

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Title: Enhancing the student learning experience: the perspective of academic staff

Structured Abstract

Background: Quality enhancement in higher education is essentially a planned process of change that leads to continuous improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students and the students' experience of higher education. Published literature that explores the concept in the reality of practice is sparse.

Purpose: The overall aim of this study was to capture and provide an analysis of academic staffs' perceptions of enhancing the student learning experience.

Design/Method/Sample: A qualitative research design was employed to capture a range of academic staffs' views. Data was collected by way of three digital voice recorded focus group interviews (n=26). Informants were from a diverse range of subject disciplines and professional groups including nursing, midwifery, social work, radiography, physiotherapy, psychology, pharmacy and life sciences. A modified version of the data analysis method advocated by Chenitz and Swanson (1986) was used to analyse the data.

Findings: The analysis suggests the existence of three conceptual categories; 'Establishing Readiness', and 'Connecting with the Students' and 'Developing a Work and Learning Environment'.

Keywords

Academic staff perceptions, quality enhancement, student learning experience, student engagement.

Introduction

Quality enhancement in higher education is a deliberate process of change that leads to continuous improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students and the student's experience of higher education. It is principally applied to learning and teaching matters however more recently it has become integral to the strategic plan of many higher education institutions (QAA, 2008). Middlehurst (1997) describes quality enhancement in terms of different levels of change. At a basic level enhancement of quality involves examining what one is doing and, as a consequence, making explicit aims, objectives and outcomes. At the next level enhancement may involve making incremental changes so that learning and teaching is more efficient. At the third level quality enhancement involves doing things in new ways. Jackson (2003) reports that the most radical forms of quality enhancement are those which involve transformational changes which call for a complete re-examination, re-conceptualisation and re-direction of existing practice.

Whilst defining enhancement and what it might mean in terms of outcome is not difficult, achieving it is significantly more complex. There is clearly a need to identify the landscape of factors that impact both positively and negatively on quality enhancement activity. Within higher education there is a growing interest in quality enhancement and an increasing desire to develop a more active strategy associated with such activity. Consequently, there is a need

to explore how enhancement is achieved and facilitated effectively and efficiently. In order to be able to develop a strategy which will enable academic staff to contribute actively to the quality enhancement agenda, infrastructures and mechanisms should be established and/or developed in order to support staff who want to engage in enhancement activity. An abundance of literature can be found pertaining to the conditions that encourage and motivate people and institutions to engage in quality enhancement activity however, the literature, reflects primarily anecdotal opinion and personal experience (Allan et al, 2002, Pittilo and Hutchinson, 2002, Andrea and Blackwell 2005). Key issues that are reported stress the need for a better understanding of the nature and purpose of quality enhancement and the need to foster the development of a culture and set of behaviours and actions that promote quality enhancement activity (Jackson 2003). There is no empirical evidence that provides an indication of the factors that make an effective contribution to a culture which values and supports quality enhancement. The lack of empirical work and in-depth understanding of the factors that impact on quality enhancement activity have been the catalyst for this study. It was envisaged that a study which seeks to explore the nature and reality of quality enhancement activity from the frame of reference of academic staff will make explicit the structures and processes that need to be put in place to value and support such activity. Furthermore, since many academic staff within the context of higher education report difficulties making enhancement activity a reality, a study that explores the concept in the reality of practice had the potential to create an awareness of the actions and interactions that are amenable to the promotion of the enhancement agenda

Research Design

Since the overall aim of the study was to capture, describe and provide an analysis of academic staffs' experience of enhancing the student learning experience in a Faculty with a

diverse range of professional groups, a qualitative, inductive research design was deemed most appropriate. The advantage that this method offered was that it allowed the complexity of quality enhancement and the richness of such practice to be captured. Furthermore, as there is a paucity of research investigating academic staff's perceptions of their experience of enhancing the student learning experience, an inductive design was ideally suited to the study.

