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Abstract

The need for enhancing the student experience in tertiary education has been widely documented. It is generally agreed that students need to be more engaged with their own learning to achieve this. This paper takes an applied approach and examines some of the 'academic instruments' that are used in third level institutions that impact directly on the student experience and consequently their levels of engagement. For the purpose of this study, 'academic instruments' are examined under the following headings: Teamwork, Learning Management System, and Self-Directed Study.

Adopting a qualitative approach, the research explored these issues with a representative sample of students from one department in a third level college in Ireland.

The findings illustrate that student-centred approaches are key to engaging students and enhancing the overall quality of their college experience. Resulting from the empirical research are a number of interventions that when actioned, could result in a more motivated and engaged student population and consequently have the potential to improve student learning and the overall student experience. The changing needs of a diverse student population and their interaction with the learning environment must be understood fully to inform strategic decision making.

Key Words: Student Learning, Student Experience, Tertiary Education

Background to the Research

Temple *et* al. (2014) define the student experience as the totality of a student's interaction with the institution. According to Temple *et* al. (2014), the term student experience has multiple meanings, and the list of what it might include is almost endless. Despite this, the importance of students engaging in higher education and the need for enhancing the quality of the student experience is well researched and is increasingly recognised as a valuable research avenue (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015; Buultjens & Robinson, 2011). This focus has given rise to questions on how best to inspire and support students in taking greater interest in, and more active responsibility for, their learning (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015).

The features of tertiary education that can have a positive or negative impact on the learning experience of the student are many and varied. Primarily, however, they include: the environment where the learning takes place, social interactions, academic challenge and curriculum, assessment strategies, teaching methodologies, teamwork, learning management systems, and directed and self-directed study. The focus of this study is on the latter three features with teamwork, learning management systems and self-directed study explored through the empirical research.

According to Payne *et* al. (2004), teamwork (also referred to as group work) helps students to develop important skills and social interactions, as well as learn about various backgrounds, culture, beliefs, and attitudes. However, the group work experience also presents its own multi-faceted set of challenges. Although many students believe they can accomplish assignments better by themselves rather than in a group, instructors find that group work helps the students apply knowledge (Elgort *et* al., 2008). Wright and Lawson (2005) found that group work helped students feel that the class was smaller and encouraged them to come to class more often. Through their research they identified that students felt more invested in the course and in the class material, which promoted active learning in a large class environment.

A learning management system (LMS) is a software application for the administration, documentation, tracking, reporting and delivery of educational courses or training programs. An effective LMS helps the instructor deliver material to the students, administer tests and other assignments, track student progress, and manage record-keeping. Essentially, an LMS supports a range of uses, from supporting classes that meet in physical classrooms to acting as a platform for fully online courses, as well as several hybrid forms, such as blended learning and flipped classrooms (Szabo and Flescher, 2002). Utilizing the LMS to enhance the ability of students to seek answers quickly can empower them autonomously and allow them to take control through student-owned learning (Iqbal & Qureshi, 2011).

Self-directed learning (also known as problem based learning) is a process of learning in which learners function autonomously, taking responsibility for planning, initiating, and evaluating their own learning efforts. While self-directed learning is often equated with independent study, and with a select group of highly motivated, experienced learners; the adult education literature suggests that it is feasible and desirable to encourage self-directed learning among all learners, in a wide variety of settings (Wilcox, 1996). In recent years, there has been an increased focus on students undertaking more self-directed learning, to complement and support the traditional class room directed learning approach.

In the context of this background literature, the objective of this study is to identify the impact of these three key elements on the student experience, and consequently, on student levels of engagement, with a view to informing strategic decision making in tertiary education.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study. Qualitative data are rich and holistic, with strong potential for revealing complexity; such data provide thick descriptions that are vivid, nested in a real context and have a ring of truth that has impact (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The major feature of well-collected qualitative data is that they focus on naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings, so that the researcher has a strong handle on what real life is like. These features make qualitative data gathering ideally suited to the present study.

There are many methodological options available within the qualitative repertoire and the chosen methodology must be capable of addressing the research questions. Focus groups, because of the use of group interaction, produce data and insights that might be more difficult to access without such interaction, and also provide direct evidence of similarities

and differences in the participants' opinions and experiences (Morgan, 1997). The main characteristic of focus group research is the simultaneous involvement of a number of respondents in the research process to generate the data. The distinguishing feature of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that might be less accessible without the interaction found in a group (Morgan, 1988). Thus, a focus group can be described as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic or topics (Carson et al., 2001). The strength of focus groups is seen in their ability to generate insights into the sources of complex behaviours and motivation, enabling the researcher to learn how respondents talk and construct their own understanding about the phenomenon of interest.

