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AMOSSHE Insight projects 2013/14



AMOSSHE

The Student Services Organisation



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About AMOSSHE Insight

AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation, is committed to a research agenda led by our members' priorities, to support professional development and broaden the evidence base for student services in the UK. AMOSSHE is keen to support our members' project work in order to share innovative research, expertise and good practice across the student services sector, and enable continuing development and improvement.

This is the purpose and goal of **AMOSSHE Insight**: to develop and share insights for the benefit of all members.

About the 2013/14 projects

In 2013/14 AMOSSHE commissioned five small projects from member organisations as part of **AMOSSHE Insight**. These are short, focused pieces of research that address topics of interest to student services practitioners and include intended outcomes that have potential for sector-wide impact or application.

Here are the projects AMOSSHE funded in 2013/14:

- **'Psychological' profile of an academic year**
(University of Dundee)
- **What can we learn from the systems in place in the higher education sector to support international students with a disability?**
(University of Kent)
- **Making a difference with data**
(AMOSSHE East group)
- **The impact on engagement and retention of Student Support and Guidance Tutors (SSGTs) in the School of Architecture at University of Brighton**
(University of Brighton)
- **Delivering inductions to new students studying part-time and through distance learning in order to identify best practice for the sector**
(Institute of Education).

You can find summaries of each of the projects in this document, and more details about them online at www.amoshe.org.uk/projects/Insight.

Making a difference with data

AMOSSHE East group



Principal investigator
Rachel Fletcher, Director of Student Support at the University of Essex

Total award from AMOSSHE
£4,950



Project summary

This collaborative project set out to review the types of service-use data collected by student services at the seven AMOSSHE member institutions in the Eastern Region:

- University of Cambridge
- University Campus Suffolk
- University of Hertfordshire
- Anglia Ruskin University
- University of East Anglia
- University of Essex
- Norwich University of the Arts.

The project aimed to:

- Identify what existing data is collected at each institution across the various services on student-use, including how it is categorised.
- Map services and data collected across the institutions to identify common areas and differences.
- Identify whether any meaningful comparisons can be made across institutions' service-use data.
- Review how summary and management data is disseminated within institutions to enable tracking and planning.

Key findings include:

- The identification of three distinct categories of service-use data: activity, profile and satisfaction.
- The disparity of data collected and reported on across institutions.
- The identification of comparable service-use data at two eastern region institutions that enabled comparative analysis of student representation at service level.

Members of the eastern region institutions generally felt that it would be useful to be able to benchmark on aspects of service delivery against other higher education providers, in order to better understand one's own service data and findings, whilst recognising that 'one size does not fit all'.

There is a recommendation to collate a succinct but wider overview of considerations in relation to data collection and use across the sector. This may aid institutions if considering introducing software or reviewing data collection methods.

In time this may also bring greater similarities in the method of data collection which in turn will more easily facilitate comparisons between support services data.

Find out more at:

www.amoshe.org.uk/projects/insight/2014/East

'Psychological' profile of an academic year

University of Dundee



Principal investigator

Iliyan Stefanov, Student Support Worker, Student Services

Total award from AMOSSHE

£2,825.45

Project summary

There are two dimensions to the provision of student support: the range of services provided and the timing of the provision of these services. The first dimension is more dependent on the level of resources available, while the second dimension is more connected to the effectiveness of the student support departments. Given the current economic crisis and limited resources, it is increasingly important to ensure that both dimensions are effective and efficient in improving the provision of student support. This project was set up to address that need.

Anecdotal evidence from Student Services suggests that the transition to university life is a stressful time for the young person. Indeed, such stress appears to be neither evenly distributed, nor the sources constant throughout the academic year. For example, among new students, in September there are more reported cases of homesickness and loneliness; in October there are higher levels of alcohol abuse, suicidal thoughts, and self-harming; and in November there are increased cases of depression and anxiety. Consequently, each of these issues has the potential to negatively impact upon the student experience, not only for an individual, but also on their peers. Interestingly, upon review of the existing literature, the hypothesis that there is a temporal pattern to the types of issues that students face throughout the academic year has yet to be tested.

The **'Psychological' profile of an academic year** project aimed to test that hypothesis and shed more light on what demand for support appears in each of the months of the academic year, and

how this is matched by sometimes overstretched student support services. The limited resources for the project meant that only first-year students were surveyed.

Data was gathered via three channels:

- Monthly surveys among students in university accommodation, where nearly 48% of them were captured.
- A questionnaire, issued to all first-year students, where 388 out of a total 1,959 students completed one.
- Focus group discussions with all student support departments of Student Services.