Collection of Data

A purposeful sample (n=26) was recruited from a range of academic staff within one large Faculty. Informants were from a diverse range of subject disciplines and professional groups including nursing, midwifery, social work, radiography, physiotherapy, psychology, pharmacy and life sciences. All staff reported having some experience of learning and teaching, student assessment, student support and guidance and a broad general knowledge of the subject area.

Three semi-structured, in-depth, digital voice recorded focus group interviews were conducted. The use of focus group interviews was deemed appropriate as they generate primarily qualitative data and capitalise and provide in-depth information in the context of interaction. Semi-structured in-depth interviews enabled the researchers to probe certain responses, pursue topics which had conceptual promise and thus obtain rich, in-depth data. Morse (1989) claims that semi-structured in-depth interviews allow questions to be organised around the area of particular interest, while still allowing for considerable flexibility in scope and depth. Flexibility was the major appeal of this method of data collection as topics which had conceptual promise could be pursued. In addition, ideas from early focus group interviews were introduced in subsequent interviews to further develop a category and sharpen the focus of the study. Since the use of open ended questions was also deemed

necessary to minimise the imposition of predetermined responses or ideological expression, the semi-structured interview was deemed to be the most suitable method of data collection.

The use of a digital voice recorder allowed the researchers to pay full attention to the interviewees. It too removed the necessity of arduous writing during the interview and provided a permanent record which could be examined in the context of new findings. The digital voice recorded interview was also used as a guarantee of rigor as it provided a means of self-monitoring whereby the researchers could constantly reflect on how questions may have shaped the data. Any non-verbal exchanges were recorded in brief during the interview by the presence of co-researcher. The role of the co-researcher was pivotal to the nature and quality of the focus group data collected. The co-researcher was able to remain detached and capture important dynamics from interactions within the group and ultimately validate or refute the primary researcher's interpretations during the analysis phase.

Before each interview began the interview agenda was explained. This covered how quality enhancement may be defined, its purpose and the factors which promote and/or prevent or inhibit enhancement activity. Discussion of the agenda was the only part of the interview which was constant for all informants as the interview then proceeded in an informal, conversational style, with informants describing their personal experiences of enhancing the student learning experience. For each of the focus group interviews conducted a verbatim transcript was drafted. Transcription was undertaken as soon as possible after the interviews were conducted. The early rigorous reading of the transcripts ensured that memories of the completed interview flooded the researchers mind and that ideas, personal feelings, relevant responses and non-linguistic features that had not been recorded in the co-searchers notes could be readily documented.

Data Analysis

A modified version of the data analysis method advocated by Chenitz and Swanson (1986) was employed to analyse the data collected. Coding of transcribed data was undertaken in two phases, a scanning phase followed by a more microscopic examination of the data. During the overview analysis, interview data were scanned in order to identify relevant themes and ideas and working hypotheses. This initial coding procedure served to develop theoretical sensitivity that is an ability to 'see' with analytic depth what is there (Chenitz and Swanson, 1986). A simultaneous in-depth or microscopic line by line analysis was undertaken to generate abstract concepts. Recurring themes, hypotheses, interrelationships and variations between abstract concepts and potential categories were documented in memos throughout the analytic process. Six potential categories developed quickly during the early stages but were then reduced to 4 preliminary categories which in turn, when finally elaborated and refined, resulted in three major categories of a higher level of abstraction than the preliminary ones. A state of category saturation was not achieved as limited time was available for data collection and analysis. The analysis can therefore only tentatively suggest the existence of three categories that describe academic staffs' experience of enhancing the student learning experience.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Establishing Readiness

The category 'Establishing Readiness' describes academic staff's perceptions of the nature and reality of quality enhancement and the infrastructures and resources that need to be in place in order to promote, support and value enhancement activity.

Within the Faculty where the research was conducted it would appear that the concept of quality enhancement has become a widely accepted tenet. It is now part of the vocabulary of many academic staff and is seen by many as intentional change that results in an improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students and the student's experience of higher education. However, consensus relating to the meaning of quality enhancement was not apparent. As one informant stated quality enhancement is

'a subjective process and a perception of the eye of the beholder'.

