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Partnerships for Success: Working Together in Higher Education for Student Success

Arthur Sargeant - Head of Technologies for Learning

Leeds Beckett University

Abstract: Student success has never been out of the minds of staff in Higher Education institutions. Their individual and collective desire to see all students fulfil their potential has never been in doubt and has not diminished over the years. In the fast changing world of Higher Education today however, the external focus on staff and student experience has grown, bringing with it such tools as the National Student Survey and the newly proposed Teaching Excellence Framework in the 2016 White Paper on Higher Education. Now more than ever, staff in Higher Education, need to sharpen their own focus on what they do and what they might do to enhance their teaching and support for students and to give credence to their work in the face of increasing scrutiny and inspection.

This short paper addresses the still all too common divide between ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ provision, suggesting ways in which we might move forward and away from this erroneous and divisive nomenclature and into a more collaborative and integrated world of shared responsibility and all-inclusive thinking. The paper focuses particularly on the relationship between professional library based staff and teaching colleagues within Higher Education.

In terms of the relationship between professional services and teaching staff, particularly in the case of library and attendant services, the current wisdom in the literature surrounding this issue would favour a move away from the “dualist” (Macfarlane, 2014) and arbitrary divide of academic and non-academic staff to a position of embracing “inter-professional practice” (Courtenay, 2012). This change in philosophy gives rise to staff collaboration leading to an integrated and consistent student experience within Higher Education, embedding support and teaching within the same delivery model rather than support being regarded as a useful but ultimately additional entity. As a result, the student experience will be enhanced by presenting a holistic experience as opposed to an experience delivered in piecemeal fashion stemming from the traditional restrictive boundaries of academic and non-academic roles. Such co-operation between teaching and support staff builds a community of staff with different skills coming together collaboratively to provide a positive

impact on the students’ learning and create a partnership for progression, not only of the learning experience of students, but also for the development of inclusive and supportive delivery models within institutions. In order to achieve this, it would be beneficial for staff to consider what Whitchurch, (2008) terms the “third space”:

“In this space, the concept of administrative service has become reoriented towards one of partnership with academic colleagues and the multiple constituencies with whom institutions interact” (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 337)

As professional colleagues staff can engage together in a joined up, immersive approach to content development and the delivery of that content across the whole of the curriculum. Planning with and integrating the subject knowledge and skills of the teaching staff with the information knowledge, skills and experience of the professional librarian. The latter can often bring to a team experience in classroom delivery and involvement in research, as well as holding a variety of high level academic qualifications.

Involving the professional librarian, whatever their institutional title might be ('academic librarian', 'tutor librarian', 'subject librarian' etc.), as an integral part of the course and curriculum planning can be a driver to greater integration of academic skills for our students. Allowing the professional librarian to feed directly into the course or module teams by acknowledging them as an integral part of the team from the outset will further enhance the depth of knowledge behind the planning and design of the curriculum. Integrating them into the teaching team, acknowledging them as part of the delivery team contributing their own expertise at module level will help reinforce the importance of academic and digital skills to students, not only for current study but future employability. The whole student needs the whole integrated experience. As Parkes (2014) suggests, a feeling of belonging for students is important in their retention and progression and that this might be best achieved through:

"...centralisation of the academic sphere to encompass interaction with professional services and social spheres of institutional activity" (Parkes, 2014, p. 5)

Students will benefit from seeing subject expertise and professional skills working together as a coherent team, not as separate entities. After all, this type of cross-team work is exactly what students will come across in their future employment and career and thus emphasising once again the importance of their university experience to their future employability. The practical demonstration of this integrated way of working in the curriculum by teaching and professional support staff will be beneficial in emphasising its importance to students. The relationship between teaching and professional staff is beneficially symbiotic, not mutually exclusive. Students seeing and experiencing this will see the value of collaboration and co-operation more clearly.

These ideas are not linked to any contractual or reputational change or any intended diminution or dilution of current staff roles in or across an institution. Quite the opposite is in fact intended. The successful co-ordination of teaching and professional support staff in the delivery of student learning will only improve and enhance the reputation of all staff, the course and the

institution as a whole. This model of inter-professional practice will be a vital positive narrative in the coming years as government policy focuses in more detail on the quality of teaching, curriculum delivery and the student experience, which of course has a vital role to play in the survival and success of institutions in the modern HE sector. As a study carried out in 2014 by the Higher Education Academy, amongst others concludes:

"Collaborative working by professional and academic staff...has therefore emerged as being particularly important for student engagement, retention and success" (Parkes, 2014, p. 5)

Student retention, engagement and success are three concepts from the current Higher Education mantra that none of us, whatever our institutional labels, can afford to ignore or make assumptions about in the modern education system. Where staff have opportunities that will have a positive effect on these three pillars of the student experience then they are bound as members of the institution and educators to investigate and engage with those opportunities to make them work for all.