Ten student volunteers conducted the monthly surveys for six months in total – September, October, November, February, March and April. The questionnaire was delivered to first-year students by a team of nine paid interns. The data was analysed by a team of four researchers.

The project tested whether the demand for support services has an inherited dynamic throughout the academic year and, if so, whether student support services can do more to reflect this in the way they provide their services to increase their effectiveness. The results from the project show that the answer to both questions is 'Yes'.

There is a clear pattern of demand for student support throughout the academic year. Furthermore, the level of this demand is not entirely dominated by the academic challenges that students are faced with but also by the state of their mental health and the challenges to their wellbeing.



Based on the findings of the project, several important recommendations are made.

Firstly, there is a clear need for rebalancing the provision of student support toward more pro-active ways of delivery that reflect the peaks of the main issues that affect student experience.

Secondly, there is a clear need for rebalancing the provision of student support from one based on helping the student to one that is based on supporting the student, again reflecting the peaks in the particular issues that students face during the academic year. Student support practitioners need to brave up and trust that the student can succeed by being supported throughout the academic year rather than from receiving help.

Thirdly, student support departments can increase their effectiveness by focusing their efforts toward

reducing the magnitude of the peaks of the main issues that students face, thus engaging in more prevention activities than crisis management work.

Finally, student support departments can better address the cycle of the demand for support by placing the student at the centre of the support system. This can only happen if support departments learn to co-operate with one another at a higher level and with academic departments to provide the support effort that delivers a high level of student satisfaction and experience.

The results of the project are only representative for the first-year students of University of Dundee. For this study to become representative of the dynamics in the demand for student support for the whole of the UK a wider student population will be surveyed, in a representative set of UK higher education institutions, that covers a number of academic years.

Find out more at:

www.amoshe.org.uk/projects/insight/2014/Dundee

What can we learn from the systems in place in the higher education sector to support international students with a disability?

University of Kent

Principal investigator
Dr Andy Velarde, International Student Adviser

Total award from AMOSSHE
£2,025

Project summary

The University of Kent reports on the findings of its AMOSSHE-funded research project conducted between December 2013 and May 2014 on Disability Support Services that have been developed in the UK higher education sector for international and European Union disabled students.

The study presents the evaluations and reflections of participating universities, and examines the different operational structures for the advisory and assessment of needs, the extent of the provisions of auxiliary aids and services as well as their budget mechanisms, and the constraints and difficulties of the workings of university Disability Services.

The results of the research are, in many cases, unexpected and striking. Some universities show that they have developed advanced systems that enable them to anticipate students' needs and provide comprehensive support provisions. These systems are incipient in a minority of institutions, but are consistent with a model of support that ensures international competitiveness. The majority of universities' financial systems, however, show weaknesses that are compensated for by the commitment and creativity of members of staff.

The report identifies good practices that universities may wish to take into consideration when designing their policies, and reflects on the implications of

the findings in terms of their long-term impact on institutions' internationalisation strategies.

Aims

The aim of the study is to increase awareness of the varied and existing systems of support across the sector for international and European Union disabled students, their advantages and the areas for possible improvement. It is hoped the research will provide higher education providers with a greater understanding of how to improve services, and to enable good practice to be shared.

The study seeks to identify institutional challenges and to highlight the views of disability specialists who are responsible for organising support to help students successfully complete their academic studies, in accordance with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

The research also includes a strand of investigation into the type of systems developed in the sector to finance the support of international disabled students, and identifies the possibilities and limitations of the different systems used.

Finally, the research aims to provide a greater understanding of the model(s) of disability support developed by universities that are embracing and dealing with the challenges of globalisation.



Findings

The findings of the research show that there is currently an influx of international disabled students in higher education providers and, although a minority, they represent a substantial subgroup.

Most of those who participated in the study coordinate their support services to international students through the same structure of disability specialists as that used for UK students, which are typically organised by disability specialisation.

A small number, however, have created specialised services for international students, considering them as a subgroup within the service, because of the complexities that surround their impairments. Traditional services encounter greater difficulties than specialist ones in supporting international students in nearly all areas of support.

The universities reported that they aim to provide the same services to international students as local students to meet their obligations under equality regulation, with the majority stressing that they provide a series of auxiliary services and aids.

They implied, however, that parity of provision may not always be achieved because of cost implications.

Most institutions were shown to have not yet introduced financial planning to anticipate and cover the cost of support provisions.

Recommendations

Three common themes were evident in the universities' reflections on the systems in place for international disabled students: an improvement to budgeting systems to enhance the level of prediction with regard to the support needs of international disabled students and to cover the additional cost of support; to raise awareness across their institutions on the different and specific issues that international disabled students bring to their institutions; and to work towards the specialisation of staff to deal with international issues and disability matters.