This view was supported by many informants who reported that within ones own sphere of work many practices considered the norm were described by others as enhancement activities.

According to Middlehurst (1997) quality enhancement can be described in terms of levels of change, an observation made by several informants. The concept was seen as multi-faceted and comprising different levels of change ranging from the very basic to the more complex. At a basic level quality enhancement was described as

'making things better' and 'being responsive and having added value'

and was principally linked to learning and teaching. On another level quality enhancement activity was viewed as improving the total or broad experience of the student and engaging effectively with students, staff, outside agencies and departments within the University as a whole, breaking down silos and making where necessary radical changes to aspects of organisational structures, processes, strategies and thinking. Indeed as reported by the QAA (2007) many informants felt quality enhancement was linked to the broader strategic management of the student learning experience and experience of higher education. Interestingly the level of enhancement activity within the Faculty was seen as basic in that it resulted from academic staff's operational experience of programme or module delivery and was primarily linked to learning and teaching. Informants did however stress that they felt

engagement with academic staff about quality enhancement strategy at a Faculty and University level was important.

Informants reported that whilst defining enhancement was not difficult achieving it and what it might mean in terms of outcome was significantly more problematic. All informants reported that infrastructures did not always support enhancement activity. One informant reported that there was

'no joined up thinking'

in terms of the promotion of enhancement activity and infrastructures. This was particularly apparent within the context of staff appraisal where it was reported that staff performance was judged solely by student achievement and attrition and workload determined by the amount of face to face contact with a student. Many informants felt these performance measures stifled enhancement activity and prevented many staff from taking the risk needed to engage in enhancement activity. Workload allocation models based mainly on direct student contact were seen as significant obstacles to enhancement activity as they did not allow staff sufficient time to engage in such endeavours. One informant summarised this view by saying

'to do it (referring to an enhancement initiative)... you can't do it within your normal workload....the culture of continuous improvement needs to be considered in everyone's workload review'.

Indeed many informants referred to the challenge of engaging busy academics in quality enhancement. Several informants felt their workload and the increasing administrative burden on academic staff placed unnecessary demands on staff and led to an aversion to enhancement activity.

Interestingly the perceived lack of opportunity for academic staff promotion within the University was also seen as a barrier to enhancement activity. Several informants suggested that enhancement could be secured through a programme of shadowing or a limit being placed on terms of office for roles such as that of a programme tutor. Clearly there was a strong suggestion that if the quality enhancement agenda is a priority there is a need to develop an enhancement culture which is then reflected in the organisation's strategy, policies and procedures. More specifically many informants felt that arrangements associated with central leadership, staff performance and management, administration and support systems need to promote a culture whereby quality enhancement is considered a priority, valued and recognised formally by the University, a view affirmed by Jackson (2003). It was felt that local enhancement activity was commendable but it alone did not constitute effective quality enhancement. As stressed by the QAA (2008) if an organisation engages in the spirit of quality enhancement or makes explicit deliberate strategic steps to show how enhancement is to be taken forward, it will be valued and promoted by staff.

On an encouraging note most informants felt that the availability of learning technology did contribute to many staff engaging in enhancement activity. This was particularly evident in terms of the availability of multimedia systems to support student learning. However, the experience was different between informants. Some felt the availability of technology and e-learning support led to many enhancement initiatives which were positively evaluated by students. Others reported that technology-based enhancement activity was less evident where information technology support was limited.

The sharing of good practice was considered critical in terms of promoting enhancement activity. Whilst many examples of how good practice is effectively disseminated were cited

it was felt more could be done to promote the dissemination of good practice and thus facilitate the enhancement of the student learning experience. Some informants suggested that more use could be made of annual monitoring and evaluation data and that consideration should be given to a cross faculty teaching observation and peer review strategy. Such cross faculty initiatives were seen as important particularly as enhancement activity was more readily recognised by staff working in different spheres of work.