Given these characteristics, focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate research method for this study. Four focus groups in total were conducted. Students from each of the years 1 – 4 were invited to participate in a focus group. The students were all studying in one department in an Institute of Technology. One focus group was conducted with students from each year; in that context the focus groups were homogenous, but were heterogeneous as they contained both males and females. Each focus group took on average one hour. The moderator used a semi-structured interview guide to ensure that areas of interest were covered, however, students were free to discuss other areas that they believed were relevant to the student experience. Each focus group was transcribed and the transcripts were analysed to reveal the research findings. Those findings are presented in the following sections.

As detailed earlier, the research paper centres around three key academic instruments and the findings pertaining to each are presented in the following sections.

Findings

The following sections present the empirical findings to this study.

Teamwork

Analysis of the data revealed many perspectives on the use of teams in the classroom. Primarily, however, these perspectives centred on choosing team members, the size of the group and resources necessary for effective teamwork. It is evident from the research findings that there was wide divergence of thoughts on teamwork and assessment, particularly, around group selection strategies. Some students had a preference for being appointed to the group by the lecturer, while others preferred to self-assign to groups.

For the first semester, it was better for the lecturers to pick out who you were with but from now on we should be choosing ourselves. You know people in your class now. (1st year student)

- *In first year it is good to be put in a group because you don't know anybody but in second year you know the people better and who will work and who you want to keep away from. (2nd year student)*

- *Working with people and seeing their different approaches is good. I was working with two Erasmus students and they had good information that helped me and I could help them in other ways. Their English wasn't the best. (3rd year student)*

- *I think it's good that if you don't know people in the class, in groups you will get to know different personalities and work with different people/groups. But I think that the assignment should be individually marked as opposed to a group mark, regardless of who you are with. (3rd year student)*

The fear that someone in the group would not do their fair share of work was evident, with concerns raised around the grading of group work. In cases where the work was given a group result, students expressed annoyance if the work load had not been fairly shared. In general, it emerged that students were in favour of marks being awarded individually. This feeling was particularly evident among 3rd and 4th years.

- *I think it should be up to the student themselves to pick groups. With some students, they may not turn up to class. Someone on a 1H may get stuck with someone that never shows up. They then get hindered by that group member. It's out of their own control. There needs to be a better way of monitoring participation in a group. Different lecturers use different ways, but I don't think many of them are effective (4th year student)*

- *The assignment should definitely be individually marked. (4th year student)*

Despite reservations such as these, the empirical findings suggest that in most cases teamwork is welcomed, and that students enjoy the experience of working with colleagues. A consensus emerged from the findings that four was the ideal number of students that should work in a group together.

- *We have only done one with four in the group but it's a nice number. (1st year student)*

- *I would say four is the ideal number. It's easier to control. (3rd year student)*

However, in keeping with the points raised earlier, students favoured the idea of individual marks for students as opposed to one overall mark.

- *Lecturers need to keep in mind it is not one big group working on a project it is four individual students who are submitting something together. Not everyone is going to share the same opinion. (3rd year student)*

When exploring the working of the groups in more detail, it emerged from the empirical research that in the majority of cases, communication within a group takes place virtually, for example, using group chats on different social media platforms. However, the need for a physical space to work together as a group over the course of the project emerged as important to the overall project outcome.

- *The study hubs are good for group work, it's good to get together but it's often difficult to get them. (1st year student)*

- *Study hubs are really good as it's so difficult to get access to a computer in college. Even if you could plug in your laptop somewhere it would help. (2nd year student)*

Importantly, however, it emerged from the findings that the timetable structure hindered the amount of time that a group could physically come together.

Our timetables were clashing and that was an absolute mess, it was brutal. (4th year student)

Students taking different electives, and from different class groups had different timetable commitments and so identifying a time where all students were free proved difficult. Naturally, this increased the amount of individual contributions to the project and reduced the amount of time actually spent working in teams.

Learning Management System

The LMS in use in the college in question is known as Blackboard. There are many aspects to this LMS that impact on the overall student experience, however the need for training and the availability of resources to ensure the effective use of the LMS, emerged as the most pertinent from the students' perspective.

