IDENTIFYING AND EXAMINING OUTSTANDING TEACHING AT A UK HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION AND THE LESSONS IT PROVIDES FOR FIRST YEAR LECTURERS AND THEIR STUDENTS

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Abstract
Institutional student satisfaction data within a UK University was used to identify modules with consistently good feedback. Interviews were then conducted with lecturers and academic staff responsible for these modules to discuss their approaches to teaching. The interviews were thematically analysed alongside students’ open responses to questions included on the module evaluation surveys to identify processes instrumental in providing an excellent student experience.

None of the modules selected using the above criteria were for first year undergraduate classes. This paper discusses how the data collected could potentially be used by lecturers responsible for first year modules to help students have a more rewarding first year experience.

Lecturers reflected that effective student engagement was central to excellent teaching. Interviewed lecturers recommended the relating of teaching to real-world scenarios and students' long-term goals and aspirations. They also stressed the importance of ensuring students are comfortable discussing academic issues with lecturers and fellow students in a supportive and comfortable environment. Several spoke of the importance of safeguarding enough time to develop and maintain their own subject knowledge. Additionally, they identified that excellent teachers consider their teaching styles, highlighting the importance of appearing confident and enthusiastic about the topics they are discussing.

Keywords: Teaching Efficacy, Student Satisfaction, Study Skills.

1 INTRODUCTION
Students’ assessment of academic support and teaching is at the heart of the student experience and is critical for attracting students, who frequently use such information when choosing their place of study [1,2,3]. The National Student Survey (NSS) gathers data from final year undergraduate students across the UK and is frequently used by potential students as a source of information. Access to this information allows students to take an increasingly consumerist approach when comparing institutions [4]. The NSS is also used as a key indicator of quality provision [5], with university and subject rankings a ‘quantifiable expression of the student voice concerning the student experience’ [6].

Many UK institutions also conduct their own internal student satisfaction surveys, including the institution selected for this study. Using a survey with similar themes to those of the NSS, more than 80% of modules are routinely surveyed across the institution at all levels (undergraduate and postgraduate) with a total data collection of more than 30,000 students’ views per annum. The information gathered is fed back to the individual module leaders within days of the survey taking place, which can help lecturers quickly identify what is going well on their modules and respond to any concerns students have. Anecdotal discussions suggest that module leaders find the comments supplied by students particularly useful. Open response questions can offer advantages over fixed likert-scale type responses by offering an explanation for the feedback scores [7], giving students the chance to make their own suggestions, and allowing lecturers the opportunity to gauge students’ emotions [8]. Detailed institution-wide analysis of this potentially rich data source is, therefore, well-justified.

An examination of this institutionally collected data across several academic years shows that satisfaction generally increases as students progress through their undergraduate courses. Students in their first year rarely rate teaching at the highest level. We examined the open response data included on the surveys of those modules from other years which were rated at the highest level, alongside interviews with lecturers responsible for delivering the modules, to draw out insights which could be used by first year lecturers to help them provide a more satisfying student experience.
2 METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research was to consider how feedback from students and Lecturers from modules with high satisfaction levels can be used to inform the first-year experience. Modules with exceptional scores (98% or above) for questions relating to teaching and overall satisfaction across two consecutive years (2014-15 and 2015-16) were selected as a way of ensuring that the rating might reflect consistency of effect. A total of 36 modules were identified. None of these modules were undergraduate first year modules, and only seven were from the second year. The majority were from third year and Masters level courses (17 and 12 respectively).

Qualitative feedback from the 2015-16 module evaluation data was then examined for each student who responded from these 36 modules. The data was drawn from two open response questions (‘Please identify up to three things you think are good about this module’ and ‘What changes to the module or its delivery would improve satisfaction?’). The data was then coded into themes according to students’ comments and analysed using a standard approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke [9]. The data was coded into general themes, and then refined as the coding progressed. This allowed themes to be generated about what leads to high student satisfaction. The assumption was that if all points raised were considered as discussed by lecturers, then student satisfaction could be improved for poorly performing modules. Comments relating to improvements were also considered on the principle that exploration of these could add further insights and context around enhancement of satisfaction scores.

