De Montfort University

OUTSTANDING TEACHING AND EXCEPTIONAL LEARNING IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

Research project
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

This project sought to find answers to one of the most pressing questions currently facing the university – and indeed the higher education sector more broadly in contemporary Britain. How can we maintain and enhance high standards of teaching and learning when student participation is widening and resources are decreasing? We sought to find answers that reflected the different contexts in which teaching and learning occur – subjects, levels and environments.

The research evidence was derived from semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 21 academic staff from across the university who had already been identified as gifted teachers. The interviews explored key themes that had been derived from a scoping study in which teachers identified key challenges they face and how they respond to them. These themes were teaching increasingly diverse and large student groups, keeping the curriculum up to date, assessment practices, helping students manage transitions, and how the institution can help teachers do better with less. Finally interviewees were asked to give examples of exceptional learning and the factors to which these could be attributed.

Responding to the increasing size and diversity of the student body

A wide range of different processes and techniques are adopted by teachers as they seek to respond flexibly and creatively to the increasing size and diversity of student groups. For some, teaching increasingly becomes a performance art as they try to engage the attention of large numbers and encourage more interactive learning. Collaborative and team teaching and the sharing of practice are becoming more commonplace. Teachers move from didactic methods to encourage more autonomous learning as group sizes diminish or students gain in confidence as they progress through the different phases of the programme. Specialist resources and student support services are enlisted to help students with particular learning difficulties.

It is clear there is no single blueprint for responding to the challenge of ‘mixed ability’ teaching. More creative approaches to both teaching and to assessment are being adopted. Personal tutoring has been introduced in some programmes as a way of monitoring and managing student progress. E-learning is used in imaginative ways to reach large numbers of students and to create a learning community among students (especially those who are dispersed through distance learning), and between students, teachers and

others, such as employers, who have a stake in what and how students learn. Academic managers are encouraging teachers to share the lessons of their practice so that all may benefit.

Keeping the curriculum up to date

The curriculum is kept up to date by a combination of factors: teachers using their own research and that of others, undertaking continuous professional development by attending conferences where attention is paid as much to teaching and learning as to developments in the subject, and through employer engagement. Increasingly sector-specific employers are engaged in continuous discussion with academic staff about what is taught and how it is learned to ensure that the curriculum enhances employability. Teachers are also in constant negotiation with professional bodies to assure academic freedom and the development of intellectual curiosity in students while responding to the requirements of the world of work. Securing subject relevance and the interplay of theory and practice are on-going tasks, particularly in more vocational subjects.

Developing assessment processes

Teachers use assessment both to help students develop as autonomous learners and to check that intended learning outcomes are not only achieved but being applied. The assessment of the application of knowledge and skills is not only critical to countering plagiarism, but in helping students demonstrate to potential employers that they can make good use of what they know and can do in the work place.

Increasing use is made of formative assessment as a means of engaging students in reflecting on their development as learners. Technology is also used to develop assessment practices: Wikis, Blogs, Blackboard and Skype are all helpful tools when assessing and supervising students. Facebook accounts are set up to encourage critical commentary and feedback on students' work by teachers, employers and other students. Indeed there is a trend of more peer review and assessment. Peer marking is proving useful in getting students to engage more meaningfully with feedback. By making assessment criteria explicit and ensuring that students themselves understand and apply them, the grade or the mark becomes less important than the reasons for giving it. Overall, there has been a discernible shift to assessing the process of learning as much as the final product itself.

Supporting students through transitions

Helping students cope with transitions into, through and out of the university and into work is challenging. Setting out clear and explicit expectations from the very start – or even beforehand at school or college – is critical. This includes clarifying expectations about how students will learn and the degree of responsibility they will be required to take on. Some programmes are planned so that students experience an increasing gradient of learner autonomy as they progress, with higher levels of interactivity in the second year than in the first, for example. The support systems provided by the university such as services provided by the Transitions team, the library and CLaSS as well as personal tutoring play an important part in student success.

