Supporting Widening Participation Students through Student as Producer Research on Quality Enhancement

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Abstract

With ever increasing barriers for widening participation students to enter higher education, it is vital that when enrolled on a programme, their social norms and needs are not ignored. When trying to acclimatise themselves in a higher education institution, these heterogeneous students are faced with greater challenges compared to traditional students. Nevertheless these students are determined to study in order to enhance their career potential. Moreover the skills, knowledge and experiences that they offer, can potentially enrich higher education. A number of widening participation Student-Researchers developed, conducted and analysed their own Student Sounding Boards, with the purpose of evaluating various business and administration programmes. These Student Sounding Boards had a dual-purpose in that they also helped to enhance the Student-Researchers' learning and helped them overcome some of the challenges faced when studying at an elite higher education institution. The research reveals how this innovative method utilises and strengthens the rich knowledge and experiences of a diverse student body.

Key words: widening participation, social norms, teaching, student as producer, quality enhancement.

Introduction

This paper will examine the challenges that widening participation students encounter in higher education institutions. It will identify widening participation students' concerns and recognise positive characteristics in relation to the learning environment. The literature then focuses on how the specific strategies, such as engaging students in the development of teaching and learning processes, may help to support these students.

The case study is based in one of the elite higher education institutions that Stone (2014) claims are often perceived to be the least supportive of widening participation students. It illuminates a method which involves widening participation Student-Researchers conducting Sounding Boards, to produce findings based on programme quality enhancement. The example discussed will illustrate how this student-centred and critical pedagogic method, can help address some of the challenges faced by widening participation students. This method can lead to a positive impact on social engagement (Burke, 2012) and academic achievement (Thomas, 2005).

For the purposes of this paper, widening participation students comprise of those from lower income or under-represented backgrounds e.g. disabled, those who have been in care, ethnic minorities, lower socio-economic groups and neighbourhoods (Office for Fair Access, 2015). Commonly these students tend to also work part-time and have a number of additional responsibilities (Atwood, 2010).

Motives for Supporting Widening Participation Students

Current statistics reveal that between 2009 and 2014 there was a ten per cent increase in widening participation students (Social Market Foundation, 2016). This may have been initially stimulated by the government through *Students at the Heart of the System*, a white paper which sought higher education institutions to take responsibility for increasing student mobility (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011; Hinton-Smith, 2012). More recently the government's *Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* urges institutions to support students from widening participation backgrounds

(Department of Business, Innovation & Skills, 2015). Addressing this aim, could help to diminish the higher non-continuation rates of widening participation students compared to traditional students (Havergal, 2016).

In order to more appropriately support students from widening participation backgrounds and hopefully increase continuation rates, their different social norms must be recognised. In comparison to traditional students, widening participation students' social norms differ because of their social class, environment, culture and experience (Bourdieu, 1977).

Reay, Crozier and Clayton's (2009) interviews identified that when widening participation students were in an unfamiliar situation, such as attending an elite higher education institution, they suffered from uncertainty, insecurity, ambivalence and disquiet. The majority of these students felt that they were incompetent and academically inadequate (which Munro's (2011) literature review attributes to their limited schooling). Also through conducting interviews, Crozier, Reay, Clayton and Colliander (2007) recognised that some of these students lacked confidence and in agreement with Munro (2011), felt unworthy to be in higher education.

On a more positive note, both Bryom and Lightfoot (2012) and Crozier et al (2007) realise the determination of widening participation students to succeed. Widening participation students feel deeply responsible for their own learning and see the opportunity of studying at a higher education institution as a means of gaining control of their career (Dupond & Ossandon, 1998). Attributed to their diverse social norms, widening participation students possess a capacity for contextualising ideas (Sewell, 2000). They are also capable of autonomously applying knowledge and identifying professional implications (Gilgardi & Gugliemetti, 2011).