Staff responsible for teaching each of the modules selected for high satisfaction were asked to participate in one-to-one in-depth interviews in an attempt to identify effective teaching practices and their implications for student satisfaction and approaches to learning. An interview schedule for the lecturers was designed around students’ comments. It was employed predominately as a guide and lecturers were encouraged to talk freely about their teaching practices and student cohorts as the interviews progressed. Tatårolu et al. [10] explain the advantages of using in-depth interviewing as a method of explaining in that it allows individuals to share ideas, problems and suggestions for solutions, making it a good choice for a study which aims to reveal lecturers’ reflections on both their own teaching and the satisfaction issues raised by students. The interviews were transcribed and coded according to themes presented in the data. These themes were identified by us as lecturer-student interaction, approaches to teaching, coursework and assessment and study skills.

3 RESULTS

A total of 726 comments from 316 students registered on one or more of the selected modules were included in the analysis. A total of 13 lecturers agreed to be interviewed from those identified as receiving high satisfaction. The issues identified in both datasets were divided into key themes, with implications for both lecturers and their students. These themes are considered below.

3.1 Lecturer-Student Interaction

We asked lecturers to discuss why they thought their students were reporting high levels of satisfaction and building relationships was frequently identified as an important factor:

“I’ve always worked very hard on building relationships. To really try and work hard to get to know students. For them to share experiences and for me to get to know them the best I can” (Masters Level Lecturer)

The same lecturer also offered a number of suggestions about how this could be achieved including encouraging students to see them as equals, rather than omniscient information providers:

“I give examples of myself asking stupid questions [so they understand] it is OK to ask a stupid question and it is OK not to know” (Masters Level Lecturer)

Other lecturers regularly asked their students for their opinions about the module content and delivery and informed their students how their views would be considered.

Also highlighted was the ability to facilitate class discussions so students are given the opportunity to develop relationships with each other:

“It is equally important to be able to make it much more student centred… you go into more of a facilitator role rather than teacher” (Year 3 Lecturer)
Mahlatini et al. [11] emphasise the importance of relationships in a recent study also examining student evaluations of teaching which suggested that relationships between students and lecturers could be further improved with more interaction. Brown et al. [12] also recognised the importance of forming relationships with students by considering the role of lecturers during nursing students’ placements, which was one of support, including diverse activities such as encouraging motivation, problem solving and monitoring.

3.2 Lecturers’ Approaches to Teaching

Both lecturers of and students participating in highly rated classes raised the value of planning and preparation:

“Staff teaching on this module are well prepared and very passionate” (Year 3 Student)

This planning and preparation was acknowledged to be difficult to fit in to a lecturer’s workload:

“It is quite hard for me to be organised, but students need to know what the expectations are so I force myself to plan ahead” (Year 2 Lecturer).

The importance of adapting module content and delivery to the requirements of specific cohorts was also highlighted. This was identified as linked to supporting student engagement:

“I engage students and make sure they are the outcomes they want to achieve” (Year 3 Lecturer)

Student aspirations were most closely associated with future employment or study options and lecturers who ensured this was explicit in learning received positive feedback:

“The module leader engages students with practical case studies and professional experiences… providing incredible opportunities for students to observe risk assessment in practice (Masters Level Student).

Understanding a cohort’s primary motivations for undertaking cases or modules should, therefore, help lecturers ensure that their students remain engaged and motivated throughout their courses or modules. Indeed, according to Fisette [13], understanding students’ backgrounds and experiences should be one of the most important aims for teachers. Similarly, the students’ comments suggested they liked lecturers who showed a keen knowledge and enthusiasm for their module.

3.3 Coursework and Assessment

As discussed in section 3.2, students reported that they found contact time particularly valuable when connections with employment or future study are highlighted. One lecturer interviewed devised assessments that enabled students to also make such associations in their coursework:

“[The students] have to produce a teaching package. Something they can take away and use within their own unit. If it was just an essay on academic piece of work, they would put it away and probably not look at it again. This gives them the ability to create something that might be missing in their own area. A teaching resource, and the actual design of it is really entirely up to the student” (Year 3 Lecturer)

Providing feedback to students about their assignments is an opportunity to address any issues regarding student comprehension of the subject and the methods they have used in their coursework:

“We give extensive feedback and I will spend a lot of time marking. And I very heavily emphasise the importance of feedback, it is part of their learning” (Masters Level Lecturer)

While feedback can be motivating for students [14], it draws heavily on lecturers’ time, which can be an issue for lecturers responsible for large cohorts or several concurrent modules.

