

## HEFCE'S CRYSTAL BALL? STUDENTS AS SCHOLARS, EMPLOYEES, LEADERS AND MANAGERS?

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### THIS ARTICLE

This article is for leaders and managers who wish to improve the retention, learning opportunities and overall experience of students. When students pay their way through higher education some find themselves vulnerable. And if how the vulnerable are treated is a guide to institutional quality, the points below will have some value.

### BACKGROUND

The following was made possible by Hefce and the far-sighted guidance of colleagues from the Leadership Foundation, Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Higher Education Academy (HEA), some UK universities and colleges and a US university. It concerns a project whose findings have begun to influence how some institutions are planned and managed. Its impact over the next decade could be considerable.

When viewing projects supported by Hefce's Leadership, Governance and Management (LGM) Fund<sup>1</sup> it is akin to looking into the future of English higher education. So it was with the Fund's 101st project; popularly known as 'Learning from America. On-Campus Student Employment'<sup>2</sup>. The potential of institutions employing increased numbers of students on campus has made itself felt and the project team is kept busy disseminating the learning. A number of pilots are underway, particularly in the English sector.

Interest was given a boost by a 2008 Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) report<sup>3</sup> prefaced by Minister of State Bill Rammell, which stated "We want to encourage universities to adopt the approach, typical in America, to find part-time jobs on the campus itself as well as with local employers. We want to see all universities treating student employability as a core part of their mission."

### WILL THIS TRANSFER?

In a word, yes. Circumstances in Leadership Foundation member institutions vary, though in many the requirement of students to fund part of their education has grown and will increase. Some institutions may find on-campus student employment of marginal interest, many

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have started to adapt and some could consider student workers a breakthrough for a better future.

Northwest Missouri State University's president, Dr Dean Hubbard<sup>4</sup>, made part of the case when he said "...a reliance on external employers to provide virtually all student employment is an abrogation of responsibility and consequently the university has an ethical duty to employ and involve its students".

A Northwest student employee Paul Klute commented "We are residents, we contribute to the economy of this town; we have the same right to employment as anyone else."

These comments are food for thought, given around 60% of English students already work part-time concurrently with their studies and this percentage will continue to rise. Irrespective of whether institutions employ students or not the needs of students are changing. These needs will require continuing adaptations in the way higher education is planned and managed.

### FINDINGS

When the project team contacted US federal and state higher education agencies a number of universities with innovative practices were identified. Most pointed to the approaches taken at Northwest Missouri State University. This university of 7,000 students was selected as the

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focus of study, which it graciously accepted. It employed its first student worker over 20 years ago. Today approaching 20% of home and 50% of international students work on campus for an average of 15 hours per week.<sup>5</sup> Nine of the findings at Northwest are:

- | Student employment is funded by increased retention, reduced re-recruitment costs and the correlation between students employed on campus and alumni donations.
- | Students work in all academic and support departments, including the President's and all other executive offices. The FTE of student staff is 43% of total staff with established staff at 57%.
- | Student employment is deliberate, systematic, institution-wide and measurable. It appears to align well with the QAA's emphasis on the enhancement of learning opportunities.
- | Some student employees have responsible positions; they lead, manage, access confidential information, have career pathways and are appraised.
- | On-campus employment enhances home and overseas student recruitment.
- | Considerable effort is made to widen student participation and retain students of diverse backgrounds through employment.<sup>6</sup>
- | The presidents of the staff and student unions support the university's policy.
- | According to the university not one established member of staff has lost their job because of student employment. The university points out that it spends around 12% more on teaching staff per student than its 41 benchmark universities. It does, however, spend less on student recruitment functions.
- | Hours of work are built around students' studies. It is unusual for students to work three consecutive hours.
- | There is strong evidence of on-campus employment improving students' learning and evidence of improvement of employability on graduation.

Many challenges face UK higher education. Involving students in the running of some institutions could help. Most delegates to the Hefce project's dissemination events felt that increased involvement is worth consideration. That said, whether on-campus student employment is appropriate in order to improve retention, become more efficient or to give students a better learning experience is for individual institutions to consider.

## UK PRACTICES?

It is important to stress there is much good practice in the UK sector. Each aspect studied at Northwest is carried out as well, if not better in a UK institution. It is the number of good practices in one place and the cumulative effect of these which makes Northwest of interest. Of the over 1,000 project DVDs requested by universities and colleges, most have been sent to institutions in England and Wales, though requests

have been received from as far away as Australia. Requests from pre-1992 universities exceed those of post-92 institutions.

