of this approach. The issues that arose during the study included the problem of how to capture the voice electronically and in a real context, selecting representative and appropriate voices and sharing them in a purposeful and developmental manner.

The challenge

'…*we intend to be: 1. the university with the vision for the long run of putting students at the centre of our way of doing things...*' Leeds Metropolitan University (2007)'Vision and Character'

Listening to students and involving them in our staff development is one way of ensuring students are at the centre of planning for the development of our curriculum.

As an expanding student-centred faculty with a responsive curriculum, it is vital to keep a close focus on how students are directly affected by changes required to meet the demands of growth. This project addressed the challenge of bringing the student voice to a module development team at a time when it could influence change.

The focus was on the group of first year students on the newly approved 2 year accelerated BSc(Hons)Sports Coaching award, with a particularly flexible and blended approach that was being explored. The team were supportive of the insights that could be gained and worked alongside the Director of ALT on this project.

Why was it decided to employ the student voice?

Use of the student voice was considered an appropriate way of accessing the views of students in an in depth manner with a focus on the learning experience from the perspective of the students. This was seen as a pro-active approach that could be undertaken during the study while the experiences were 'live' and the students could express their current views.

Students were given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences as they were happening and engage in a conversation with each other and the Director of ALT about their learning.

There has been limited prior experience of the use of student perspectives in curriculum focused staff development. This was an opportunity to realise the potential of use in an innovative programme with the intention that practice could be rolled out further if successful.

Solution...

The initial stage was the production of an outline plan for the project to be taken to and approved by the ethics committee prior to the start of any interviews.

Students studying the PDP module on the Sports Coaching degree were invited to attend two meetings with the Director of ALT through the course team. Six students volunteered to participate and the first meeting took place immediately following a planned lecture.

Ethical clearance was established and permissions were sought to record and use the voices for the purposes of staff development. An informal discussion took place based on a range of questions about the PDP learning experience. The award team members were invited to join the interview but chose not to do so, so the interview involved the Director of ALT and the six student volunteers.

The questions were carefully created to avoid discussion of individuals and to focus only on the student learning experience. The questions included:

What was the PDP module learning experience like for you?
Has the web/ classroom blend of learning worked for you?
How was it being a student on the module?
How might you suggest we develop it in the future?
Do you think there are particular elements that are very important for first year students?

The student voices were transcribed and analysed leading to the identification of six key themes that could be further explored for course development.

Specific quotes typical of each theme were extracted from the main recording and each had a focus question created for staff discussion.

A staff development session was based on the five key themes raised by the students and the selected voices were listened to alongside paper copies of the quotes. Colleagues discussed the issues raised and considered changes to enhance the provision with the production of an action plan as a direct outcome.

Results

The use of the student voice was evaluated both with the students and staff to try to establish if the inclusion of student voices was a worthwhile process.

The evaluation comments indicate that the use of the student voice was considered by the team as an effective way of sharing perspectives for staff development. This was seen as a pro-active approach that could be undertaken during the module delivery while the experience was 'live'. Students had the opportunity to reflect on their learning and engage in a reflective conversation.

The five key themes identified through the analysis of student comments, and the emergent questions that were posed during the staff development session are outlined below:

1. WebCT design issues (Several comments from the students indicated a theme that suggested a general point about the layout and design of the web based materials and easy navigation)

The emergent question arising from the student comments was:
'Is there anything we need to consider in terms of re-thinking the design of the web based elements of the programme?'

2. Length of the programme delivery (Several comments from the students indicated a theme that suggested a general point about the effectiveness of the initial block learning in the experiential outdoor field week)

The emergent question arising from the student comments was:
'Is the length of the programme delivery working or could there be an improvement if it was changed?'

3. Contextualisation to the course (Several comments from the students indicated a theme that suggested a general point about the generic nature of some of the materials and activities on the web and the direct application of them)

The emergent question arising from the student comments was:
'Would there be a benefit in contextualising the module to more closely relate to the award focus?'

4. ICT possibilities (Several comments from the students indicated a theme that suggested a general point about the personal use of ICT and the possibility of including podcasting)

The emergent question arising from the student comments was:
'Are there other uses of the web that students would find helpful and do we want to consider them?'

5. Teaching patterns (Several comments from the students indicated a theme that suggested a general point about lecture and seminar patterns of attendance and their preferences)

The emergent question arising from the student comments was:
'Are there alternative teaching patterns for the face to face support that might be considered?'

The outcome of the development discussion was an action plan for changes and developments to be introduced in the next delivery of the module. Not all of the student comments were directly responded to, such as the suggestion to podcast all lectures. It was considered to be less appropriate in some instances due to the nature of the sessions, although podcasting would be used for special interviews or instances where

they would be used to enhance the learning experience. All comments were welcomed and were considered and discussed in the light of experience and expertise. All the comments considered resulted in some form of change or adaptation to the course.

Following the initial interviews the students were invited to a second meeting to jointly evaluate the experience of being involved in the project. All the students involved returned for the evaluation meeting and responded to questions with the following comments:

- It would be better at a less busy time
- We were helping our tutor
- It was enjoyable and interesting to hear others
- Honest
- Never had before – good to see the review process
- Shows what students think and what can be changed
- Hope it has an impact – depends if put in practice
- Comfortable way of talking – no pressure – with a camera we may be less inclined to talk
- Suggest more regular and possible buddy systems to talk to more experienced students
- Next year tell year 2's that we made the changes – students would see it.

Following the staff development session, all the six staff team involved were asked to complete an evaluation form considering the use of the student voice, five forms were returned with the following comments:

- I was pleased to see how many were involved and how honest they were
- Good to 'hear' what they thought, you can lose context with the written word
- Benefit to see the students honesty about a modules in a relaxed environment
- Video - possible alternative?
- Only students experience a perspective staff never will
- Broader range of gender and background
- Must be used wisely
- Written was enough
- Very positive – the more student involvement the better in respect of a student centred approach
- Take on board some of the comments and influencing the delivery next time
- I like the idea of taking a whole group with an independent person
- Suggest involving students who are not just volunteers
- We could have more input into the questions
- Should form part of the blend at the time of course development

In what ways, if any, did employing the student voice make a difference?

Based on the evaluation comments outlined in the previous section, it could be interpreted that the indications point to students feeling valued. It is important to note

that they need to know the impact in the long term in order for the process to be seen as useful, so feedback will need to be built in.

There was a clear perception that the students were honest and insightful in the interview and that was a key factor in their comments being so carefully considered.

The inclusion of the student perspective in module development process is seen as a student-centred approach to development and that was appreciated by the staff team involved as well as being an important approach for the University.

As an additional benefit for the students, involving them gave an insight into research processes that may be of use in the future. By being directly involved they have experience of ethics and permissions seeking and they way data can be gathered through interviews.