How the university can help

Interviewees reported that the university has already taken steps incorporating principles of flexibility and collaboration so as to maintain and improve students' learning experiences. Academic staff themselves are taking the initiative in exploring the best use of resources, including their own time, and in finding ways of best disseminating information and good practice. They believe that the university could help even more by giving greater recognition and value to excellence in teaching and encouraging staff to experiment, be innovative and take risks; and investing more in the uses of technology where appropriate, and in training and developing staff in the use of technology to enhance teaching, learning, assessment and the monitoring and tracking of students.

Excellent teaching is founded on a combination of the qualities (inherent and acquired) of students themselves, programme design, teaching methods and the judicious use of additional support.

The evidence base for this research comes mainly from the testimony of teachers. This seems to be corroborated by the few examples of evidence incidentally acquired from the students themselves. To gain a fuller picture of what constitutes outstanding teaching and excellent learning in different contexts and challenging times, a follow-up enquiry that highlights and captures the student voice would be both useful and timely.

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SECTION 1 – PROJECT RATIONALE

Background

This research project was initiated jointly by the Academic Professional Development Unit (APDU), the Department of Academic Quality (DAQ) and Library Services and was funded to run from February 2010 to July 2010.

There were two key factors that shaped the project: firstly, higher education (HE) in general is now operating within a political climate of constant change, including decreasing resources and increasing student numbers. Consequently, it becomes ever more important to find ways of delivering high quality teaching and support for learning which are effective, efficient and appropriate to the needs of both the student and the curriculum, and additionally that are adaptable to suit a wide range of learning contexts. This project aimed to discover approaches, techniques and good practice examples in teaching and supporting learning that are being used within and across the university that are responding successfully to the current and likely future context of higher education in the UK.

Secondly, emerging conclusions from a small piece of research being undertaken in APDU around perceptions of excellent teaching suggest that underlying the different teaching activities and environments is the relationship that is built up between the teacher and the learner, how each relate to the discipline, vocational area or profession, and the kind of communication that is engaged in. The different activities and environments require different kinds of positioning of teacher and learner, and different ways of communicating. This relates both to undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In this climate of decreasing resources we need to explore this more – which principles hold true, whatever the activity, environment or level, and which are particular to different contexts.

Project outputs

This report forms one of the outputs from the research project. It focuses on lessons learnt about the challenges to teaching and supporting learning that academic staff members feel they are currently facing, along with how these challenges are being met within the university. It is intended to help inform future policy on teaching and learning for the benefit of both students and staff.

The second output is a web-based resource with which staff can engage to identify examples of good “classroom” practice and ways in which these

examples may be transferred and adopted in their own practice. This resource is still in development and is likely to encompass some or all of the following: text-based case-studies, recorded interviews, ‘talking heads’, podcasts.

SECTION 2 – METHODOLOGY

There were two stages to the data collection process for this project:

Stage 1

An initial scoping study was carried out in which data was gathered and analysed from academic colleagues within the university about the challenges currently being faced and the ways they are responding to them. An email was sent to Heads of Departments, Programme Leaders, Teaching Fellows (TFs), Vice Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award (VCDTA) winners and Chairs of Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees from across the university asking the following two questions:

1 What are the key challenges your area of responsibility is currently facing with regard to, for example, curriculum design, teaching and assessing and supporting student learning?

2 How are you intending to respond to these challenges?

24 responses were received. These were thematically analysed and thematic maps produced. Using an iterative methodology, these maps were then given to two different groups of Programme Leaders at subsequent meetings for their review and additions. The maps were refined after each meeting to incorporate any new data. This process was repeated at a TFs event, from which the final maps were produced (see Appendices A and B).

Stage 2

The final versions of the maps produced in stage 1 were used to direct the second stage of the project, which involved semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of academic staff. The significant themes emerging about the aspects perceived as most challenging by academic staff were identified and used to create the interview questions. These themes were:

- The increasing numbers of students entering HE
- Keeping the subject/curriculum/resources up to date
- Designing assessment strategies that ensure quality and rigour for students, but are feasible for staff workloads
- The preparedness of students to transition into and through the HE experience

Consequently, the following six overarching interview questions were devised:

- How do you as a teacher in your teaching and in your role respond to having an increasingly diverse and large student population?