Connecting with Students

The second category, 'Connecting with Students', describes the significance of student engagement from admission to graduation and strategies that may be employed to enhance the students' learning experience and their experience of higher education in general.

Without exception, academic staff acknowledged the importance of student engagement in achieving quality enhancement. However, the main feature of connecting with students was deemed to be the active part of such engagement and students' participation in the decision making, a view affirmed by others (Coates, 2005; Campbell et al, 2007; Heerens, 2009.) As Alexander (2007) states, "the concept of students as active participants, as stakeholders and partners in the process of learning is fundamental to how we take forward higher education in the 21st century." (Cited Campbell et al, 2007a, Pg. vii) Informants recognised that student engagement was encouraged by participatory approaches to learning and teaching, citing examples of problem based learning, action learning and collaborative learning approaches, including the use of learning technologies to connect with students. The positive outcomes of such a diversity of learning and teaching strategies is widely endorsed within the current literature (Holley and Dobson, 2008; Mead et al, 2006; Doolan et al, 2006).

Developing the feedback skills of students, through the use of self and peer assessment was also perceived by informants to positively contribute to student engagement in the learning process. As HEIs strive to improve student satisfaction, this is an area worthy of further consideration. Indeed Nicol (2009) suggests that integrating opportunities for reflection and self and peer assessment is beneficial, as it provides students with early experiences of self monitoring and making evaluative judgements about their own and others' learning.

Whilst a range of exciting developments emerged from within the focus groups, informants stressed the importance of objective evaluation of the effectiveness of such initiatives on the students' learning experience. As stated by the Quality Assurance Agency (2006) "Enhancement of learning opportunities [also] takes place by staff independently generating enhancement initiatives, but such routes to enhancement are associated with good people and their good ideas rather than necessarily with good institutional approaches to quality enhancement."

Informants clearly viewed student engagement as central to enhancing the student learning experience. However Little et al (2009) found that HEIs placed more emphasis on viewing students as consumers and rather less on viewing students as partners in a learning community. Whereas an important emerging feature of connecting with students was the continuum from admission to graduation. Examples given by informants included establishing lines of communication from the outset; making effective use of the induction period; establishing a supportive 'student community'; and promoting group cohesiveness. The significance of the first year of study was further evidenced within the QAA enhancement theme, 'Responding to Student Needs' which identified a range of benefits of

effective student engagement at an early stage, both for the student learning experience and for levels of student retention and progression (QAA, 2005). At the other end of the spectrum, informants emphasised the importance of employer involvement and feedback; the role of alumni; and most of all – ensuring graduates are fit for purpose.

Within HEIs the opportunity to listen to, and act on the student voice is clearly embedded as a routine part of quality assurance through student feedback processes and student representation on programme committees (HEA, 2008, Pg.51). However with an increasing emphasis on quality enhancement and reflecting on the experience of the quality enhancement framework in Scotland, the real value and importance of student engagement has been increasingly recognised over recent years. In 2007, the Hearing the Student Voice project aimed to promote and encourage the use of the student voice to enhance the effectiveness of academic professional development and ultimately the learning experience of students (Campbell et al, 2007a, Pg.3). However, in undertaking the case studies, issues arose relating to student participation, representation and protecting students' interests.

Similarly some of the challenges and constraints to connecting with students identified by informants included: managing student expectations; impact of cohort/group size; adequate preparation of students for the level of engagement expected and student representation. The difficulty of ensuring that student representatives, often volunteered/nominated rather than elected, reflect the views of the whole group was raised by academic staff within the focus group interviews and the importance of training recognised in this regard. These views reflect the findings of Little et al (2009) who describe the lifecycle of the student representation process as progressing through a number of stages viz. awareness raising and recognition of the role; nominations and elections; training for the role; undertaking the role;

monitoring and reviewing effectiveness. In addition, the national work of *sparqs* (student participation in quality Scotland) who deliver training and support for student representatives as well as providing advice to institutions is worthy of note (Heerens, 2009).