Learning points

If this project were to be repeated in a similar context, the following learning points would need to be considered:

- Be open about purpose and involve recipients of the staff development
- Do not allow evaluation/ personal comment – generic issues need to be identified for discussion
- Recording quality of the voices must be high if they are to be played back to a group
- Selection of the voices for staff development needs care to ensure they are representative and appropriate
- Planning for the gathering the voices needs care and must be done at an appropriate time
- Students must be informed about the impact of their involvement

Resources

The most significant resource required for this project was time for the Director of ALT and the students. The staff team would have reviewed the module under normal circumstances and this project supported them in doing that efficiently and with a clear focus.
Lunches were provided for the students at both the data gathering and evaluation meeting Transcripts were typed and analysed by the Director of ALT, and although time consuming this was viewed as a worthwhile activity as it ensured the voices were carefully considered and re-heard several times, allowing for reflection and consideration during the transcription process.

Support implications

The student voice case study activity was well structured and it is easily transferable to many staff development planning opportunities. Colleagues have been interested in becoming involved in undertaking a case study for the project there is some progress in establishing a community of practice. ‘Student Voices’ are now included in university wide discussions about HE Pedagogic research with teaching.

In order to explain with project and encourage potential involvement I have shared with colleagues a ten-step process for undertaking a case study student voice project:

1. Establish the focus of the staff development where the voices will be heard.
2. Get internal research ethics approval
3. Recruit some students
4. Confirm permission from the students to use the voices (Form provided)
5. Record the process/ meeting/ interview/ voices
6. Evaluate the process with students (Form provided)
7. Prepare the voices in a staff development session and plan the delivery
8. Deliver the session
9. Evaluate the process with staff (Form provided)
10. Write up the findings (Form provided)

This may be useful for those considering participating in the project as it continues. There is strong encouragement from the project team to encourage participation in the development network of enthusiasts. Further information about how to get involved is included in the project link below.

Useful literature/web links

List of books provided on the main web pages for the project including:
Asmar C (1999) 'Scholarship, experience or both? A developer's approach to cross-cultural teaching' International Journal of Academic Development 4 (1)
Ramsden P (1988) 'Managing the effective university' Higher Education Research and Development 17 (3)
Yorke M (2007) Editor, Personal Development Planning and Employability, Series 2, Chapter 6

Leeds Metropolitan University Internal Publications:
www.leedsmet.ac.uk - Vision and Character document 2007
Assessment Learning and Teaching Strategy 2005 – 2008, Leeds Metropolitan University

Visit the project website for further information about plans, activities, events and how to get involved:
www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices

Contact
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Student perspectives on how we can improve social integration for overseas students

Alison Varey, Napier University

Hearing the student voice

Promoting and encouraging the effective use of the student voice to enhance professional development in learning, teaching and assessment within higher education

An ESCalate-funded project involving Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, UCE Birmingham and the University of Westminster

Case study

Title

Students' perspectives on how can we improve social integration for overseas students

Institution

Napier University

Background

Overseas students face particular challenges in integrating with students from here and other countries. The aim of this workshop is to find practical and achievable strategies for strengthening social cohesion both in the classroom, and through encouraging participation in University-led activities.

Current situation:

- Often the amount of cross-national interaction is generally Iow
- International students expect and desire greater contact
- Interaction with domestic peers is generally associated with psychological, social and academic benefits for the international student
- Domestic students are largely uninterested in initiating contact with their international peers I
- Significant intercultural interaction is unlikely to occur spontaneously : interventionist strategies might be required to introduce and promote more and better cultural activities
- Students, both local and international, perceive it is the responsibility of educational institutions to increase and enhance intercultural activities

The challenge

What were the issues that lead to this activity?

Workshop aimed to find practical and achievable strategies for strengthening social cohesion both in the classroom, and through encouraging participation in University-led activities. International students are not integrating well with home students.

Why was it decided to employ the student voice?

To hear the views of students over the problems and their suggested solutions. Also to hear the students reactions to suggestions from staff

Solution

Describe in some detail how the activity works...

Workshop activity instructions:

You will split into small discussion groups. In your groups, spend 30 minutes exploring ways in which we can improve social integration for overseas students.

On your post-its, note down at least one suggestion on each of the following themes:

1. Mechanisms for discovering the needs of international students

2. Mechanisms for encouraging domestic students to integrate

3. Activities the University can organise to promote a two way exchange between cultures

4. Practical strategies for encouraging integration in the classroom

Nominate a member of your group to feedback briefly to the rest of the workshop.

How were students recruited for this activity?
Suggestions supplied by the International Support Tutor

In what way is the student voice employed?
Participation in the discussion groups

Results

What have the results of this activity been?
Suggestions for the questions outlines earlier
What is the evidence, if any, for the benefits of this activity?
Good feedback from staff on using students in the workshop. One suggested they would employ this method within their area.

In what ways, if any, did employing the student voice make a difference?

Different viewpoint, more aware of the actual issues, more aware of the diversity of opinion

Learning points

What were the key points for success?
Students were confident.
What were the things you would do differently if starting again?
More preparation with the students.
What were/are the main risks?
The students feel intimidated.

Resources

What resources did the activity take in terms of time, money, goodwill and human resources?

Time to organise the students
I bought cakes and drinks with me to thank them
It took more than 3 hours of the students' valuable time
I have used up some goodwill although I think the students enjoyed participating and being listened to.
To make a difference I need to collate responses and then try and make things happen

Support implications

What are the 'support implications' in terms of the resources required for this activity to continue?

Student time and organisation time

Further information

Is there any further information you would like to provide?

Useful literature/ weblinks

Are there any publications in the literature relevant to this development that you would recommend?
Are there any publications describing this development?
Are there any relevant weblinks to follow up?

Contact

Contact name and details...
Alison Varey, Director of Academic Development, Senior Lecturer, School of Computing

Hearing the student voice

Promoting and encouraging the effective use of the student voice to enhance professional development in learning, teaching and assessment within higher education

An ESCalate-funded project involving Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, UCE Birmingham and the University of Westminster

Case study evaluation: staff

Thank you for participating in this case study. It has been developed as part of a larger project designed to find effective ways of enabling lecturers to improve their academic practice by listening and responding to students' perspectives on their learning. We are calling this '**hearing the student voice**'.

To enable us to analyse the value of this case study, we would appreciate your feedback through completion of this form. For further information about the project, please visit www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices

Case study title

Social Integration of overseas students

Institution

Napier University

Reaction

What was your main reaction to the student involvement?

Good, although wish lists are not always practical. And how representative are they

Fine. It is better for us to understand student requirements

Very helpful in understanding problems of integration and identifying possible solutions/aid.

Very welcomed. Students' experience contributed significantly to workshops

Good to hear student perspective
Impressed by how willing they were to give their views. It was a very good idea

Added value

Did you feel the student involvement brought added value to this activity?

Yes/ No
(please circle)

If yes, state how…

They often know things we don't eg what is actually available, what is useful etc

Without student involvement the staff would be discussing the matter in a vacuum

We can understand the students' needs better

Essential to ensure we address students' problems, not just what we think they are.

Actual examples of their experiences given and discussed

It is good to hear first hand the good and bad experiences

Without them, it would be impossible to know their thoughts and see things from their point of view

They provided ideas and thoughts we as staff may not have thought of or come across before

Impact

Will the student involvement in this activity make a difference to your practice?