- How do you make sure you keep your curriculum up to date, responding to (a) current developments in your subject (b) the changing needs and expectations of employers (c) the requirements of professional bodies, while continuing to engage and motivate students?

- How do you ensure that your assessment practices contribute not only to students' development as autonomous learners but also to improving your own teaching and the programme?

- How in your role do you account for and enable students to manage different transitions into, through and out of the HE experience?

- In this time of decreasing resources, have you any examples, or suggestions about how you, your team, the wider university can maintain, or even improve the learning experiences of your students?

- Can you give a couple of examples of students undertaking exceptional learning in your programme? How do you account for them?

The purposive sample was made up of academic staff from across the university with particular emphasis on VCDTA winners, Research Informed Teaching Award (RITA) winners, and TFs; the rational being that this group of colleagues have experience of, and success within, a wide range of teaching and learning contexts. The thematic maps also directed the research team to particular areas of the university from which the sample should be drawn.

Interview sample

21 members of staff were interviewed in the second stage of the project. The sample incorporated all faculties and a variety of different academic roles.

Faculty breakdown:

Faculty:	No. of interviewees:
Art and Design	2
Business and Law	5
Health and Life Sciences	7
Humanities	4
Technology	3
Total	21

Role breakdown:

Role:	No. of interviewees:
Senior Lecturer	7
Principal Lecturer	6
Lecturer	1
Unit Manager within a Department	1
Faculty Collaborative Co-ordinator	1
Professor	1
Reader	1
Associate Head of School	1
Head of School	1
Head of Department	1
Total	21

Due to the varied nature of roles and for consistency within the report, the term ‘interviewee’ is used when referring to members of the sample in the following ‘Findings’ section.

SECTION 3 - FINDINGS

Q1: How do you as a teacher in your teaching and in your role respond to having an increasingly large and diverse student population?

Introduction

Over the last few years the size and diversity of the student population have both increased significantly. This has posed new and developing challenges for teaching staff as they have sought to maintain and enhance the standards of teaching and learning. In this section we set out some of the ways in which they have responded. This includes teaching larger groups interactively so as to maximise student engagement and participation; adopting collaborative teaching approaches; teaching groups of different abilities and social diversity; personal tutoring; monitoring and managing student progress; using e-learning; and trying to create a sense of a learning community in the context of increasing heterogeneity, scale and complexity .

Teaching large groups interactively

For most teachers this means teaching larger groups of students and requires them to adopt different teaching strategies or different approaches and styles.

> "I can teach up to 150 students at a time. It makes interactive teaching, for example, inviting answers to open questions, something of a challenge. The same skills are needed however many you are teaching. I realise you have to 'perform' in order to build rapport. Students vote with their feet if you are simply providing Powerpoint presentations.
>
> If we are going to have large groups we are going to have to 'entertain' our students, ad lib and get them engaged in stimulating activities, the kinds of things you cannot achieve through Blackboard. You have to understand your audience and staff have to be aware of their groups and 'know the market'. I find myself drawing on my previous experience as a pantomime performer". (A O'S)

Another teacher seeks to engage large groups of students directly with the material:

> "I try to involve the students, not stand at front and just talk……. I try to break down the lecture, give lots of little tasks to do throughout the lecture. Sometimes they have six lectures in one day. I try to get them

> engaged with the work –give them tasks to think about this, or explain this to someone else for two minutes – and that tends to keep them more engaged.
>
> I'm also quite robust about challenging anything that I see – in a firm but friendly way. Sometimes get students to move, for example if they're on the back row and I can see they're up to something nefarious, I get them to move down to engage with the material". (KP)

Collaborative teaching

Some departments have chosen to adopt more collaborative teaching as a response to the larger group sizes. In the Drama degree there have been 146 first year single and joint honours degree students.