One of the aims of the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework is to acknowledge the efforts that higher education institutions make to advance the overall learning experience of students from widening participation backgrounds (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills, 2015). A key way to do this is to support these students' social norms through

teaching and learning which can have a positive impact on social engagement (Burke, 2012; Thomas, 2005) and academic achievement (Bamber & Tett, 2001; Thomas, 2005). Recently it was revealed that strategies should be more meaningfully linked to teaching, learning and other curriculum practices (Stevenson, Burke & Whelan, 2014), especially for elite, research-intensive higher education institutions (Bamber & Tett, 2001). Although there is limited research on specific strategies to support widening participation students (Crozier et al, 2007; Hockings, Cooke and Bowl, 2010), it has been suggested that such practices should include innovative, diverse teaching strategies (Baptista, 2011) and student-centred learning (Hockings, Cooke & Bowl, 2010; Thomas, 2005).

Context

The elite higher education institution department which is the focus of this case study offers a number of multi-disciplinary undergraduate programmes and provides a range of functions to meet the needs of widening participation cohorts. With regards to the business and administrative undergraduate programmes offered in this department, students may study on a two year full-time or three year part-time basis. Upon completion of their programme, they then have the opportunity to top-up to a degree. In addition to having certain qualifications and / or experience, potential students must also meet specific widening participation criteria in order to be considered for the programmes.

The full-time programme currently has seventy five students, with the part-time programme having fifty five students currently enrolled. Out of the one hundred and thirty students, approximately half are female, half are mature, three fifths from ethnic minority backgrounds and one in ten speak English as a second language. The majority of the students work either on a full or part-time basis, and some have carer responsibilities. Most are from lower socio-economic groupings.

Two of the compulsory modules on the part-time business and administration programme comprise of students exploring and then developing research practices. Both modules are

aimed at preparing these students to undertake a 5000 word research project, and should they choose to top-up their degree, a 12000 word dissertation.

Establishing the Students as Partner Research

Utilising students such as those from widening participation backgrounds as partners is an idea that has proliferated in both national and higher education institution policy and practice (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). Involving students as partners to work with academic staff fosters learning and teaching enhancement (Carey, 2013). Specific advantages of students as partners that are attributable to supporting widening participation students, include making higher education more inclusive and increasing student competencies as well as nurturing a sense of belonging (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014). The Higher Education Academy (2014) adds that feeling a sense of belonging has been shown to increase student retention and success. Furthermore involving students in the enhancement of their educational experience addresses the UK Quality Code for Higher Education's Student Engagement indicator seven (QAA, 2012).

Healey, Flint and Harrington's (2014) Conceptual Framework (p. 3) considers four types of partnership learning communities and the broad activities that can be conducted within these. The learning community and activity that this paper focuses upon is the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning through Quality Enhancement. It is an alternative to the evaluation of curriculum, teaching and learning strategies (McCulloch, 2009) that use passive engagement practices such as standard module reviews, programmes evaluations or student representative reports (Carey, 2013).

As a solution to passive engagement evaluation practices, Freire's (1970) empowerment evaluation methodology was employed to inform the design of the students as partners research activity. Freire's (1970) original methodology centred upon equipping rural peasants with the knowledge to conduct their own research and ultimately design the content of educational programmes. To emulate this, undergraduate widening participation students from the part-time business and administration programme (hitherto known as

Student-Researchers), who had passed the two research practice modules, were recruited. Similar to Freire (1970), the Module Leader for the two research practice modules, facilitated a number of additional fortnightly workshops with the Student-Researchers. These workshops were used to conjointly establish the parameters of the research, the research method and reiterate the importance of research ethics. The general parameter agreed was that an evaluation of both the full-time and part-time business and administration curriculum, including teaching and learning, would be undertaken towards the end of the second semester. This would be done via focus groups designed, conducted and analysed by the Student-Researchers (otherwise known as Student Sounding Boards).

By using Student-Researchers to carry out the research on the quality of the learning experience, it was hoped that it would generate more honest dialogue, compared to typical module and programme evaluations (Fetterman, 1994). The information found from conducting the Student Sounding Boards was then presented by the eight Student-Researchers to the business and administration Programme Team, with a view to informing the Programme Review.