There are ways to help institutions be better prepared to anticipate and respond to the demand of their services from international disabled students, and to deal with the sudden changes in composition and complexity associated with it. These could also help institutions to maintain or develop competitive advantage in the international market for disability-accessible higher education. Institutions may want to consider that a concerted effort for constant improvement of their disability support systems would enable them not only to protect themselves from global market fluctuations but also attract recruitment.

The improvements to support provision for international disabled students will present a significant challenge to higher education providers in the UK, and each institution's organisational complexity will need to be taken into consideration. The report identifies a series of good practice measures that are recognisable as affecting the institutions' capabilities to support international disabled students, and to improve internationalisation and market share in this area.

Find out more at:

www.amoshe.org.uk/projects/insight/2014/Kent

The impact on engagement and retention of Student Support and Guidance Tutors (SSGTs) in the School of Architecture at University of Brighton

University of Brighton



University of Brighton

Principal investigator

Clare Hughes, SSGT Manager, and Justine Devenney, SSGT in the School of Architecture

Total award from AMOSSHE

£2,500

Project summary

The University of Brighton has developed a system across most parts of the university by which a Student Support and Guidance Tutor has a role to play in schools. These staff are in the main managed within Student Services and have a specific manager for their role but they are located in schools and have a very strong identity within the school. The SSGTs are becoming increasingly important as a link into schools for staff and a link to support and other services for students. They work with students on a one-to-one basis who either self-refer or who are referred by academics or other staff members. SSGTs work with students who bring a range of issues to them directly and, in addition, often act as a signpost to other services and agencies across the university.

Their roles across can include a range of tasks, including:

- Attendance at open days – to advise students and parents about the support available.
- Work to engage students pre-entry – Facebook, and playing a role at open days.
- Being aware of widening participation students and those who are coming in through clearing to ensure contact is made to enhance engagement.

- Playing an integral role in Welcome Week and in induction activities.
- Playing a role in attendance monitoring, and most importantly in following up student non-attendance.
- Signpost students to Student Services to ensure support is put in place, and case manage complex cases where necessary.
- Playing a role with mitigating circumstances procedures.
- Playing a role in the implementation of 'reasonable adjustments' for students with a disability.
- Working to enhance engagement and retention with vulnerable groups according to the needs of students in the school, for example international students, mature students, part-time students.
- Running or facilitating bespoke support sessions for individual groups.
- Collaborative work with Student Service, using data to target where intervention is needed to help retention and engagement.

It is becoming acknowledged across the university that the role that SSGTs play is a valuable one as a



method of supporting students directly in schools, but we wanted to assess the impact of their work with regard to retention and engagement from a range of perspectives, and in particular from the perspective of the student. We chose to look at the work of the SSGT within the School of Architecture, as she has only been in place this academic year and we would therefore be able to compare the situation both before and after her arrival.

In order to do this we undertook a comprehensive range of activities, including:

- Questionnaires to staff.
- Questionnaires to students.
- Student focus groups.
- Meetings with staff from Student Services.
- Meetings with staff from the Students' Union.
- Looking at findings from the National Student Survey. (NSS)
- Looking at findings from our strategic planning office.

We had a lot of support from staff and students. Our findings included the following:

- The role of SSGT is considered to be very important within the department by both staff and students.
- An overwhelming percentage of students would go to an SSGT if they were considering withdrawing from the course.
- Students are less likely to take academic concerns to counsellors now that there is an SSGT in place.
- A number of issues mentioned as difficult in the NSS have begun to be addressed by the SSGT.
- Evidence that the location of the room used by the SSGT impacts on the number of students who access the service.

- Students seem reluctant to use the services of university departments (for example Student services) and see more benefit in working with staff (or discussing with fellow students) who have an understanding of how the department works.
- A significant number of students spoke to no-one about their concerns prior to the SSGT being in place.

Recommendations that can be put in place include:

- There is evidence that the role of SSGT is considered to be beneficial for both staff and students and it plays a role in enhancing student engagement. The role should continue and be increasingly embedded in the ethos of departments.
- SSGT rooms should be allocated somewhere near to the centre of the departments.
- SSGTs need to invest time in learning about the unique culture in schools.
- More publicity is required at the beginning of the academic year and on a regular basis to ensure that SSGTs have a high profile in the school to ensure that all staff and students understand the role.
- Collaborative working with officers from Student Services should continue and develop.
- Both staff and students are reassured by seeing SSGT in lectures, activities and assessment activities such as presentations.
- Close working with course leaders is essential for good communication, and regular feedback to academic staff on key themes and common issues is essential.
- Working closely with year leaders on attendance issues can help prevent students withdrawing from university.