> "The lecture theatre is a wide theatre with two screens in it, which does mean there can be a split focus if you are in the middle. When I've lectured in there I have tried moving the students so that they're sitting in two of the blocks more tightly together rather than being spread out. One of the things I'm aware of is that it's a fifty-minute lecture slot and there are a lot of students so it's more difficult to play with the space than when you are in a studio space in a three-hour session with a small group of students.
>
> One of the things we did this year was that two of us took the last lecture……that lecture was fun to do and there was more of a sense of dialogue between the two members of staff, which enhanced that sense of dialogue in the space. That's something that I think we might think about more next year". (EP)

Initially the large teaching group seemed daunting but the response of team teaching – in the case that follows across modules - has brought additional benefits to teaching staff and ultimately to the students

> "It's quite easy to be negative when thinking about large student numbers. In an ideal world it would be great to have smaller classes as there would be more potential for individual contact. But realistically and pragmatically, one of the things that has happened by having large groups is that the three modules I teach on are all team taught. So there is that sense of collaborating whilst teaching, of sharing feedback, and sharing ideas about sessions before sessions but also having that debriefing afterwards about how things went". (EP)

Greater collaboration has been the preferred response in the Law School to larger numbers of more diverse students. The Head of School has tried to create a team culture believing that teachers and students benefit from teachers sharing ideas and learning from practice that makes a difference.

> "In one of the Departments in the School we have monthly team meetings and these are well attended; that's because we make the meetings interesting and worthwhile. We have now a very supportive culture. We also have termly away days and there is always an agenda and at each meeting we encourage people to disseminate good practice – anything you've seen, done or would like to try"? (SP)

Good practice is shared in response to some of the trends occurring in the Department of Applied Social Sciences

> "I'm running plagiarism workshops in May for the whole school. They'll be some input and delivery from me, but also small and large group work and in the small group work I'm going to make sure people from different divisions are working together, so they can share good practice and difficulties and struggles.
>
> It's hard in institutions to share practice. We have around 30 programmes and people get so busy that it's difficult to find opportunities to share". (BS)

Teaching groups of different abilities

The challenge of teaching large groups is made more so when there are students in the class with different abilities. Providing content that engages all the students simultaneously requires subtlety, forethought and improvisation.

> "The way I tackle this is by teaching different stages. I do this by using what I call an ideas ball. While the 'bottom-end' students are getting to grips with new information and insights, I bounce in other higher-level stuff aimed at the more able students which goes over the heads of the 'bottom-end' students. I use one Powerpoint slide for all and in talking to it might add on a bit for the 'top end' or might then pop in another slide for the higher-achievers…I have to improvise a lot. I use Powerpoint because it gives structure but then I can go off piste"**.** (FW)

Another teacher reports having a

> **"**range of students from some who are very academically accomplished and some who may not have studied for years. For me, I try to focus on what they have in common with one another, and this is their practice and their enthusiasm to do that as well as they can". (RC)

Another teacher currently lectures about 120 first year students and is anticipating that number to double next year when the first year module will be used on all the undergraduate programmes in the department. Her response is to adopt different methods for different year groups. With the first year groups she stands in front of the class and talks at them and occasionally gets them to do interactive activities. In the second year class sizes are much smaller (about 30) and taught in a flat classroom [rather than a tiered theatre]. This makes interactive teaching considerably easier. The large groups present practical problems which make it much harder to adopt a more flexible and imaginative style:

> "If you ask them to talk it takes five minutes, and you want to stop them and move on because it takes longer for them to settle down. On the one hand it's frustrating because you want to move on, but on the other it's good because they're engaged and talking…but the massive lecture theatre makes it more difficult for me to go round and talk to them. It's more challenging to turn them into activities where all the students will learn something because it's easier for someone to hide or not understand what they should be doing and so not do anything. It's harder to be a facilitator in that environment. The size of the group has inhibited my innovation" (LM)

The challenge of taking in students with a wide range of academic qualifications and abilities on entry has prompted various responses. Some of these are whole-institution or systemic, others are more particular to departments or particular programmes.

For example, the Department of Informatics has enrolled students who are more diverse in age and ethnic background. An Access to IT course targeted at women has enhanced the gender balance. The varying levels of confidence of students on entry has proved demanding. Moreover, some students have particular learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia while others present behavioural challenges. Indeed 38 per cent of the university's students with autism and aspergism are in this department. Initially the response was 'random and unsystematic' and strategies included extra time and attention paid by staff to individual students. Now material is on placed on

Blackboard a week before the class so students can download them in any format they want.