Yes/No

If yes, state how…
YES

Perhaps - might improve/increase my feedback mechanisms (ie ask more explicitly for feedback from international students

Intend to have similar session re library services for international students.

Being made aware of how the student feels

Will be able to consider their needs more effectively

NO
I will continue to talk to as many students - home and overseas - as possible

Benefit

What was the best thing that you will take away from this experience?

The belief that other people care

Has given me a much wider view of what it is like to be an international student at Napier

The way, method and style of the workshop

International students are all different like the whole student body, not 1 size fits all.

The knowledge that the institution is taking an interest in overseas students

A better understanding of practical/cultural problems that international students experience

Lots of ideas of how to improve things

There is genuine interest and desire in improving integration

Format

If the student voice was presented in a different way, would it make this activity more effective? **Yes**/No

If yes, state how it should be presented

One of the student suggestions was an on-line forum - which would allow ongoing discussion etc

Maybe. There are a lot of ways to present students' voice, but I think this is a good way

More structured input - students prepared to talk more about their own experience and wishes

Involvement in web-based dialogue, blogs etc might reduce inhibition, make them more comfortable to state point of view.

Changes

Could changes be made to the student involvement to improve the effectiveness of this activity?

Yes/No

If yes, state how…

Better preparation, so they'd come prepared

Would have been useful to have some home and EU students present

Perhaps a short written student account or FAO sheet given out prior to the start

UK students and European students could be involved too

More structured input - students prepared to talk more about their own experience and wishes

Involving students in professional development

In what other ways could the student voice be used in academic professional development?
Regular cross-programme, maybe campus-based forums? Much more open Boards of Studies
Could be used to help with the delivery of lectures/tutorials
Ask the students feedback during the period
Feedback. Use in PDR - student/staff liaison need to know what works/what doesn't
n/a
Give students the ability to be more involved in all aspects of development not just via NSA
WebCT development, Module development

Involving students in learning and teaching

Do you employ the student voice within your own practice? Yes/ No
In what other ways would you consider employing the student voice?
Yes I think so. Most of the work revolves around what they say
Discuss with the students about my teaching
Student helpers/ mentors/ guides
n/a
Staff/student liaison meetings - they gather the views of their fellow students and bring them to the meetings
International students are represented amongst Senior Residents and their views/experiences incorporated into department practices

Further information

Are there any other comments you would like to provide?
We need coordination. If International College doesn't want to do this, can Student Support Services take it on?
More joined-up thinking/sharing of experience across the university would be good.
I think it is vital to get the existing students' perspective – it’s not all about recruitment of students it’s also about retention

Hearing the student voice

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Case study evaluation: student

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To enable us to analyse the value of this case study, we would appreciate your feedback through completion of this form. For further information about the project, please visit www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices

Case study title

Social Integration of overseas students

Institution

Napier University

Reaction

What were your main reactions to BEING ASKED to participate in this activity?
Talk about some experience.
Great to hear that university is concerned about social integration.
Cool.
Helpful.
I like these kinds of activities which could be helpful for learning new thing.

What were your main reactions to participating in this activity as a student?

Give some suggestions.
A place where I can raise my issues about socially integrating with local students.
I can get some useful information about how to integrate in the society more
I would like to give and share my experience to help the following fellow students.
Its good and I hope I can help.
Gather the information and try to share my experience with other students.

Added value

Do you feel student involvement made this activity more valuable for lecturers?

Yes/ No

(please circle)

If yes, state how…

Lecturers can get feedback about some strategies that have been done, and know some measures are effective or not.
Lecturers came to know what student thinks.
Students are the people who have actual and real experience which are valuable.
Feedback through interviews, surveys more effective.
Students can tell their feelings about some activities which may help school to organise activities to promote the social integration for overseas students.
He can understand what the students have problems, how can he help or advise them regarding to any issue.

Impact

Do you think the student involvement in this activity will make a difference to the way lecturers work with students? **Yes**/No

If yes, state how…

The lecturers may give more feedback to international students.
Feedback from students will help them find ways to communicate better.
Coursework design
Lecture arrangements, tutorials.
Lecturer can't think about all that the students need.
He comes to know what students are expecting from him and what will be deliverable.
How can he help to handle their coursework.

Benefit

What was the best thing that you will take away from this experience?

It is to know some strategies to improve my social integration skill.
Try and find ways to socially integrate with home students and society.
Getting useful suggestions for me to do.
Got a chance to share the experience. How could we overcome the problems that we have faced as international students.

Format

If the student voice was presented in a different way, would it enhance the effectiveness of this activity? **No – 2**

Yes

If yes, state how…

It gives some ideas about the questions.
A forum where international students can put their issues online.
One to one interview – more and critical info in depth.

Changes

Could changes be made to the student involvement to make this activity more effective?

No – 1

Yes

If yes, state how…

Different students from different countries.
If there were more students' joining in this activity, they can provide more information.

Involving students in professional development

In what other ways could the student voice be used to help lecturers improve their academic practice?

The video may just focus on one problem (eg how to finish the coursework) and then talk about other problems one by one.
First thing to teach them the British education system because some students may come from other education systems.

Involving students in learning and teaching

In your current experience of learning and teaching, do you feel that your lecturers take account of the student voice in their work?

Yes/No

Some are but some aren't.
In what other ways could the student voice be used in learning and teaching?
Discussion between students from different countries about coursework, lecturer' content, living experience.
Face-to-face interview.

Further information

Are there any other comments you would like to provide?

More activities, not just group discussions. Also one to one interview.

Please provide contact details if you would be happy for members of the project team to contact you

Name .....

Programme .....

Institution .....

Email .....

‘My first year experience’: constructing student video diaries

Fiona Campbell, Napier University

Hearing the student voice

Promoting and encouraging the effective use of the student voice to enhance professional development in learning, teaching and assessment within higher education

An ESCalate-funded project involving Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, UCE Birmingham and the University of Westminster

Case study

Title

Provide a suitable title for your case study…
'My first year experience': constructing student video diaries

Institution

Provide the name of your institution …
Napier University

Background

In about 100 words describe the background to this activity…

In planning an internal staff conference *Firm Foundations: equipping new students to succeed*, it was agreed that employing the student voice at the start of the day would enable staff participants to better understand the experiences and issues of first year students and be more open to the ideas, interventions and practices which they would encounter later in the day and could adopt.

To be effective the student voice portrayed was required to:
* be authentic and present real issues
* highlight critical 'at risk' times in the first year
* highlight the behaviour of 'at risk' students
* identify the staff support, interaction and feedback which make a difference to students
* not identify individual students.

For these reasons the student voice was employed through the use of video diaries constructed from views elicited in student surveys and acted out by students.

The challenge

What were the issues that lead to this activity?
Conference focus on the needs of students for effective interventions to enable them to become successful learners.

Why was it decided to employ the student voice?
Important for staff to hear the authentic voice to:
* help offset any pre-conceived assumptions about the first year experience
* appreciate the issues which students face in adjusting to university life – academic and social
* develop an emotional connection with students to better empathise with their perspectives
* learn what support, interactions and feedback can make a difference to first year students

Solution

Describe in some detail how the activity works…
How were students recruited for this activity?
In what way is the student voice employed?