Find out more at:

www.amoshe.org.uk/projects/insight/2014/Brighton

Delivering inductions to new students studying part-time and through distance learning in order to identify best practice for the sector

Institute of Education



Principal investigator
Clare Hewitt, Assistant Registrar, Student Support

Total award from AMOSSHE
£1,500

Project summary

This project is an initial investigation into the delivery of inductions, in particular to new part-time and distance learning students in order to identify best practice for the sector. Time and resources restrict the depth in which a full investigation could be undertaken, but I hope that the findings are a useful starting point for other student services practitioners across the sector to reflect on their induction practice and to get ideas for improvement where appropriate.

The project came about mainly due to the profile of students at the Institute of Education (IOE). The IOE has approximately 8,000 students that are predominantly postgraduate (85% of the student population). Over half are part-time, although they may attend either during the day or in the evening.

Our student profile (2013-14) is below:

- 231 undergraduate students
- 4723 postgraduate students
- 945 research students
- 2140 initial teacher education students
- 41% full-time students
- 59% part-time students

Many masters courses offer online modules and some are entirely online.

The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (2012) research shows that part-time students show lower retention levels and also have lower attainment levels, although the reasons for this can be complex. Induction is an important part of the retention process, and given the IOE profile of students I felt an investigation into our current practice as well as those of others would be useful and informative.

The project write up is organised into different sections. It draws from the feedback given by IOE students, staff and AMOSSHE members and seeks to use that to inform the recommendations arising from this investigation. I have also considered the findings in light of previous research into new student induction, although it has to be noted that much of this is focussed on the undergraduate experience rather than postgraduate experience. As noted by Ruth Whittaker: 'The growing diversity of the student population requires institutions to develop and operate strategies that address these generic issues as well as those which are specific to different types of learner group' (Whittaker, 2008).

This investigation seeks to address the distance learner and part-time learner groups and find examples of best practice. It is my hope that these



preliminary findings may lead to further research into the postgraduate student experience so that issues specific to that group can be effectively addressed. This is particularly relevant in the fast-moving higher education landscape where we have yet to see the full effect of undergraduate tuition fee debt on numbers of postgraduate applicants in the future. Effective conversion and retention techniques are going to be vital in maintaining this student population.

Recommendations

This investigation has been quite ambitious in scale and would necessitate far more time and resource in order to ascertain statistically significant findings. Further targeted research into the demographics of the two groups (distance learners and part-time learners) might better show where they differ from full-time and campus-based learners in terms of expectation, and more interviews and research on higher education provider practice could reveal any themes in practitioner perceptions and therefore service delivery to these groups of students. One assumption is that because of the difference in the way they access the course compared to full-time, campus-based learners, their needs are therefore different. However this is not necessarily the case, particularly in an increasingly fluid world of blended learning where students can move between groups fairly seamlessly. The recommendations of this investigation can be applied to all students and are backed by previous research in this area.

- Know your student – the better academic and professional staff understand their student demographic, the more relevant induction materials can be created. Although a note of caution is to take account of the ‘actual diversity of the student group and avoid generalisations based on learner profile’ (Whittaker, 2008).
- Use a variety of delivery methods of induction in order to offer options for all groups of students.

Online and face to face methods are currently deployed most often, but the use of phone apps is on the increase. Offering a face to face option is important as IOE students certainly identified this as being the most valuable induction experience they’d had. Online methods do not seem at this point in time to be able to recreate that experience, although they are an adequate substitute for it, particularly if using a real-time option like Skype, Lync or Collaborate.

- Recognise the different status of students, particularly part-time students, and address what their experience is likely to be and what they will be able to access in terms of statutory and other support. The delicate balance to be struck for higher education providers is doing this whilst at the same time not making them feel alienated from other student groups (for example full-time). Age can be a factor here as part-time learners are more likely to be mature learners.
- Include study skills needed for the course in any induction, such as use of facilities like VLE, library and so forth. Induction materials that are embedded in a course are particularly effective, so consideration should be given to ensuring induction delivered centrally and on course are complementary, and also how centrally created induction materials can be embedded in a course (such as creating an online webinar or tasks based on a library induction).
- Create a sense of belonging – all the recommendations above will assist in this. Involvement of former students, peers and university staff is key. This is shown in the findings of this investigation where it was noted how social media can be a powerful force in creating a sense of community, but only if there is regular staff or student engagement with it through either posting useful links or encouraging discussion.

Find out more at:

www.amoshe.org.uk/projects/insight/2014/loE



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