For students who have sight problems the discussion threads on the VLE are inaccessible and handouts have had to be produced on cream paper that is 70 per cent more expensive than white. On a particular database module, 10 per cent of the 165 students were registered as having special learning requirements, on account of which phase tests became increasingly difficult to administer. Extra accommodation, staff and equipment had to be used. In providing effective responses to student needs, extra costs were incurred.

This all increases the burden on front-line staff. The use of technological applications (e.g. Wikis and Blogs) is also being challenged. Blackboard is not suitable in all respects for unsighted students. Some material has had to be converted into a Word document so that these students can take part in VLE-based discussion.

Where students may not have sufficient mathematical skills staff find themselves providing extra input and time. The back-up of additional provision of study skills provided by the support centre in the Library has been used and has proved invaluable on some courses. However, not all students take up this offer of extra support because they see it as extra work.

Specialist student support services are also signposted when students are recognised as needing extra help of a different kind – e.g. counselling.

In the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences a biomedical science programme has increased from 60 students to four combined courses amounting to 140. One response has been to cover less material in a lecture; and having discussions that are relevant to student experience. Bespoke assignments and resources for the different groups of students are put on Blackboard:

> “I may have six different programmes of students in my sessions, so there will be six different assessment strands. That’s how I make it diverse and different for them. It is a burden and a challenge as you have to think of six different assessment strategies. It can also be difficult getting the level right as we have experienced scientists at different grade levels from laboratories. It’s very much a learning curve at the moment dealing with massive numbers and diverse groups.

> It's diverse in terms of professions, but also culturally, nationally, internationally. Many students come through clearing, so there is a range of achievement.
>
> Some students are already in professions and come in on day release. Others are full-time students. That makes it difficult. Generally the ones in employment are the better students. With teaching, it's quite difficult to address all audiences, it's more of a challenge. Some students will be more theoretical and some more applied". (VR)

Pragmatic responses have been adopted by different departments and teachers in response to the burgeoning numbers of students entering programmes. It is clear that teaching techniques that were suitable when teaching modules to 30 students do not work for 100. There are implications, for example, for the timings and types of assessment (see Q3 below). Although there may be good pedagogical reasons for individual assessments there is not enough time when covering 120 students.

There is no single blueprint for teaching or assessing larger groups. The challenge of teaching and assessing larger groups is being met in a number of ways; these include teaching to different stages or what used to be referred to as 'mixed ability teaching', stretching some and supporting others in the same session; working to what students have in common; and drawing on performance skills. More collaborative and systematic responses include the use of Blackboard; sharing good practice formally and informally; and co-teaching. By working together and sharing good practice, teachers are finding their own solutions that fit the subjects and topics being taught and do not compromise on standards of teaching and learning.

Responding to social diversity

Teachers have also used different strategies in responding to the social diversity of student groups now entering the university. The Law Department called on the Academic Professional Development Unit to establish a programme on cultural diversity so staff could think more deeply about the kinds of issues that could come up when teaching students from a wide range of backgrounds. On a Housing Studies course there is a module which is concerned with sociology and politics and the students undertake a group project that encourages them to consider who they are and how their ideas have been formed. It is made explicit that students treat each other with respect. In a Masters programme for youth and community workers 20 per cent come from Black and Minority Ethnic groups. Here the key to successful teaching and learning is small group work within the larger group, keeping an

eye on who is participating and who is not, making sure that people are confident in moving beyond their comfort zone. Anti-oppressive practice is a theme that runs through the programme and in an all the modules and assignments students have to show how they have taken account of diversity in their practice.

