'Size matters': Enhancing the part-time student experience through co-location and the creation of viable markets

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Introduction

During the past eighteen months this Faculty has invested heavily in improving the quality of its part-time (PT) student experience at key junctures in the student life cycle. In so doing the Faculty's large size (12,000 students) produced a paradoxical mixture of simultaneous advantages and risks. While the scale and scope of the Faculty's business commanded a certain amount of respect and responsiveness this same scale and diversity greatly complicated the task of moving forward to enhance the part-time student experience in a united and coherent fashion.

The issues

Part-time students constitute a large and growing proportion of students in Higher Education nationally where they make up roughly 40% of the total student population (King, 2008). This picture is replicated in the Faculty, where PT students currently make up around 38% of our total student population(over 4600 part-time students enrolled in 2008-09). This is a sizeable number of students and partly as a result of a principled desire to understand better what this large group of students thought about their experiences and partly as a result of a wish to be more competitive in recruiting and retaining students (Park, 2008) the Faculty undertook a survey of its part-time cohorts in 2007-08. This work proved timely given the subsequent publication of Paul Ramsden's report for John Denham in which the future of the part-time student experience in HE was a key feature (Ramsden, 2008).

The internal survey made clear just how diverse the Faculty's PT student population was once we got below the headline figures. The PT students were distributed quite unevenly with some Programmes comprised almost entirely of PT students, whilst others had only a handful enrolled. Roughly half were on post graduate routes whilst half were studying on undergraduate courses and modules. There was considerable variation in levels of previous study, levels of learner autonomy and familiarity with HE processes and protocols. Whilst some were studying in a distance-learning mode others were being taught off campus. Equally whilst some students were taught in homogeneous groups normally 'out-of-hours' in the evenings and at weekends, others were being taught 'in hours' and alongside their full-time peers.

This said, the survey did help to identify some common features. The overwhelming majority of our PT students (nearly 90% of respondents) were studying with the express purpose of improving their career prospects in some way and three quarters reported juggling a combination of employment and/or family responsibilities at the same time as they were studying. Furthermore while historically much of the learning, teaching and assessment these students had experienced was rated highly in student feedback and external examiner reports some of the other facilities and systems which impacted on the PT student experience had proved much harder to access. This echoed work elsewhere which had also identified areas such as course flexibility, induction, financial advice, student support and guidance as aspects of the part-time post-graduate student experience in need of attention and where enhancement activities should be directed (Park, 2008).

In some quarters PT students were seen as being in some way 'different' from full-time students; this was a difference often characterised by a perceived and particular vulnerability to external events. However many colleagues were keen to move away from deficit models

of PT students towards a more measured appraisal. The very maturity and experience associated with many PT students coupled with their strong professional and career motivation could just as easily make them more resilient to external events than some of their younger full-time peers. Many of our PT students were well used to shouldering responsibility, multi-tasking and coping with adversity and were able to combine these skills with a clear sense of purpose and a desire to achieve.

The Faculty's Response

The Faculty's response to these issues was heavily influenced by Ramsden's report (Ramsden, 2008). For many of our full-time routes the rise of the commuter student who will not experience the traditional UK HE residential experience (HEFCE, 2009; Brennan et al, 2009) coupled with the need for many full-time students to secure term-time employment (Heiselt & Bergerson, 2007; Dhimar, 2006) meant that the boundaries between full- and part-time cohorts in terms of their discrete or distinctive features were becoming increasingly blurred. The relationship might be better described as a pair of overlapping continuum in which full-time and part-time students share more or fewer characteristics depending on the individuals concerned. We needed to move away from an artificial division between full-time and part-time and to adopt a student lifecycle rather than student typology approach. As Brennan et al point out we need to be wary of attempting to run ‘parallel universities’ for different types of student (Brennan et al, 2008). We therefore addressed three inter-related strands. The first centred on the induction and orientation of new part-time students as a process rather than an event. Secondly we sought to tackle inflexible patterns of student support that favour full-time over part-time modes of study. The third strand involved the establishment of more welcoming and engaging learning environments and academic communities for part-time students.

Making progress on these strands meant close co-operation, co-ordination and teamwork was needed to pull together the necessary contributions from central departments, student support teams, academic colleagues and the Students Union. We sought to encourage collaboration and co-location amongst academic staff groups wherever possible as a means of using our size to our advantage by creating viable markets that central departments could respond to more easily. In addition the Faculty also introduced a new resource in 2007 to support the enhancement of the student experience across the board in the shape of four Learning Hubs, each with a Learning Hub Manager and, since September 2009, a Graduate Intern too. The Learning Hubs were established to act as a ‘coordinating point’ for different staff groups and students which could help to influence a cultural change by facilitating greater co-location and integration of systems and services and links between different stakeholder groups. The Hub Managers are tasked with addressing five strategic student experience goals: induction and orientation, student engagement, student support and guidance, widening participation and careers guidance. The Learning Hub Managers and their Graduate Interns have already made a distinctive and valuable contribution in this work for PT cohorts. Feedback from PT student induction and orientation events has been very encouraging and Hub Managers have also led the way in making Education Guidance and Information Skills support much more accessible for our PT cohorts.

As a result of this work in the coming year PT students across the Faculty will benefit from a range of initiatives aimed at improving the quality of their experience including: targeted pre-sessional events to smooth the transition into HE; the extension of pre-enrolment Blackboard sites; the introduction of off-campus induction and orientation inputs; some extended opening of catering facilities in the evenings and improved systems for room cleaning and catering at weekends; extended opening of the Students Union Advice Centre offering assistance with money matters, housing difficulties, academic conduct cases, immigration problems or legal and employment rights; weekend academic guidance and information skills workshops; and Course Administrator briefings and drop-in provision to assist PT

students to understand the University's systems for procedures such as extension requests, extenuating circumstances, assignment management and on-line results services.

Summary

While much has occurred in the Faculty over the past eighteen months aimed at enhancing the part-time student experience a great deal remains to be done and it seems likely that this issue will always remain something of a 'moving target'. Space for Learning Hub activities is at a premium and this will continue to act as an inhibitor on our work until a planned new building is completed. In addition the Faculty's activities are spread across two campuses one of which is much less conducive to co-location, collaboration and the creation of a critical mass of students and endeavour that is so helpful in triggering change. What seems certain though following the publication of the new framework for the future of higher education (BIS, 2009) is that improving our 'offer' to our PT students will remain a high priority for the foreseeable future.

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