Using authentic comments taken from the current Student Satisfaction Survey, scripts were developed for 4 student profiles:
* mature, female,
* school leaver, male,
* direct entry student, male
* international student, male

The scripts covered student attitudes to their experience at key times during the year:
*first few days
*first assessment
*Christmas
*end of academic year

Through the School of Computing, digital media student filmmakers were recruited who then recruited appropriate fellow students as the four actors. The actors were filmed acting out their parts at the four key times listed above and a DVD was produced.

The DVD has been developed ethically in that it captures and portrays real student views but does not expose individuals.

Results

What have the results of this activity been?
What is the evidence, if any, for the benefits of this activity?
In what ways, if any, did employing the student voice make a difference?

Part of the DVD (2 students) was played at the start of the staff conference and made an impact on participants engendering much discussion and debate about what the students had said both on the day – and still now!

Evaluations included:

Most felt it had been a positive experience:
Comments included: *Caught my attention, powerful stuff!, 'rang true', brings issues to life, the impact of a 'live' student beats the books anytime*

Many indicated that employing the student voice had made a difference to them:
Comments included: *Without empirical evidence we're left with guess work and even if our guesses are good, we can't know all the ways that students experience their first year; more immediate and effective in getting the message over than having a member of staff presenting anecdotal evidence.*

Some indicated that it would make a difference to their practice:
Comments included: E*asy to relate to and think of the implications for teaching and learning*; *gave me confidence to continue to refine my teaching; ideas for practical input on my programme.*
Some staff detailed how their practice would change.

Learning points

What were the key points for success?
Undoubtedly using authentic, genuine student views which both surprised, engaged and moved staff.

Enthusiasm of the students involved who made an effort both in the casting, preparation, props, acting and filming which ensured that the actors came across as real students.

Telling a 'story' – important for the script to be carefully developed to tell a story about the individual portrayed, their experience and their reactions to it.

What were the things you would do differently if starting again?
Nothing

What were/are the main risks?

Selection:
Important for the messages to be succinct and well made. Could have been dangerous if the film had been longer and there had been too much repetition.

Using humour:
The humour in the DVD was genuine: both an unfortunate incident experienced by the mature student and the naïve over-indulgence of the school leaver were derived from actual survey comments. One member of staff was concerned that we were laughing at the students and found this uncomfortable although after some discussion agreed the laughter was more related to the humorous incidents and the accuracy of the stereotype portrayed. Important to be careful about using humour appropriately

Amateurism
Important for actors to be convincing and filmmakers professional. If not the message could be lost and the investment worthless.

Resources

What resources did the activity take in terms of time, money, goodwill and human resources?

The digital media student and the student 'actors' did not ask for remuneration – looking at the experience as a useful learning opportunity for themselves. However as a fair amount of time had gone into setting the scenes, rehearsing, filming and editing etc, all the student participants (5) were rewards with Amazon tokens to a modest value.

The development of the script by EdDev staff was a very time-consuming task – 5 days work approx. Although it did give those involved an opportunity to become familiar with the many comments made by students in the surveys used.

A member of school staff liaised between the students and the 'clients' (EdDev) and ensured the project was on-track.

A tangible resource - the DVD – has been produced and is now available for use in other staff development contexts and has been employed in professional development workshops and other events.

Support implications

What are the 'support implications' in terms of the resources required for this activity to continue?

None – unless edits of the DVD re required.

Further information

Is there any further information you would like to provide?
The DVD has been used as an example of the student voice in external educational development conferences and very positive comments about its value have been made. The potential for its generic use in other institutions has also been raised.

Useful literature/weblinks

Are there any publications in the literature relevant to this development that you would recommend?
Are there any publications describing this development?
Are there any relevant weblinks to follow up?

Contact

Contact name and details …

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Hearing the student voice

Promoting and encouraging the effective use of the student voice to enhance professional development in learning, teaching and assessment within higher education

An ESCalate-funded project involving Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, UCE Birmingham and the University of Westminster

Case study evaluation: staff

Thank you for participating in this case study. It has been developed as part of a larger project designed to find effective ways of enabling lecturers to improve their academic practice by listening and responding to students' perspectives on their learning. We are calling this '**hearing the student voice**'.

To enable us to analyse the value of this case study, we would appreciate your feedback through completion of this form. For further information about the project, please visit www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices

Case study title

Use of video diaries of first year student experience within staff conference *Firm foundations: equipping students new to Napier University to succeed*

Institution

Napier University

Reaction

What was your main reaction to the student involvement…

I enjoyed the videos and was impressed by how well they were put together and performed by the students – they caught my attention

That it was powerful stuff!

I wanted to ask and then listen. I didn't get that chance.

I thought it was an interesting way of exploring students' experiences and confirmed for me what I have long thought about students feeling isolated, particularly mature students in the early stages of the first semester. It also confirmed that what I try to do with 1st years is addressing many of the issues raised by veronica. People like Chris should probably have had better advice prior to starting his degree but it does show the

importance of chasing up 1st years over their attendance and then being able to nip problems in the bud.

Surprise at some elements of it. This applied particularly to the intensity of the doubt felt by the mature student that she was going to make it.

I though the authenticity was good – could relate to what the students were saying, it 'rang true'. I have head students having very similar conversations.

As a mature student myself I recognised the female student's experience, although I as a lot less negative at the time!

A good way of getting the message across, but nothing very surprising in the content.

Good idea. Adds immediacy and realism.

Very positive. I thought the videos portrayed different student perspectives on the first year experience in a vivid, realistic and humorous light.

A good way of getting the message across, but nothing very surprising in the content.

Added value

Did you feel the student involvement brought added value to this activity?

Yes/ No

If yes, state how…

Made it seem more 'alive' or 'real'.

I think there are far too many studies in HE that appear to overlook impact on students. In order to look a the first year experience (as experienced by students) this surely must include more examples such as the video diaries that help us to understand students' perspectives.

Gives direct student perspective; brings issues to life.

Change of teaching style was a relief from speakers who could not be heard in the lecture theatre.

I think it was again the authenticity. Easy to relate to and think of the implications for teaching and learning.

The impact of a 'live' student beats the books anytime.

Without empirical evidence we're left with guess work and even if our guesses are good, we can't know all the ways that students experience their first year.

It made me think of the hurdles we could remove or lower – and those which will always be there, by the very nature of life.

Made the statistics live and much more meaningful.

The student involvement caught my attention and made me listen to what was being said. It felt more immediate and effective in getting the message over than having a member of staff presenting anecdotal evidence, even though we were told the students were acting. Somehow the whole thing felt more real.

Impact

Will the student involvement within this activity make a difference to your practice?

Yes/**No**

Nothing new was said.

Because I am constantly trying to find ways of informing myself about 'How was/is it for you?' And I didn't react with, let alone find, ways to improve my searching.

Probably not, but it will give me confidence to continue to refine my teaching.