Teachers in the School of Applied Social Sciences are encouraged to think about developing particular strategies:

> "There have been big increases in some of our programmes, some have tripled in numbers over a period of three to four years. One of the difficulties staff have had is to try and take the same techniques they used to deliver a module to 30 students to deliver it to 100 students. That just doesn't work, things need to be thought of differently, e.g. time for assessment, style of assessment. For example, one module had individual presentations as an assessment method, and there might be good pedagogical reasons for that, but you cannot do it with 120 students – it's just too time consuming. Sometimes staff find it frustrating to see that they have to stop doing something that was well designed for pragmatic reasons. The message that we have to get out is that it's not about diminishing quality or cutting corners, it's about being pragmatic and thinking about things that work equally well but is more appropriate for the numbers we have". (BS)

In Education Studies the diverse needs of the students are recognised and differentiated approaches are seen as crucial if the student is going to make the most of the learning opportunities provided:

> "What we want is for learners to have ownership, to wake up learning on the inside, win their hearts and minds. We have to devise different pedagogical activities for the different learners we have; we need to put in different kinds of support. We need to build in reflection to enable analysis of progress by students themselves and by tutors. Differentiated reading is a further example, taking account of the range of prior knowledge and experience that people bring with them." (SY)

Personal tutoring

In the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences there has recently been a great increase in the provision of nursing places. Some of these have been taken up by students who find independent learning too much of a challenge and expect to be 'spoon-fed'. In response, one lecturer has set up a personal tutor system.

> "In nursing we have a touchy feely approach to patients, and for some academics it's hard not to have that approach with students. We're trying to increase student independence but saying to students 'come speak to me, how are you doing?' is fostering dependence. So across the faculty I've structured a personal student support mechanism so students have a clear idea of what a personal tutor does for them and what they do for their personal tutor. It gives direction from day one to students coming with no understanding of what higher education is and sets out expectations of what they're going to receive. It's also important for equity of provision – we have over 1000 nursing students and 90 members of staff. So if they have a structure to say you will be expected to do this and your personal tutor will do this, there is some equity of experience and hopefully quality of experience too. (AM).

A further innovation in nursing studies has been the development and use of a prediction tool – factors drawn from evidence that are a kind of early-warning of attrition – at different stages of the students' progress through the programme. This has helped the team of nurse teachers support and develop the large numbers of students coming into the university with an increasingly wide range of backgrounds, abilities and expectations.

Monitoring and managing student progress

Large numbers of students in different programmes across the university makes it harder for teachers to have sustained face-to-face contact with their students and keep a watchful eye on their progress. It requires extra vigilance to spot signs or symptoms of students struggling to stay on track. Absenteeism, for example, has to be nipped in the bud.

In the Pharmacy department a lot of time is spent in the first year

> "chasing things up by, for example, sending e-mails to students to see why they are not at lecture. It's not really my job but something I do because it worries me when they don't come, and I think if you can catch them early enough and they realise it's not optional to come to classes, then it might save some of them…….I think it's sad when we get to end of year one and we lose students, because our assessment regulations are quite tough, so it's sad if a student has been a bit immature or hasn't appreciated the effort they need to put in and they're devastated at the end of the year. It takes a lot of time but I think it's worth it…..also, I think the students get to know that I do keep an eye, so by second year everybody comes". (KP)

It is very difficult to monitor the development of students who are spread around the country and learning at a distance, especially when the numbers increase hugely and suddenly. When asked to teach an intake of 300 probation officers, the Department of Community and Criminal Justice introduced regional co-ordinators and set out accessibly in the student handbook the relevant contacts for students for different aspects of the programme.

Use of e-learning

This same department has made extensive use of e-learning, for example Blackboard**,** to reach and teach its growing number of students but, on their own admission, not as imaginatively as they could have:

> "We have tended to use Blackboard in a rather boring way - mainly text-based. We used it mainly for online debates which are fun and work very well for some people. Here's an example: we divide them into Blackboard groups of about 10-15, each topic is moderated. There's a four week period when they're covering a particular module, so in my module for example I ask a question like 'do we live in a punitive society?', and there is a rota as to who has the responsibility to start that discussion, and then others will respond at a time that suits them. This is good for them as many have significant commitments, so to be able to choose the time of their response is important to them. As moderator I'll dip in from time to time with questions like 'that's a good point, have you considered this…?', and the debate evolves in that way.
>
> The training regime is about to change, and this might be an opportunity to see if there are other ways of doing things that are more imaginative and interactive. There is a lot of good stuff that we put on Blackboard, but we recognise that it is mainly text-based and that's not the preferred way of learning for many people." (RC)

Blackboard is also used to provide a three-year holistic shell for the 50 (increased from 20-30) students doing imaging and communication design as part of their degree in Game Art.