These DVDs have been used for away days, policy meetings, staff development, reference and so on. As a result of DVD requests, follow up presentations and facilitation of pilots, the project team have insight into who is doing what in the UK. While the confidentiality of individual institutions has to be respected, the following three examples are generally in the top 10 areas of interest for universities and colleges.

### 1 STUDENT AMBASSADORS

Many UK institutions employ ambassadors. Their development is a non-controversial lead into Northwest's approaches, where every day is an open day. The example of a UK university with some reliance on UCAS Clearing is a useful illustration.

In common with many institutions it has well-planned open days. A project team member was invited to observe an open day and recommend improvements. It rained continuously and attendance was reduced by over 30% of that expected. A private sector parallel is that of a company which opens when it wants to, rather than when it suits customers and with no adjustments for weather. The university accepted these points and will over three years make a phased adaptation of the US approach.

Since higher education is a high financial investment for students and that student funding is the principal income of many institutions, a re-think of how some campuses are presented could be timely. In the example English university, the whole process of recruitment, including how it is managed and led is being reviewed for effectiveness and support. It will take what is appropriate from the US approach, some characteristics of which are:

- | Most prospective applicants are given an individual tour by an ambassador, often two, one of whom will be a major in the visitor's subject of study. It is common for students to be accompanied by family members.
- | Tours are booked in advance with name and contact details registered. Consequently, and this is a critical point, the university can track the conversion rate and other relevant statistics with great precision.
- | Ambassadors are available to visitors for 48 weeks a year.
- | Visitors are received at a well-appointed university house. It offers a good first impression and a professional backdrop for ambassadors.

### 2 TALENT DEVELOPMENT

This subject interested dissemination event delegates more than any other. It is based on the principle that students of all backgrounds can improve their learning with peer mentoring and coaching. Northwest believes Talent Development improves retention by around 10%. A number of UK institutions practice peer mentoring to a high standard, but none on the scale or scope studied by the project. An English university is piloting Talent Development in the Northwest manner with the assistance of a project member. It could become a beacon for the sector.

Talent Development at Northwest is a free service to students. With the exception of two, its 70 well-trained employees are students. The university's Talent Development Centre (TDC) has six functions, including helping students who have difficulties with a subject or learning skills, assisting 'B' grade students to achieve 'As', and supporting 'A' grade students to maintain 'As'.

The Centre also carries out Supplemental Peer Mentoring, employing trained student mentors selected by academic staff. The student mentors, usually recruited from the previous year, retake the class contact parts of a module. At appropriate times during the week they facilitate informal sessions which discuss the key learning points of a lecture or module material. No new material is introduced. Discussions sometimes focus on how to learn, good practice in the presentation of learning and ways of approaching exams and assessment.

The project found that peer discussions assisted greatly in students' understanding of course material. An important function of a mentor is to meet the module leader regularly, to feed back which aspects of a module are working well and which students find difficult or unclear. The project team gained the view that virtually all academic staff would welcome the benefit of supplemental mentors. Having mentors in classes has become something of a badge of honour, denoting a hard but valuable module.

Some points of interest concerning the Talent Development Centre (TDC) are:

- | Around 30% of students of all abilities use the TDC per year and over 80% will have made some use of its programmes before graduation.
- | Students with borderline entry are required to attend some TDC sessions; some are referred by staff. The majority attend with self-interest.
- | While the TDC may add up to 10% to student retention the university believes it is key to maintaining wide participation.

### 3 BALANCED SCORECARD

Northwest's scorecard or 'Dashboard' as it is widely known has influenced many UK institutions, in most part because of its ease of use. It has developed over 20 years, contains 15 years of trend data, uses predictor and outcome measures and has been distilled to pure simplicity, which is one of its great strengths.

As with all information systems, Dashboards are useful only if the information is accurate, contains useful data and is updated regularly; in some cases daily. Project members found that much institution-wide and departmental data are inputted by students as well as regular employees. Certainly at Northwest, without student workers there is a question of whether continuous updating is viable. This point was seen clearly by the University of Gloucestershire (see later) which sent a team of staff to Missouri to exchange ideas.