Yes/No

If yes, state how…

I'm currently organising an introduction to the university evening for students who have been away from education for a few years – the videos highlighted the importance of speaking to current students who were in this position before marketing and developing the programme for the evening.

I think it made me think of what more innovative ways we can:
1. hear the student voice
2. ensure staff are aware of current student perspectives.

I will increase my direct impact to new students in early weeks of the MSc programme of which I am programme director. I will revise and improve induction.

I will try and be more aware that small comments/ actions of mine can be <u>very</u> important.

Benefit

What was the best thing that you will take away from this experience?

I enjoyed it, and it reinforced how important things were which is always useful.

Memorable portrayal of some first year student voices. Innovative use of video diaries for educational and developmental purposes.

The value of listening to the student voice.

Reassurance that allowances I have been making towards students are justified, and similarly that sometimes taking a stand is necessary.

Confirmation that I' doing the best I can in the circumstances.

Ideas for practical input on my programme.

A keen awareness of how strongly my colleagues 'know' and 'already do'. A challenge to find ways to challenge that – constructively.

That while the voices may have been performed, the statistics and experiences we talk about relate to real people.

Format

If the student voice was presented in a different way would it enhance the effectiveness of this activity? Yes/**No**

I thought it was well presented.

Can't think that it could have been better.

Don't think so, though it might have been good to see chunks from real student interviews rather than scripted though I know this is logistically nigh on impossible!

But maybe include a few more less extreme students whose needs might not be so obvious and well known.

Yes/No

If yes, state how…

Four students to every one staff; staff only to speak/ question after 2 seconds silence.

Improve sound quality.

Chris: hardly heard/understood a word.

Had a little difficulty hearing 'Chris'. Possibly have more than just two case histories without making the sequence too long.

Strictly speaking, this depends. Sometimes having students there in person to speak for themselves and to present their own voices and be valuable… but I realise there re some challenges to this too. Your video dairies are more easily transferable to multiple educational opportunities.

Changes

Could changes be made to the student involvement to improve the effectiveness of this activity? **Yes**/No

If yes, state how…

These are composite students created from data I student satisfaction questionnaires as well as including parts of the students who acted the parts. I'm not sure, but it is possible the real individual student experiences are simplified or possibly stereotyped in this amalgamation (??)

Maybe film a group in discussion of their difficulties in the first month.

It would have been interesting to hear from students who were school leavers who didn't drop out – what was the difference for them?

Most of our students are local yet an American and a northern Ireland student featured?? Why?

Yes/**No**

It looked right as it is.

Let them speak. Listen!

Involving students in professional development

In what other ways could the student voice be used in academic professional development?

Still relatively new to the university so am unsure of how things work. My only comment would be as often and in as many ways as possible!

Anonymised, independently moderated focus groups on the nature of the leaning experience on particular programmes leading to a summary for review panel changed to make objective recommendations.

Use it (or rather adaptations) to 'teach ' other students.

It would be good to know what they saw as positive learning experiences, even if they were hard, once the 1st year was over.

Not sure other than giving the student perspective – but the perspective could be on a variety of issues eg teaching, assessment, university support etc

Feedback forms after lectures on how much they have leaned.

Comments on lectures, tutorials; what they value most in the learning environment; how they use online resources.

Presence at staff conferences and workshops.

Student evaluation to inform staff development.

Involving students in learning and teaching

Do you employ the student voice within your own practice?
In what other ways would you consider employing the student voice?

Yes/No

Curriculum development

Student module evaluation focus groups.

Use student opinions to evaluate and improve the service I provide. Working with students to develop events for those coming to university who have been away from education for a while.

I write (email) to them for advice during and after the event. I believe – and value – what they tell me.

I seek feedback from student in an informal capacity all the time. I give them space to ask questions and make mistakes and find out what worked and what didn't. Sometimes I adapt what I'm doing and sometimes I explain more clearly why I'm doing something in particular way, even if it seems like hard work.

I make use of student helpers within the teaching environment.

We engaged 20 students recently to comment on the careers service. As a result of this and other methods we received an award of excellence.

Within validation and programme review events. In evaluating learning experiences, involving students in running teaching and leaning activities, involving students in research projects. Through joint publication of work.

Further information

Are there any other comments you would like to provide?

There is a danger that we go too far in listening to the student voice but I really like the video diaries and would like to have seen more of them. I'd be interested to know what they think of the personal tutor system here because from my perspective we have far too many students to make it personal and therefore effective. How can you monitor 40 students on a personal basis?

This was a conference with a practical output which can make a difference to the student experience.

We need to find ways of judging how typical these personal accounts may be. We also need to be reassured that what they tell us has been triangulated.

Just that it was very well done/ put together – really professional. Students seemed natural – not actors.

Please provide contact details if you would be happy for members of the project team to contact you

Name .....

Programme .....

Institution .....

Email .....

‘How we like to be taught’: recording student views to support staff development in student-centred learning

Ann Rumpus, University of Westminster

Hearing the student voice

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An ESCalate-funded project involving Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, UCE Birmingham and the University of Westminster

Case study

Title

'How we like to be taught': student views recorded on DVD for use in a staff development session on student-centred learning and transcribed in a guide for staff

Institution

University of Westminster

Background

For a significant time the University's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy and Strategy has made a commitment to student-centred learning:

a. *Learning and teaching methods promote student-centred, active learning and enhance opportunities for flexible learning and enquiry-based approaches (whenever possible and appropriate).*
b. *Learning and teaching methods are selected to meet the learning needs of a diverse range of students (including international students and those with disabilities), with attention to issues of fair access and equal opportunity.*

However we recognise that taking such an approach is not universal and that in spite of a range of staff development support (e.g. workshop provision, advice on curriculum design and paper-based information) there is an incomplete understanding of what student-centred learning really is in some parts of the institution, and that this principle of the Policy was being only partially met. Hence we felt that 'capturing' students' views on what is helpful in motivating and supporting their learning, and what teaching approaches they find useful, would provide us with a valuable staff development tool. This would help extend the understanding of student-centred learning, and would provide for a more appropriate delivery of the curriculum.

The challenge

What were the issues that lead to this activity?
Why was it decided to employ the student voice?

The challenge for any staff development activity in a very large and devolved institution is engaging a tangible group of staff. Time constraints mean that workshop uptake is invariably low, and the project team was seeking an approach which could be used in a variety of ways, in different fora, and which would engage colleges. It was decided to use the 'student voice' as the project team noted from previous work (in which alumni were asked to comment on the curriculum, and the value of embedded skills) that the fact that students had voiced a given opinion gave it very much more credibility and force than if it is conveyed by other staff. The project team were located within the University's Educational Initiative Centre (EIC), a University-wide unit with the remit to support academic staff in all learning and teaching activities. Using recorded material on a DVD provided flexibility for use of the students' comments with different groupings of staff, and over the longer term, which the project team were looking for.

Solution

Describe in some detail how the activity works…
How were students recruited for this activity?
In what way is the student voice employed?

