Using National Student Survey Data to Enhance the Student Experience

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The National Student Survey (NSS) poses many opportunities and challenges for degree programmes, faculties and universities in addressing feedback from final year students. This case study provides an overview of how NSS data has been used to enhance the student experience within the Faculty of Education, Community and Leisure at Liverpool John Moores University. The Faculty has 2500 students of which half are funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the other half from the Teacher Development Agency for Schools. As a result the Faculty is rather complex and offers a diverse range of undergraduate and postgraduate professional and vocational subjects that encompass education, teacher training, sport, dance, outdoor education, tourism and food studies.

In responding to the NSS survey it is relevant to note two issues which will impact on all universities. Firstly, the timing of the NSS does not allow much opportunity for action taken within the academic year in which data is reported. Therefore, the Faculty acknowledged that it needs to monitor the impact on NSS results over a longer period of time in order to be able to identify which actions have a positive impact. Furthermore there are great difficulties within the Faculty in identifying which programmes sit under which Joint Academic Coding of Subject Codes (JACS) codes. Bearing these issues in mind, this case study will provide a brief summary of how the Faculty and university have taken steps to address one area related to ‘feedback’.

Responding to student comments on feedback
Whilst feedback is an area identified as a concern across the university sector the Faculty focused its response on student comments relating to two specific areas: ‘feedback on my work has been prompt’ and ‘feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand’. Extensive discussion took place with the Student Union, Faculty and university to address the issue. This resulted in the Student Union working with the University Learning Development Unit to producing a document on ‘10 steps to make feedback more effective’. This document was presented to the University’s Senior Management Group and accepted.

In addition to assessment submission dates being placed in module outlines, a date by which students can expect feedback (normally within three weeks) has been inserted. Furthermore, staff will also engage in dialogue with students in relation to how they will receive their feedback (i.e. electronically, face to face, written). It was also agreed that year one students will receive feedback on their first piece of assessed work during a one-to-one tutorial, thus facilitating discussion of the nature of the assessment and how the comments can be used to enhance subsequent performance.
This example demonstrates how students can work in partnership with academic tutors and senior university managers to address issues of feedback and, through informed discussion, take a proactive and consultative approach to addressing concerns about feedback arising from the NSS data. Indeed, the Faculty has gone even further to ensure that each student/staff Board of Study early on in the academic year will have as a standing item ‘feedback’ on their agenda. This will offer further opportunities for students to discuss and identify any issues or concerns with the nature of feedback whilst also being explicit with expectations of students in relation to feedback.

Celebrating positive aspects of the National Student Survey

A strength of the Faculty is an 82% satisfaction rating for the personal development of students. A reason for this is the Faculty has a large number of vocationally orientated programmes which lend themselves well to addressing many aspects of personal development such as self reflection and goal planning. Indeed, these developments have been shared with several university programmes and Faculties across the university. The Faculty has also taken steps to actively consult with students on what aspects of personal development they value and through open dialogue with academic staff steps have been taken to ensure these are embedded across all programmes within the Faculty. In particular students noted how they valued opportunities to examine ‘how they learn at their best’, ‘what barriers they have to studying’, ‘opportunities to set short and long term goals’, and ‘opportunities to engage in one to one personal development planning with academic staff’.

Concluding thoughts on enhancing the student experience

In summary the Faculty has embraced positively the feedback gained from the NSS. It is important to acknowledge however, the difficulties in assessing and measuring enhancement activity. In part, this is due to the timing lag involved in delivery of NSS results and the ability to implement changes within the same academic cycle. Indeed, in attempting to measure the impact of NSS on enhancement activity there are many variables which can have an impact on data. Therefore one of the strategies the Faculty is using to address this is to identify further student feedback activity to both confirm NSS data and/or assist in enhancement work. For example, in addition to NSS data the Faculty uses student module feedback data to inform the enhancement process. Furthermore, the university have also been proactive in establishing focus groups with level 5 students to explore issues identified by NSS data both in an attempt to demonstrate we are listening to feedback, whilst also preparing students for level 6 when their NSS feedback will be counted.

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