From the research findings, there was widespread consensus that both staff and students would benefit from further training and education on the tools that an online learning management system offers. It was evident from the focus groups that the more basic tools on the system were being utilised, such as the feature to enable notes to be uploaded, however, the more interactive tools were not being exploited to their full potential.

I use it to submit projects and I use it to download notes. (2nd year student).

It was generally agreed that Blackboard has many excellent tools that would enhance the student experience, but students were of the opinion that, to truly benefit from the system, more education and training needed to be provided to both staff and students.

We want more of an understanding on how to use Blackboard and the different tools. We are given a brief view when we arrive but that's very early on, we didn't know what most of that stuff meant. (1st year student)

I don't think the lecturers are using Blackboard to its fullest capability. (1st year student)

Relevant to this point is the issue of resources, where the use of Blackboard can result in the students incurring a cost. The cost of printing and the availability of printing stations emerged as a significant hurdle to the use of Blackboard. When lecturers upload the notes to blackboard, there is a general expectation that those notes will be printed by students and brought to class. However, students encountered difficulties with this.

It depends on the module. For a module this semester the notes are on a pdf and it's a pain to print, as it is 7c a page and there are 35 pages and you can't condense it down because its pdf. (4th year student)

There aren't enough printing stations. (2nd year student)

I am lucky because I can use the DSS (Disability Support Services) services to print off my notes. (2nd year student)

Similar to the point made in relation to availability of study hubs, the availability of laptop space, desktops to access and printing locations arose. This resource issue further leads to difficulties for the students in having the notes printed in time for class. Exploring this in more detail, it emerged from the focus groups that students were frustrated around the way in which notes were released. Some lecturers put all their notes online at the beginning of the semester, some do so topic by topic, some do so after a topic has been covered in class, while others do so on a week by week basis. Interestingly there was no consensus among the students on when notes should be released for class.

It's also good to look ahead before class to see what you are going to be covering. You can also get results and it has all the information on the module that you need. (1st year student)

A certain lecturer is good, in fact he is excellent at putting stuff up on Blackboard whilst he might not put up let's say what we covered in class on a Monday until later in the week because he wants to grab our attention and wants us to think, learn and listen. He wants us to write down our own notes. I think that's good but sometimes if it's a really long report or PowerPoint that he's reading off of its good to have some notes in front of you and then he might give additional handouts in class. I do think that is good because the people who don't go don't get it. There are pros and cons to it I suppose. (4th year student)

It would be nice if the lecturers were on board and decide one way of using it. Currently it varies from lecturer to lecturer and is very sporadic. (2nd year student)

I'd rather not look at the headings for notes by topic, I'd rather look at the weeks. Week 1 and week 2 etc. (3rd year student)

Different students had different perspectives about what was the most suitable use of Blackboard for note delivery. However, it emerged that in general, students would benefit from more clarity on the use of blackboard for notes, and perhaps more consensus among lecturers on a programme on the appropriate use of blackboard for that particular programme.

Self-Directed Study

The students were asked about their understanding of self-directed study. This is a term that appears on all the module descriptors and so should be one that they are familiar with. Interestingly, there existed a lack of understanding on the term self-directed study across all four years. The students expressed that the term should be explained fully in class and reinforced throughout each year.

It sounds like something that lecturers pulled out of their heads. (2nd year student)

Yeah it should be on Blackboard and explained in class. (2nd year student)

From the student's perspective, this discussion highlights the importance of student friendly terminology. One participant suggested the term self-directed should be changed to 'study time'. The term self-directed study is not regarded as student friendly.

It isn't student friendly – anything with the self in it I stay away from. (3rd year student)

Change the name to something else, to something like project work. (3rd year student)

The findings indicate that if the term were more accessible to students, then they might be more likely to engage with it. Interestingly, even where awareness of the term self-directed study existed, there appeared to be a lack of interest to engage in self-directed study over the course of a semester.

- *No I don't think it would be of any benefit. If you're told you should be studying x amount of hours you're not going to do it. It will turn you off. (2nd year student)*

- *We do enough class time in a week. (1st year student)*

- *I think it's a behavioural thing...I know that you get people leaving everything to the last minute. It's like a learned behaviour... (4th year student)*

- *Are you suggesting that for 2nd year business we should be studying over 20hrs a week? (2nd year student)*

In addition to lack of understanding of the term, from the students' perspective, the amount of hours assigned to self-directed study on the module descriptor is unrealistic. This indicates the necessity to reassess both the term and the number of hours assigned to it on the module descriptor.