A member of the EIC project team selected a current student, who was undertaking a journalism course, to work with him. The student (who was paid at the standard student employment rate) interviewed students from across the four campuses of the University and asked them to comment on what they found helpful and less helpful in terms of supporting their leaning and what motivated them. The comments were gathered on a *vox pop* basis, approaching students who were on all four of the University's campuses, in common rooms, canteens or outside spaces. The responses were recorded on video, edited and placed onto a DVD as a presentation of just over 20 minutes. The views of 26 students were presented on the DVD. The availability of the studios of the University's School of Media, Art and Design was an essential element in limiting the costs of the product, and ensuring a product of professional quality.

Prior to being recorded the students were reassured that the material would only be shown as a staff development tool, and that it would not be used otherwise either within or outside the University, or for publicity purposes etc. It was also emphasised that that staff would see directly what students said, so that comments would be directly attributable to them. They were asked to sign an agreement that made their consent to this clear. The students were asked not to name individual staff, courses or modules in their remarks.

The journalist student made all the interactions with the interviewees, the project team member acting solely as a 'consultant' in the background to help direct the project, shape the direction of the questioning and edit the DVD. The students were asked to describe what they found helpful about the teaching at the University, what they found less helpful, what they would change, what motivated them and how they would sum up the experience in one sentence. The DVD was then organised under these headings.

Care was taken that the edited video was a full representation of the students' views, rather than any pre-conceived representation of the views of the EIC. In fact the students expressed enthusiasm for a range of student-centred approaches, and for variety in teaching and learning activities, reinforcing the University's policy.

The DVD was used as part of a formal staff development session on student-centred learning, where it was shown as an initial exercise to prompt staff to consider how students learned. It was additionally shown in a similar way with the group of new Academic staff taking the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education, and the researchers and other staff with a role in supporting learning on the Postgraduate Certificate of Special Study in Supporting Learning, and it was used in a staff development session for staff from the HR College of Commerce and Economics in Mumbai, India. It was also shown to the School-based Learning and Teaching Coordinators, at one of their regular meetings, and to a meeting of senior staff including the Vice-Chancellor, Pro- Vice-Chancellors, Deans of School and Heads of central units. Staff having viewed the DVD were asked to fill in an evaluation form.

Results

What have the results of this activity been?
What is the evidence, if any, for the benefits of this activity?
In what ways, if any, did employing the student voice make a difference?

The vast majority of staff who viewed the DVD found it a compelling expression of the students' views of what they found to be effective teaching and said that this was a very powerful tool to make them think about this dynamic. A selection of staff comments are given below.

Comments from the Student-centred Learning development workshop included positive statements on the value:
Freshness - Useful to hear from the students discussing issues with a fellow student.
Good structure and that the students had the confidence to be critical of learning experience.
Useful to hear student feedback and reassuring that their comments reinforce my own ideas of what is needed for effective teaching and learning.

However some disadvantages were also expressed:
Not knowing which campuses all the students came from, which students had issues in relation to which courses.
Not sure about how representative the views are about the learning experience.

The areas which colleagues identified for further reflection included:
Reviewing my teaching and learning styles.
Trying to be more student focused.
The need of students to be recognised.
Getting students more involved in my lectures i.e. drawing examples from students' work.
Giving more feedback to students.

The wider audience also had a range of comments:
Positive comments included:
It had no commentary or judgement and allowed students to have their say. The relaxed style of the presenter and the students.
Good points about active learning/enthusiasm – useful for professional development. Reflects different learning methods used and directly illustrates students' different preferences for different styles.
Clearly not scripted and genuine responses. The student involvement in the making. That these were our students talking about an important topic.
Actually seeing and hearing responses carries a veracity that reading though piles of module feedback comments never can.
Good to see students involved in the production. I found it inspirational. It reminded me what we are here for! Why not do one about working at Westminster?
I suggest a similar 'vox pop' could be done amongst staff about the staff/student interface (e.g. what would you like students to do more of, what would you like students to do less of, what are the good/bad experiences in your teaching?).
We all found the DVD to be very interesting and took considerable note of the comments made by the students. It was a very worthwhile project to undertake and the way you presented the positives against the negatives made rather compelling viewing.

Points for concern, which were very much smaller in number than the positive feedback, were:
The fact that there was no way of knowing how generally applicable the criticism and praise was both in terms of numbers of students and the numbers of lecturers to which it applied.
Entirely anecdotal. No idea whether views are representative of general opinion. Needs a clearer summary of points raised.
It possibly was a bit too long and the same message(s) could have been made with fewer interviews, quotes.
Unclear what the implications are. Small sample, selection may have reflected willingness to provide response, other footage may have been discarded.
Nothing new that I was not aware of. I think most staff are aware of student views.
I am not sure how relevant the feedback is to the courses for which I am responsible. Were the students only asked to comment about teaching? Admin also plays a role in their learning experience.

Areas identified which staff would reflect on, or act on, were:
The quality of my teaching. The enthusiasm/passion I put into my teaching. I will ask students to reflect on their learning in some of my sessions.
The benefits of teaching staff engaging in a proper dialogue with the students.
The fact that teachers need to be enthusiastic to make students enthusiastic.
The importance of feedback, seeing students are supported during the course of their studies.
It has confirmed to me the centrality of the student/tutor relationship. I will quote it as evidence of the importance of this and the importance of students being known.
Means of capturing and communicating to staff key areas of student experience of TLA for focus.
Need to look at key skills development. Need to support tutoring system better. Identify the whole picture/the links between modules.

It has helped my current project to encourage staff to engage with Blackboard and in relation to providing ways to support students.

Some comments identified future potential uses for the DVD:
Ask students to watch it and make comments/reflect on how it relates to them.
Show it to ALL teaching staff and get them to fill out this form and then discuss implications and opportunities arising out of the DVD.
Staff development and course committees (so students can see it).
Staff induction; induction is as much a part of professional development as other things. It might mean that a few staff end up seeing it twice, but every time I see it there is something new.
Staff development sessions focused on TLA enhancement at departmental and School level.
Show to students at course committees to seek broader view and test validity of those expressed.
Include students in workshops on teaching and learning alongside staff.
Could use it for marketing the University (i.e. what our students say).

Learning points

What were the key points for success?
What were the things you would do differently if starting again?
What were/are the main risks?

Clearly the main success point of this project was the visible capturing of the students' views on their leaning on the DVD and the high impact this has on teaching staff; it proved a valuable staff development tool. The use of a student interviewer was seen as key in obtaining such a valuable set of students' comments, and added to the credibility of these for staff.

The DVD is also seen as having a fairly long shelf-life and will provide a level of awareness raising for new staff about the students' learning and also the role of the EIC. However this breadth of approach meant that the project was specifically not generating detailed comments to inform the curriculum design and delivery for any particular course, a limitation identified by colleagues. It would be too expensive an approach to gather local course-based details, and can only be effectively developed for an institution–wide initiative.

One risk of this approach is the students' views would be less helpful in terms of shaping approaches to teaching, in the event their comments supported our strategic approaches. There will also always be the risk of bias among the project team in undertaking the editing, and the selection of comments. This was also identified by colleagues; the project team were aware of this and made stringent efforts to eliminate any potential bias. In future this could have been obviated by the use of a completely independent editor, but this would have added to the costs.