As identified in the recent HEA report (2008, Pg.17), of the commonly mentioned drivers for change to quality enhancement, the most significant is the perception of changes to student expectations and concern about student views as reflected through student feedback mechanisms. Student feedback is therefore a primary source of evidence although some academic staff questioned the validity of existing University student feedback mechanisms and identified influencing factors such as the survey design, timing, method and context of administration. HEFCE (2008) found that HEIs are responding vigorously to student feedback, such as the National Student Survey (NSS), with widespread evidence of institutional actions and initiatives arising from NSS results (Cited Little et al, 2009).

The HE sector is clearly motivated by the need to be responsive to student expectations (HEA, 2008, Pg.18) and this was also evident from the academic staff responses, which valued both formal and informal mechanisms of evaluation. Importantly, informants stressed the need to complete the feedback cycle and maintain effective communication with students.

Whilst we cannot always resolve the issue, one respondent emphasised that

“it’s getting that feedback that’s probably the most important thing”.

This view has been widely endorsed across the sector (Little et al, 2009, para 8.42) and is reflected within the ten-step approach devised by Campbell et al (2007b).

The importance of connecting with students cannot be over-emphasised and the findings demonstrated that there is clearly a strong commitment to promoting student engagement among academic staff within the Faculty. As one respondent stated,

“...it does go back to [like us] being in partnership with the students, to work together to ensure that their feedback actually contributes to the enhancement process”.

Indeed, there has never been a time in which student involvement in the quality of their educational experience has been higher on the agenda (HEA, 2008, Pg.51)

Developing a Working and Learning Environment

Developing the work and learning environment refers to academic staffs' perceptions of the physical environment and how it influences the enhancement of student learning. Discussion of physical environments broadly fell into three main categories: staff office environments; informal work environments; learning environments.

Staff office environments:

The importance of having appropriate office environments was recognised by informants. It was suggested that offices should be fit for purpose and provide a safe and supportive environment in which to develop a rapport with students. The importance of the physical environment, when considering effective communication between staff and students, was highlighted by Alan Bigger (2007, as cited in Andrew, 2009) in his presentation to the Association of University Director's of Estates (AUDE) when he listed this as one of his 'top ten facilities issues'. One informant suggested that it is important to

'provide a space for them [students] to be able to explore in and feel safe'.

It was suggested that shared offices could hinder pastoral and academic support. Staff being disparately located from colleagues within the same discipline was also thought to hamper student communication with staff.

Herzberg, Mauser and Snyderman's original study (1959) suggested that extrinsic elements or 'hygiene factors', which include working conditions, relate to job dissatisfaction, whereas intrinsic elements related to the actual content of work such as recognition, achievement and responsibility or 'motivational factors', are significant elements in job satisfaction. Within academia, autonomous work activities, such as research, individual teaching sessions and tutorial support, it could be argued, lead to job satisfaction, however extrinsic elements being unsatisfactory, such as office space, could lead to feelings of job dissatisfaction.

Pearson and Seiler (1983) investigated academics' levels of satisfaction and determined that academics were generally more satisfied than dissatisfied with their environment, however our current study (although not specifically investigating staff dissatisfaction) did suggest a degree of perceived dissatisfaction and identified that unsatisfactory physical environments could constrain enhancement activities.

Informal Work Environments

The importance of available and accessible informal work environments was also highlighted when considering enhancement. Informants recognised the benefits of informal social spaces for discussion and dissemination of ideas. Participants commented on the value of informal discussions with colleagues at coffee areas and over lunch, however, the variability regarding access to coffee areas and informal meeting rooms was viewed negatively.