Discussion

The following sections discuss the research findings in the context of the relevant literature in the area, allowing for recommendations for strategic decision making to be made.

Overall, students considered that teamwork was a valuable learning experience enabling them to work with students from diverse backgrounds. The findings have emphasised some of the group work challenges, including group formation, management of group tasks, group size and resources. This list is not exhaustive, but does highlight the need for more investigation into these important issues that influence the outcome of group assessments.

The research indicated that the students were concerned with 'free riding', a concept that appears frequently in the literature on group work. The problem of the non-performing group member who reaps the benefits of the accomplishments of the remaining group members with little or no cost to him/herself has been well documented in the literature (Morris and Hayes, 1997), and is reflected here. It emerges from the research that an established and agreed peer-to-peer and a self-assessment process should ideally be in place, and should be standardised throughout the programme of study. In this way, the potential for students to "free ride" and benefit from such activity is reduced.

The focus groups yielded the finding that four members to a group appeared to be the best practice approach to group size. Traditionally, two and three represented the ideal group size, however, four appears the preferred choice amongst this cohort of students. This builds on existing literature where groups of four or five members (Davis, 1993) and groups of three or four members (Csernica et al., 2002) are suggested as appropriate.

The focus group findings illustrate clearly that the students believe that more physical space is required for both individual and group work. One recommendation would be to evaluate the needs of faculty and students for learning spaces that bring together print and electronic resources with learning tools that assist in collaborative learning. In addition to this recommendation, and perhaps in conjunction with it, it emerges from the research that there is a need for more effective use of the LMS. Currently, only a limited amount of tools are being utilised by lecturers, and from the research findings, the students would welcome enhanced use of additional tools.

Feedback from the research emphasises the need for additional training for both staff and students around their use of the LMS. It may be that instructors are more familiar with transmitting information and are less familiar with creating computer-based interactions such as synchronous or asynchronous discussions or creating quizzes with feedback for each answer as suggested by Malikowski et al., (2007) than they are with using other tools on the system. In this case, lecturing staff may need time to develop different ways of working within technological systems and may require more training. The research suggests a more standardised approach to the use of Blackboard needs to be implemented.

The transition phase from second-level to third-level education provides an opportunity to influence the behaviour of tertiary students towards taking ownership of their learning process. Some strategies that may assist in this transition phase might include providing study skills classes and classes in critical thinking. More specifically, self-directed learning's emphasis on personal autonomy, personal responsibility, and personal growth, embodies some of the most fundamental principles of higher education, and is something that needs to be presented to the students from first year onwards. The research indicates that the term self-directed study should change to something more accessible for students, and that a more realistic time period should be associated with it, that is reflective of the modern students' commitments outside of college.

Conclusions

From the analysis of the findings, it is concluded that there is an opportunity to influence strategic decision making in tertiary education. With an informed student perspective, the research indicates the need to affect some changes in policy at a management level. Strategies around the use of teamwork need to be developed, where there are clear guidelines for both staff and students on the composition and size of groups, and the workload distribution and grading strategies for the group. A standardised approach to the use of the LMS needs to be adopted. Accepting that a "one size fits all approach" is unlikely to be appropriate, consideration needs to be given to this at a module, or at a programme, level. Keeping in mind the modern students' commitments outside of college, to home life, social life or work life, strategies need to be developed around time management and learning approaches at tertiary level. This needs to begin in first year and be followed through to fourth year.

It is also concluded from the research that there is a significant opportunity to develop an app within the institution. The app could have a wide range of features, but at a fundamental level it might assist students in engaging with their programme of study in a way that enhances

their learning experience. The app could empower the students' autonomy, and allow them to take control through student-owned learning. It would have the potential to help students to manage their time better, which would result in more engagement in self-directed study. More efficient use of time on the part of the student is required to ensure they are truly engaging in the learning experience. The app could serve as a platform for the distribution of notes, class material and dialogue, both with the lecturer but also with other students in the class. This should give students more ownership and enhance the quality of the student's experience. More research is required to investigate how such an app might look and feel. However, in such a rapidly changing landscape, the need to interface with and respond to the changing needs of the student population is necessary. Resulting from this would be the potential to improve the quality of the students' unique learning experience, in a way that is real and relevant to them.

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