Another problem is that the students interviewed might be seen as an unrepresentative sample; some staff commented on this. In this case they were those students who were relaxing around the campus, and were not selected to any particular pattern. However, as it was a visual presentation, the students could be seen as representing a range of nationalities, ethnic groups and ages, and including both men and women. However it is

recognised that they were still a self-selected group. This concern can be counteracted by being careful to use the material not as 'an answer' but as a prompt to encourage staff to reflect on and debate students' learning.

The DVD focused on the views of students. In retrospect more students could have been interviewed and presented within the scope of the DVD, but this would have added to the production time. Overall we fell that the DVD at over 20 minutes was a little long, and in future would restrict any such presentation to under 15 minutes.

The use of public spaces for interviewing the students appeared successful in that they were in a position to be willing to participate. However this did lead to some problems with the soundtrack, as extraneous noises were also captured. In future clip-on microphones would be used rather than the hand-held microphone.

It is intended that in the future this will be used as a teaching tool in the context of the formal programmes in education, and for targeted staff development sessions held by the EIC. It is being provided to all Schools so that the Deans and School-based Learning and Teaching Coordinators can use it in the local activities and it is also planned to use it in staff induction as a tool to introduce staff to the University's teaching approaches. The outcomes of this in terms of the development of the curriculum are inevitably going to be long-term and intangible and difficult to attribute specifically to this project. Nevertheless the project team take the view that the reflection and discussion engendered by the DVD will be helpful in the long term.

Comments from the students which were recorded on the DVD are currently being transcribed for use in an EIC Guide to Student-centred Learning for academic staff, to be made available in hard copy and on the web.

The material will not be used in marketing. Although this suggestion was made by a number of colleagues the DVD was developed for a different purpose and an undertaking had explicitly been given to students that it was not to be used for public display. Clearly in engaging student cooperation it is very important to be clear about the purpose of the project.

Resources

What resources did the activity take in terms of time, money, goodwill and human resources?

The students were very willing to express their views at interview and this proved very easy. The fact that the interviewer was a fellow student was probably important in this.

The was fairly time-consuming to record the material, as the students had to be coaxed by the interviewer into expressing specific views, rather than vague generalities, and lacked the specific language with which to describe their learning. This resulted in recording quite a lot of redundant information, and a high level of time in editing. Overall the DVD cost over £1000 to make, paying the student at the student rate and with free access to editing equipment etc. Some time was also contributed by EIC staff, estimated as about 40 hours. If the same team were to provide another similar DVD

there would probably be some saving of time, and the team were on a steep learning curve in carrying out the project.

Goodwill was not an issue as the EIC staff involved were very enthusiastic, and this fitted alongside seem existing work on student-centred learning.

Support implications

What are the 'support implications' in terms of the resources required for this activity to continue?

The DVD can be used in the future by a range of staff in staff development activities, as broadly defined, and this requires little in terms of resources. Although in time current staff may have been fully exposed to the DVD, it can be used with new staff for a considerable period, as an effective developmental tool.

However the costs of such a production, without the backing of a specific project, are such that care will have to be taken to ensure that the end product is valuable; the use of the resources to support any future production of a DVD of this nature would have to be fully justified. However the impact is such that ideas are consideration for more projects of this type.

Further information

Is there any further information you would like to provide?

Useful literature/weblinks

Are there any publications in the literature relevant to this development that you would recommend?
Are there any publications describing this development?
Are there any relevant weblinks to follow up?

Contact

Contact name and details …

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‘What we really think’: focus group reflections on an MA course

Ann Rumpus, University of Westminster

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Case study

Title

'What we really think', expressing views on a Masters programme through focus groups.

Institution

University of Westminster

Background

In about 100 words describe the background to this activity…

The University's Educational Initiative Centre (EIC), a University-wide unit with the remit to support academic staff in all learning and teaching activities was approached by the Course Leader of the MA in Personnel and Development (MAPD) and asked to organise focus groups to seek feedback from the students about the curriculum design and delivery. This was as part of a regular evaluation process which is expected by the accrediting professional body, the CIPD.

The course team were anxious to have more specific feedback than was generated by the annual written end-of-module questionnaires, and the request fitted well with the EIC's participation in the Student Voice project. The course team also felt strongly that if this could be mediated by staff who were not part of the course team the students would feel uninhibited in providing feedback.

The challenge

What were the issues that lead to this activity?
Why was it decided to employ the student voice?

There were no particular concerns that the course team had in relation to the course, but they held a strong view, in line with University policy, that student feedback is essential in any course review and design process. As the course is part-time for people working in the Human Resources field, the course team also thought that is was important to gain views from both current participants and alumni.

The MAPD course team wished to obtain student feedback on the programme as a whole, over and above that provided by the module feedback questionnaires. The reasons why the timing for this was appropriate were;

1. The regular evaluation requirements of the professional body
2. The fact that there had been several major changes to the course in recent years.
3. The recent significant increase in fees.
4. The need to focus on quality improvement to retain the Centre of Excellence status.

Solution

Describe in some detail how the activity works…
How were students recruited for this activity?
In what way is the student voice employed?

The course leader, in consultation with the students, identified that the early evening would be an the most appropriate time for the focus groups, given that the students are in full-time work. He invited students to attend, and it was anticipated that six students would attend each of two focus groups, one for continuing students and one for alumni. The decision was to keep the focus groups small so as to facilitate in-depth debate. In the event the numbers of attendees respectively were four and three, but it was noted that they were careful to express a range of views (not just their own) and that in particular the current students had canvassed views of others. The participants at the focus groups were reassured as to the confidentiality of their direct input, nothing would be attributed to any particular individual, and only the course leader was aware of which individuals attended.

The focus groups were facilitated by two members of the EIC, one to promote discussion through asking open questions and to record the major points on a flipchart for the participants' agreement, and the other to make detailed verbatim notes. The students were asked not to name individual staff in their comments, and where they did so these were not included in the transcripts. Each focus group lasted for approximately 90 minutes. The EIC staff encouraged an open debate where the participants led the discussion, but ensured that two particular topics of interest to the staff were included, these were:

A focus on the first year of the programme with the group of continuing students (that is, the Leadership and Management and People Management and Development modules) and on the course as a whole with the alumni group; and

a particular interest in their perceptions of the University's CIPD Centre of Excellence status and the value that this adds.

After the focus groups the remarks of the participants' were transcribed, using verbatim terminology, and presented to the course team (abut 8 staff) in a staff development session facilitated by a member of the EIC who had facilitated the focus groups. This session enabled staff to have a free and open debate about the course delivery and to identify further issues they needed to work on to develop the course. These issues could not be addressed on detail at this session but were to be followed up through a staff awayday where the detailed changes to the curriculum were to be identified and planned.

Results

What have the results of this activity been?
What is the evidence, if any, for the benefits of this activity?
In what ways, if any, did employing the student voice make a difference?

