Teaching Large Student Numbers – Interim Report

Higher Education Academy - Business Discipline
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Introduction

With the changes in the educational environment and in particular the escalation in the price of higher education, the expectations of students in terms of their learning experience are increasing whilst the funds available to teach them remain the same or, in some cases, are decreasing.

Over the past ten years, there has been a trend towards teaching students in larger groups, whether this is in a lecture, seminar, workshop or tutorial. This inevitably has implications for the student experience, as well as for the workload and demands made of academic staff.

In addition to teaching large numbers of students on campus, many academics are also responsible for the delivery and management of modules across several campuses through collaborative partnerships. This adds a further dimension to ensuring the quality of the student experience.

This project has three main objectives which are to:

- identify the different perspectives on "teaching large numbers of students";
- gather examples of best practice for managing the student experience where large numbers of students are being taught;
- produce a toolkit to assist those involved with teaching large student numbers.

Methodology

Two questionnaires have been sent to key contacts in business schools and business and management departments in Higher Education Institutions. Those completing the questionnaire have been invited to participate in interviews with a view to gathering case study examples of best practice.

The researcher is attending workshops (Personalising Student Learning - Manchester 21/3/2013) and conferences (ABS Learning and Teaching conference - Nottingham 23/4/2013) to present initial findings and to host open discussions in relation to the management of the learning experience for students taught in large groups.

Interim Results

Over 25 institutions have expressed interest in being part of the research and responses have been received to the questionnaires which addressed the two strands of the project:

- teaching on campus: lectures, seminars, workshops, tutorials
- managing the delivery of modules across collaborative partnerships: international, across campuses, regional

Responses to the questionnaires indicate that:

- The concept of "large numbers" varies from: 1000 to 45 students
- The growth in the number of overseas students has led to increases in class sizes

- The largest growth is in postgraduate student numbers – particularly students from South East Asia
- Initially student numbers for undergraduate courses grew annually, but over the last 5 years these have generally remained the same, or decreased slightly
- Normally “core” modules have the largest student numbers
- Large lectures can be up to 900+ and are generally supported by smaller classes (18-30)
- The subject areas with large student numbers vary but are commonly associated with numerical subjects such as accounting and finance and statistics
- In many cases, substantial changes are made to how the module is taught, but assessment often remains the same
- Teaching teams vary in size from SSRs of 25:1 to 90:1
- Some workload models do consider the number of students on a module as well as contact hours

Both positive and negative aspects of teaching large numbers have been identified. Positive comments include the experience of being part of a teaching team; having to continually “think outside the box”; being required to introduce new methods of teaching and assessment (which have led to increased pass rates) and the need to continually reflect on the effectiveness of the module delivery; a safe environment in which students can learn without being identified; providing the opportunity for students to network and learn from each other.

The majority of respondents identified several negative aspects of teaching large numbers and these include: possible dumbing down of curriculum content and the assessment to accommodate a wider student population; lack of interaction with students in class which often leads to a greater burden of out of class communication through emails; behaviour/attendance/noise management issues; fragmentation of the curriculum through team teaching; the burden of the assessment process; management and administration of the module often not recognised through workload models; loss of the personal learning experience for students.

Strategies and techniques for enhancing the student learning experience have been put forward and these will be discussed and developed during the workshop.

The Next Stages

During April and May telephone interviews will take place with those wishing the participate further in the research, with a view to gathering further case study material for inclusion in the toolkit for teaching large student numbers.

Feedback from the workshop and conference will be summarised and contribute to the final report.

The research project report and case studies will be submitted to the HEA at the end of June 2013.

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