3.4 Study Skills

Some of the lecturers identified several skills as lacking in many students entering higher education and several also highlighted the value of teaching study skills alongside subject knowledge. One identified academic writing as a perennial problem:

“It is about being critical. They need to know that they have to be critical. Some of them have a bit of a problem with this” (Year 3 Lecturer)
Another was concerned about students’ abilities to deliver good presentations, which he felt may be down to a lack of self-confidence.

The lecturers in our study also expressed the importance of delivering study skills within the modules in a timely manner, which was thought to be the most effective mechanism:

“[Study skills] are integrated into the course, and I did that for a reason. I introduced the library support sessions as searching the literature after the first couple of runs because it became apparent that even people who had studied recently, literature searching had moved on a bit. So it is worth it even if it is just a refresher... it is quite a practical thing delivered by the subject librarian but they are also directed to the other support that is available” (Year 3 Lecturer)

Addressing study skills within the class as opposed to in standalone study skills modules has been identified elsewhere as offering more value to students. Calvery and MacDonald [15] considered how technology could enhance teaching and learning and concluded that it was important to integrate guidance about using technology with teaching so students do not see them as separate entities.

One lecturer referred to much lower attendance rates when study skills were offered in separate bespoke classes. Another suggested that a module with a very packed curriculum could make study skills guidance available on-line for the students to refer to as and when needed:

“I put advice about writing academic essays, and even some resources, on-line” (Year 3 Lecturer)

4 CONCLUSIONS TO DATE

This paper considers how feedback from students and Lecturers from modules with high satisfaction levels can be used to inform the first-year experience. The findings presented came from mainly final year undergraduate modules and postgraduate modules. There were no first-year modules identified and our conclusions reflect on why this might be, ahead of a further analysis of the literature and the data.

The features considered as valuable by both students and lecturers could be identified as lecturer-student interaction; well-prepared and passionate lectures, relevant coursework and thoughtful feedback, plus support for study skills alongside subject knowledge. The relative deficiency of satisfaction in the first year of study might be explained by the interaction of effects of these features.

In the first year, lecturers are yet to get to know their cohorts, and the lecturer-student relationship is in its infancy. Further, many first year students enter university with a wide variety of previous educational experiences, and initially at least lecturers may need to make a certain amount of assumptions about students’ backgrounds when planning first year modules. This impinges on preparation – which is more difficult when you may not know your students’ ability levels nor the numbers you are to be teaching. This makes delivery at an appropriate level for a specific cohort more challenging.

A further challenge to first year lecturers is to set aside sufficient time to give thoughtful feedback to what can be larger than average class sizes learning initial generic topics. The challenge to turnaround feedback to a timescale that means the work is still fresh in the mind of the student requires innovation on behalf of the institution and the lecturer on the types of assessment to set.

Lecturers might address these conundrums by trying to devote as much contact time as possible to getting to know the students and building relationships. This could incorporate time spent explaining clearly and enthusiastically what is expected, what skills will be needed and how these will be acquired. Data analysed in this work suggests that students were especially satisfied with their modules when they could relate their studying to future work or study plans. First year students are likely to be a lot less clear about their future work plans, so insight might be incorporated into how coursework or assessment builds skills for future job roles.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that there are likely to be more generic, compulsory modules in the early stages of undergraduate courses, which the students may continue to find less satisfying.

4.1 Limitations and suggestions for further research

Although this study provides useful insights into students’ and lecturers’ views and approaches to studying and teaching, further work is needed to determine the suitability of adapting these findings to the first year experience. Students go through a myriad of emotions when transitioning to university
and it is possible that this could lead to a negative perception of their modules. First year students may not be in a position to understand the approaches to teaching and assessment used at University level and this could contrast sharply with their previous experiences, which may result in negative feedback. Further research with first year students and their Lecturers considering the suitability of the above recommendations would, therefore, be advisable. Nevertheless, the work to date suggests useful areas of work on which lecturers of first year modules could focus on when considering how to engage their students.

REFERENCES