The student participants in the focus groups were very ready to provide constructive feedback to the course team. They commented that the fact that the focus groups were facilitated by neutral individuals was very helpful in enabling them to express their critical as well as positive views. The critical comments were all very constructive and the participants took the exercise very seriously.

The course team were able to identify a number of important elements for development, which will result in changes to this year's delivery, including:

Providing more guidance on the assessments.
Developing an improved way of encouraging students to ask questions.
A detailed review of a particular module to resolve some of the issues raised about depth versus breadth.
Gaining more feedback from the part-time staff contributing to the programme.
Ensuring all of the timetabling information is given out well in advance.
Engaging in a dialogue with colleagues about effective practices in teaching HR professionals.

Some longer term issues were also identified and clearly the exercise will have both a short and long-term impact on the course delivery.

Staff attending the staff development session were asked for feedback and made the following comments:

1. What did you find most useful about this workshop?

- Hearing a sample of student views.
- Chance to get data pertinent to my department and discuss these with colleagues.
- The opportunity to have a professional dialogue with colleagues.
- Chance to discuss issues we don't normally get an opportunity to.

- Useful to talk to colleagues about the ways in which the student experience links with staff experience.
- Opportunity to discuss perceptions of course. Discussion based on data – focus for discussion. Openness of discussion. Facilitator's style.

2. What did you find least useful about the workshop?

- Some questions not asked e.g. on learning/specific resource response.
- Not applicable.
- No conclusions about how to move forward.
- Action points?
- Would have liked to have read the responses before the meeting.
- Not applicable. P.S. A written set of notes sent out beforehand could have been useful.

3. What issues (if any) will you reflect or act on as a result of the views expressed by your current and former students?

- Managing expectations.
- Extent to which learning is structured.
- Structuring learning in relation to teaching. Managing students' expectations.
- Look at whether some of the negatives are likely to be in my modules and reflect on these to improve.
- Differences in learning experience. Training or education? Deep or surface learning?
- I think that it was a useful exercise that raised the need to examine in a systematic way the whole range of issue related to learning objectives for the programme, staff expectations, student expectations, learning styles, and the (broadly) administrative issues raised in the focus groups. These issues are discussed between staff regularly but perhaps this session will provide a further focus for systematically developing the discussion.

4. What (if anything) has our work added to existing feedback from your students?

- Confirmed earlier comments.
- Without this feedback we would be without any data.
- More useful to have this narrative than the limited feedback provided by the module feedback questionnaire forms.

5. What (if any) improvements would you like to make in obtaining feedback from students in the future?

- More directly relevant questions (e.g. was there anything you disliked at the time which you now feel was beneficial?).
- Perhaps more qualitative feedback on module evaluation questionnaires.
- More focus groups.
- More discussion in addition to feedback forms.

6. Do you have any other comments?

- Would like to attend future focus groups even if via one way mirror.
- Useful.

Learning points

What were the key points for success?
What were the things you would do differently if starting again?
What were/are the main risks?

This was clearly a useful exercise in providing staff with feedback from students to inform their debate. The staff, both through the feedback forms and in conversation, indicated that having the students' verbatim comments from the focus groups was a useful approach, and that this generated more reflection that other forms of feedback (mainly paper module feedback questionnaires and the Course Committee meetings).

The use of the independent facilitators clearly helped the students speak openly about the course and to express any criticisms, but this has the disadvantage that some subtle points, unappreciated by the facilitators, might have been lost. One the whole we would argue that the independence of the facilitators was of significant benefit.

It is acknowledged that the students were a self-selecting group, and that this could have led to bias. In fact the students had consulted widely and were careful to represent the views of the cohort as a whole, so this concern was to some extent ameliorated. It remains however an inevitable and valid criticism of this approach.

The EIC had debated whether to record the students' comments from the focus groups on audio tape to relay to the course team. In the event this was not done, partly due to the time involved in editing the tapes, and partly due to concerns that the students might have been identified by their voices, hence breaking the important confidentiality aspect. Thus the decision was made to write the comments down verbatim and to supply these to the course team. In undertaking this some detail was inevitably lost, and the facilitators had to make a selection of the comments, a full transcription was not possible and would have presented an unwieldy amount of information to the course team. In making this selection the facilitators were careful to use comments which carefully represented the views of the entire groups, rather than of single individuals. Nevertheless, in spite of the care taken to avoid it, it has to be recognised that a danger of bias exist in this approach.

In planning the staff development workshop the decision was made not to circulate the students' comments in advance, in order to ensure that the group could take a fresh and common view, with an open debate. However a number of the course team indicated that they would have liked longer to address the comments, and they would be circulated in advance in future.

The general approach proved to be very valuable, the main advantages being that it is relatively inexpensive, immediate and local; hence details on a very specific aspect of the University's provision can be acquired. It could also be easily repeated after a time period to identify the outcomes of the changes implemented. This approach may not have the impact of direct contact or video recordings of students but is straightforward, fairly inexpensive and importantly preserves the confidentiality of the students, while being less anonymous and more informative than quantitative scores, and limited remarks, on routine questionnaires. Again, as with any student feedback, the comments should be seen as information to prompt and guide staff reflection and discussion, rather than a presentation of specific solutions.

Resources

What resources did the activity take in terms of time, money, goodwill and human resources?

The time required to adopt this approach should not be underestimated. The course leader put considerable effort into identifying students who would attend the focus groups (it was not easy to recruit student to this due to the time demands of their full-time careers and other commitments) and in organising the room bookings etc. the course team also spent time in attending the workshop, but this can be seen as work which would be undertaken in any case.

The EIC also contributed significant time, (planning and facilitating the focus groups, writing up the comments, planning and managing the staff development workshop and follow up activity, probably 18 EIC hours in total) and although they were willing to do this under the auspices of this Student Voice project might not have time to do this as a more routine exercise. However, if goodwill is available, this could be done by different course teams on a mutual basis. The direct financial resources required were very small, simply the catering for the focus groups and the staff development workshop and the minor materials required (feedback forms etc.).

This project clearly depended on the goodwill of the students in attending the focus groups. It was disappointing that some students, who had indicated that they would attend, in the event did not, leading to smaller groups than anticipated. In future an attempt would be made to recruit a larger number of students to compensate for anticipated non-attendance. The students were not offered any 'reward' for participation, apart from some refreshments. In future consideration would be given to paying students for their involvement or offering some incentive (eg. a book token). The difficulty in recruiting students may reflect the lack of a sufficient culture of student engagement in such activities in the past.

Support implications

What are the 'support implications' in terms of the resources required for this activity to continue?

Given the caveats about time in the section above this can still be seen as a relatively cheap and effective way of gaining genuine student comment to inform staff and curriculum development. Continuing this approach with the course team, or indeed extending it to other course, could be undertaken with a limited range of resources.

Further information

Is there any further information you would like to provide?

Useful literature/weblinks

Are there any publications in the literature relevant to this development that you would recommend?
Are there any publications describing this development?
Are there any relevant weblinks to follow up?

Race, P. (1999) ed. *2000 Tips for Lecturers.* chpt. 6 Feedback, evaluation and external scrutiny, pp 178 – 200. Times Higher

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