The lack of social space for students was also lamented and informants recognised the importance of considering student opinion when high level decisions are made about the future developments of the campuses. Radloff (1998) stresses the need for social space on campuses and recognises the importance of shared interaction. Radloff suggested that 80% of student time on campus is spent informally outside of scheduled classes. Libraries, refectories, cafes or bars are now being used as areas for study even though they may not have been intentionally designed for this purpose. Recent campus developments have perhaps paid more attention to social learning space and café culture learning is being increasingly recognised and cultivated. For example, the Science Museum in London has developed “Café Scientifique” to stimulate scientific discussion and learning in adults who would not normally engage with, or attend, science events (Academy exchange, 2007) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) subject centre for languages, linguistics and area studies (LLAS) has developed café culture learning to encourage language learning within a social environment (Academy exchange, 2007). An informant also provided an example of effective practice from a visit to another institution where all

‘new buildings have cafes at the bottom of every block’.

Learning Environments

Informants commented very positively on the well resourced learning environments including ‘StudyNet’ (the University’s tailor made virtual learning environment) and well equipped teaching rooms. Consideration of the physical teaching environment is somewhat limited within the literature, which tends to focus on the learning and teaching process (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Biggs, 1999), however, as Jamieson et al (2000) discuss, the increased use of technology within teaching has required Institutions to reconsider the relationship of the physical setting to the student learning experience.

The resources available via StudyNet and the learning that goes on outside the classroom (such as fieldtrips and work experience opportunities) were identified as examples which enhance the student learning experience, however a constraint identified by staff, was the perceived increase in workload having an aversive effect on enhancement activities. Informants reported that there was little time to develop their skills particularly relating to learning technologies (e.g. Table PCs, podcasting).

Informants were very positive about the well resourced teaching rooms; however, the importance of having an efficient and effective room booking system was highlighted. Frustrations regarding room bookings and problems such as allocation of an inappropriate teaching room were examples identified as barriers and constraints to enhancement activities.

As identified by Jamieson et al (2000), the physical environment plays a significant role in how teachers approach their teaching. Referring to their research within Schools, Zandvliet and Straker (2001) further suggest that “adequate working environments for students is more than a comfort or safety issue but rather also a learning issue in that an inadequate physical learning environment might effect psychosocial disharmony perhaps disrupting or distracting the intended learning goals in these settings”. It is increasingly apparent that HEIs must consider the physical environment when considering learning, teaching and assessment strategies.

Our findings suggest that work and learning environments do influence enhancement activities and indeed, HEFCE (2009) identifies the importance of the physical environment

within HEIs; “A HEI estate should; support the institution's mission; be sustainable in environmental, social and economic terms and be efficient and represent value for money. One HEI has developed a “Positive Working Environment Initiative” (Threadgold, 2008) which amongst other things, wishes to simply provide a “workplace where the space is pleasant and comfortable to work in”. It may be pertinent for other HEIs and to develop similar Initiatives.

Conclusions

In conclusion it is evident that in order to promote quality enhancement in higher education and thus the improvement of student learning and the students learning experience enhancement activity should involve everyone who teaches, supports and guides students. Enhancement needs to be explicit at every level of an organisation. Institutions need to develop clearly, a culture which promotes enhancement activity and an environment where those who are engaged in enhancement are valued and supported with the necessary resources, structures and processes.

Key to the success of enhancing the student learning experience is the engagement with students at both a Faculty and University level. The role of the student in the process of shaping the student learning experience has long been recognised in UK Higher Education. Furthermore, the increasing marketisation and continuing drives to public accountability, have prompted renewed institutional efforts to ensure that student voices, as consumers and stakeholders, are listened to and their messages acted upon as appropriate (Little et al., 2009). As a result, connecting with students is a key feature in developing the quality enhancement agenda and a greater emphasis needs to be placed on students as partners in the learning community.

Finally a further critical driver to facilitate and promote enhancement activity is the need for the physical environment accessible to both staff and students to be conducive to learning. The particular architecture and the design of learning spaces contributes significantly to engagement in enhancement activity and thus improvements in student learning and achievement. Desirable designs include having learning places that are functional, fully resourced and allow for academic and student collaboration. Space that fosters a sense of academic and or student community was deemed crucial.

(4663 words not including abstract)

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