Findings

Overview of the Findings from the Student Sounding Boards

Although the focus of this paper is on how the Student Sounding Boards task supported the widening participation Student-Researchers, there will be a brief discussion on what they found.

The research revealed a number of ways in which the business and administration programmes could be enhanced, which included more one-to-one support and discussions rather being 'talked at'. The use of exemplar assignment and local case studies was advocated for all modules. Notably, students commended the support given by most staff and praised those who utilised student-centred learning methods. The Student Sounding

Boards also revealed concern regarding their choice of programme in relation to future job prospects, and as a result, requested more career advice opportunities.

Outcomes and Experiences of Student-Researchers

The following discussions encompass excerpts from the Student-Researchers' reflective diaries which they were asked to keep throughout the process. These are accompanied by observations from the Programme Director and research practices Module Leader. Like Atwood (2010) distinguishes, all eight Student-Researchers had caring responsibilities, mainly for young families. Most had either a full-time or part-time job, and some also undertook voluntary work. In agreement with Dupond and Ossandon (1998) they were all studying to improve their career prospects, although some acknowledged that the main reason for studying was to fulfil their personal interest.

In relation to enlisting Student-Researchers to conduct the Student Sounding Boards, one student revealed feelings of academic inadequacy (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009) when she divulged that she was "daunted about doing research as that is what top professors do". She also expressed that initially she felt that she was not good enough to design the questions and take notes as part of the Student Sounding Boards. Another Student-Researcher was surprised to be asked if she wanted to be involved because she previously had a few personal problems which had impacted on her studies and made her think that others saw her as useless (echoing Munro's (2011) research).

During the first workshop for Student-Researchers, a student was uncertain (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009) as to whether she belonged there (Munro, 2011). But after talking to others during the workshop, she found it encouraging to know that she would be carrying out the research with students who had similar attributes to her. After the first workshop two Student-Researchers were reticent to continue because of the many external distractions that they faced which could impact on their ability to conduct the Student Sounding Boards. Fuller (2007) concurs when he discloses that adapting to the workload and academic environment can present particular challenges for widening participation.

Bryom and Lightfoot's (2012) identification that widening participation students are determined to succeed is demonstrated in one of the reflective logs when a student revealed that she would "give it a go, so my son and family can be proud of me". Associated with Gilgardi and Gugliemetti's (2011) findings about identifying the professional implications of practice, a few of the Student-Researchers stated that knowing that the research would be used to develop business programmes, made them feel like their experiences and knowledge of research methods was beneficial to the institution. Consequentially, for one Student-Researcher this bolstered their confidence, making them feel "just as good as the 'normal' university students". Another student recorded that by analysing the Student Sounding Boards to draw conclusions, made the theory on research practices much more clearer in terms of its application to "everyday life".

From the Module Leader's observations, the widening participation students who carried out the Student Sounding Boards showed greater engagement with the academic community. Moreover their motivation and confidence increased as a result of building close relationships with their fellow Student-Researchers. The latter corresponds to Burke et al's (2013) single institution study which recorded that student friendships provide support mechanisms that can help them feel a sense of belonging in higher education. The Programme Director also felt that like Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014), the Student-Researchers employability skills such as problem-solving, time management and teamwork, had also been enhanced.

Conclusion

Whilst the aforementioned outcomes and experiences relate to business and administration, which according to the HESA (2015) attracts the majority of widening participation students, ideas can be applied to other subject areas. Moreover Moore, Sanders and Higham (2013) specify that strategies such as these, which support students by raising aspirations, should form part of an broader, on-going process between widening participation students and higher education institutions.

Widening participation students may have many responsibilities and face more challenges, compared to traditional higher education students, but their social norms can enhance the higher education environment. There may be social inequalities if widening participation students have inadequate structural and material support in all types of higher education institutions. Given that some widening participation students stumble and others may not continue in higher education, being granted an element of responsibility and partnership within their institution, could be a means of helping to overcome this. Even if this is not the case, feeling a greater sense of belonging and increased confidence, may help them in overcoming some of the challenges faced when studying at a higher education institution.

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