To focus on professional support staff in library and related services, how might colleagues work to achieve this community of practice in our institutions? Institutions might embrace the concept of the "unbounded professional" (Whitchurch, 2008), a concept encompassing the idea of professional support staff with a broad range of project-based experience embedded within curriculum and other cross-institutional projects, lending their skills and experience and their observations of student behaviour outside the immediate remit of their subject and teaching interactions. This arrangement can also provide useful insights for teaching colleagues through gathering and analysing data provided through various learning and teaching systems, e.g. Library Management Systems and Virtual Learning Environments, to support and inform teaching colleagues in the area of student engagement and progress and possibly in enhancing curriculum design. Success in integrating teaching and professional support staff in curriculum and other institutional projects is vital to achieving a coherent, collaborative approach to students' learning. As

Courtenay (2012) observes, this inter-professional practice means:

“...that colleagues form a learning environment for each other, a community.” (Courtenay 2012, p. 49)

Whereas it may have been seen in more traditional times:

“...an intrusion by librarians into territories traditionally claimed by academics” (Courtenay, 2012, p. 43)

In many ways, is this not what students are expected to understand and practice while they study within an institution? It is expected, at various times, that they will work together, bringing different skills and abilities, backgrounds and opinions to produce a functioning group delivering required work to a high standard through co-operation and collaboration. Putting this collaborative working relationship into practice within cross-university teams as providers and arbiters of the students’ learning and teaching experience can only positively reinforce the student awareness of academic and working practises. In developing such combinations of skills, a regime of mutuality rather than duality between teaching and professional staff can be achieved, with a mutual understanding of roles, skills and strengths and an acknowledgement of the benefits of close collaboration for the success of all in using all of those attributes together.

This is not a proposed shift in attitude for one particular group of staff or one particular role, rather it is a recognition that all staff in Higher Education should understand how they relate to one another but most of all, how they relate to students. The old cliché of working in siloes still pertains in some areas and with some more traditionalist colleagues. This type of working has been under threat for many years now and many in the sector have made significant moves towards addressing this through diverse institutional structures and the recognition of shared decision making.

Professions have also moved forward from their traditional roles into the new digital and somewhat commercialised era. A student is still a student, customer or not. Libraries for instance, are no longer the bastion of information, opening the portcullis slowly to allow those who seem

most suitable to be granted access to their collections. Libraries and librarians are now the established purveyors of information through a wide range of media, opening knowledge up to the many in as many ways and over as many access points as possible. The drawbridge is down and the portcullis is up and librarians are welcoming in the new learners and their teaching colleagues with open arms. They are advocates of digital literacy, and academic and information skills. They are supporters and partakers of research development and access, charged with opening up and advocating new areas of information and ways of accessing it to learners. They are seen as acknowledged partners of teaching colleagues, willing and able to understand the roles, responsibilities and motivations of those colleagues and to respond accordingly through their personal and service commitments. They have the opportunity to engage proactively across the curriculum and to volunteer, even indeed be ‘pressed’, into sharing their experience, expertise and enthusiasm with course and module teams as a matter of course, rather than a special invitation.

Libraries and librarians are no longer passive supporters of others’ achievements but proactive participants in and contributors to the teaching and learning experience of students and colleagues. Staff in Higher Education should consider not only their personal internal motivations, but also their role in terms of the sector and the institutional context. In particular, reflecting upon how students perceive them, their role and their institutions, how students recognise their part in the learning journey, and how staff influence and support that journey in a positive encouraging way. Teaching colleagues and professional services strengthen their impact on the learner journey by recognising and making use of each other’s professional assets, actively seeking opportunities to work together for the benefit of learners, and by embracing inter-professional practice. Thus, achieving greatness through co-operation and collaboration.

The National Student Survey looks at institutions in a compartmentalised way, reinforcing the differences in roles and encouraging learners to look at and judge individual parts of the institution. A necessary evil in these days of league tables and data

analysis. However, with proactive co-operation and partnership between teaching and all support staff in this case, the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. If all work towards functioning as a collaborative, organised and consistent unit, bringing all the expertise of staff together and focusing on students in the round then teams might step outside some, if not all, of the barriers which might mitigate against them working together, and bring to bear a single view of how the experience of students at our institutions might be enhanced. Students deserve no less than staff at their very best as individuals but also as a community of likeminded professionals, delivering a high quality educational experience through mutuality not duality. As a John Biggs puts it in his model of 'constructive alignment':

"Teaching and learning take place in a whole system, which embraces classroom, departmental and institutional levels. A poor system is one in which the components are not integrated, and are not tuned to support high-level learning. In such a system, only the 'academic' students use higher-order learning processes. In a good system, all aspects of teaching and assessment are tuned to support high level learning, so that all students are encouraged to use higher-order learning processes" (Biggs, 2003, p. 13)

This philosophy is not about perceived status or lack of recognition of professional support staff or any diminution of the role of teaching colleagues. Both are as valuable as one another to students in different but totally interconnected ways. It is the strengthening of this interconnectivity that should be encouraged. To provide students with an educational journey in which they can perceive no 'joins' but one that is a smooth, coherent and uninterrupted experience, allowing them to flourish as individuals with guidance and support from a committed and collaborative staff.

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