With characteristic vision the Leadership Foundation has funded a Small Development Project<sup>7</sup> to build some example Dashboards with the help of colleagues from the US. Most, if not all, UK Dashboards are top-down institutional systems; the projects will be complementary bottom-up ones for departments. They will comprise what heads of department and their staff want to know to assure themselves the department is going in the right direction. Data will also be produced to inform preventative action, which many see as the key benefit of Dashboards. The project begins in autumn 2008. Whether participating institutions embrace the whole concept and involve students will be watched with interest. Dissemination will be by regional presentations and the Leadership Foundation website.

## UK EXAMPLES

One of the universities to place its intentions in the public domain concerning Northwest's practices is the University of Gloucestershire.<sup>8</sup> It has made student employment the focus of its 2008 Leadership Foundation/HEA Change Academy project.<sup>9</sup>

Institutional change with the Change Academy requires a substantial investment in people and funds. Gloucestershire's investment from all levels is considerable and is likely to prove significant for itself and the sector. The Change Academy is a year-long programme of support for the university's teams. It will help develop the knowledge, capacity and enthusiasm to achieve the intended complex institutional change at operational and strategic levels.

Gloucestershire's project, 'Promoting Student Engagement Through Employment', will transform the university's approach to the employment of students. Over the coming years the university will move from a situation where student employment is small scale and ad hoc to one where it is an intrinsic feature of the institution. As this ambition unfolds students will take advantage of the huge benefits which can flow from the employment of large numbers of students on campus. They will benefit from an approach which accepts the primacy of their study needs and gain valuable employment-related skills, some of which will be accredited. The university expects to achieve improved levels of student engagement and retention rates.

Students will benefit in a number of ways. For example:

- | Flexible employment opportunities will give priority to students' study needs. In this way the tension between employment and study, which so often exists when students work, will be minimised and actively managed.
- | Opportunities will be created for students to gain valuable employment-related skills. The university will provide direct confirmation of participating students' employability and offer accreditation, where appropriate, of aspects of work experience learning.

Students will become much more 'embedded' members of the university community.

These points contrast with the experience of most working students. Many work unsocial hours, are sometimes too tired to pay due attention to their studies and often learn little of use to take into employment on graduation.

At sector level, Scotland yet again leads the way. Students are employed as members of institutional audit teams. An experienced Scottish auditor recounted how "they brush up rather well". QAA is now pressing ahead with plans for the implementation of student auditors in 2009-10. It will also continue to support the developing role of students in quality assurance within their own institutions.

## A CHALLENGE FOR UK HIGHER EDUCATION

Some colleagues reading this article may think it promotes the end of higher education as we know it. For some institutions it does. But as time will show, the financial demand of students to contribute to their learning will grow. Institutions can choose to believe student employment is not their problem or that it is their opportunity.

Some colleagues may think this article advocates that students could and should work concurrently with their studies, which some believe will reduce student grades and achievement. Could? Yes. Should? Not necessarily. There are projects which report that students who work alongside study will experience a reduction of grades.<sup>10</sup> None until now suggest that if institutions help students with employment on campus, grades and achievements will rise.

With the caveat that only some things from US higher education are transferable, students who work on Northwest's campus believe they have become better students. They reach higher grade point averages than students who work off campus, are more likely to participate in university clubs and societies, have a higher incidence of volunteer work in the community and feel safer. They have increased employment prospects on graduation and a favourable record of alumni giving.

A challenge for UK institutions is to debate the issues with their students and staff. Virtually all UK institutions would benefit from some

of the learning from the US. The Hefce-supported project's sole purpose was to gather knowledge to help improve higher education. Take-up so far encourages the belief that its purpose is being achieved. Project members watch with interest to see where the baton will be picked up next.

## A FINAL THOUGHT

It is satisfying when students graduate and take up responsible posts. These may well require leadership and management skills, often with confidentiality as a requirement. Is there any evidence to suggest that well-trained students will behave differently from regular staff concerning confidential information, or any reason to believe that students do not have management skills before graduation?

Is there something magical in the handshake of a vice-chancellor at the graduation ceremony which transforms an unemployable person into one with employment prospects? Clearly no. If Hefce's crystal ball is given another rub will some see students can be scholars, employees, leaders and managers?

To receive the Hefce project's main disc please email your postal address and number required to the project leader:

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## REFERENCES

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