> "This allows the 1st year students to look at the modules of the 2nd and 3rd year students. And it means that in subsequent years more advanced students can go back and look at modules or parts of modules they did earlier continually reflecting on previous tutorials,

> projects and self assessing their individual learning journey. Students can now learn 24/7/52 weeks a year, bringing a lot of flexibility. We can recap on learning and the faster learners can move onto 2nd year tutorials and learning materials early. Students are required to constantly deconstruct their workings and assess how to make it better. Each project will not be drawn or modelled once but many times. This ethos means you can get your '10 bad models' – which everybody does - out of the way early and critically analyse the visual and technical aesthetics of each piece of work. The three-year holistic Blackboard shell has supported this ethos and seems to create better autonomous learning". (CW).

In another part of the university a lecturer has responded to the larger numbers of students she teaches by putting podcasts on Blackboard. These are particularly useful when students enrol later.

> "I'm gradually going round everything I do to make sure there is a podcast version. It's a quick and dirty record live in the lecture, I'm not doing it separately at home. The faculty e-learning co-ordinator has helped immensely as he's helped me see how to make podcasts effective and how to release them at certain times. You try and learn as much as you can from other people". (VR)

A lecturer who stresses the importance of building in reflection as part of the learning process says:

> "I've got them all blogging – writing reflectively. They are doing this across the ability spectrum. I give them opening sentences, for example, "This week I learned…" "The thing I most enjoyed about this session was…" "This made me think, made me wonder…" I have gone from the descriptive to reflective. 'Top-end' learners become reflective much more quickly. I take the blogs as they are written even if they use appalling grammar. If they have A levels they have been taught how to pass exams not how to think. The whole course is designed to get them to think and blogs help a lot. From reading them I can see that particularly (but by no means only) for the 'bottom-end' achievers the seminars provoke more thoughts than the lectures, but lectures, especially the video clips in them, do this as well". (FW)

Learning agreements

Diverse students inevitably come to the university with highly differentiated expectations of what their experience in higher education will be like.

Learning agreements and learning contracts have been introduced in some areas in order to deal with this and make explicit and better understood what students can expect from staff and staff from students. These are thought to be particularly helpful when recruiting international students who are often sponsored by governments and employers and may have very fixed and unrealistic ideas about how they will learn in a 21st century higher education institution handling a hugely increased intake of students.

In the Faculty of Business and Law they have developed learning agreements in response to students increasingly seeing themselves as consumers and threatening litigation or demanding fee reductions if and when they fail their degree. But the Faculty is not sure whether they are

> "worth the paper they are written on….whether they have any value. We are more conscious of following all our obligations for teaching and assessment. The downside is it restricts creativity and flexibility." (JP)

In Education Studies the strategy has been to adopt a learning contract in which

> "the student identifies their own learning needs; and an important part of the process is the support services – e.g. within faculty we have academic support on essay-writing, time management, referencing, etc. And there is university-wide support. There is good take-up by students. The impact of this support depends on the timeliness with which the support is brought in.
>
> Formative assessment and close monitoring are crucial. Identifying blocks and enablers to learning is part of the process, part of the broader dialogue that students have with their peers and with staff. It's about creating a learning community". (SY)

In summary

This sense of creating a learning community – or a whole host of smaller learning communities – is pervasive in an institution comprising a large number of highly diverse students and providing such a wide range of programmes. Differentiation – or personalisation to employ the current buzz-word – is widely seen as the most fitting response. It can be and is expressed in several ways; through adopting more interactive, inclusive and collaborative styles of teaching, the provision of additional, specialist support, personal tutoring, the use of technological applications, and learning agreements and contracts.

It is evident that there is no single blueprint for responding to the challenges of extra numbers and greater diversity. Teachers are proving adept at devising and developing these different strategies and approaches that suits the subject, the students, their own preferred style of teaching in the fast-moving policy context for higher education. Moreover, they are willing to share the lessons of their experiences. It takes time to think through these approaches and try them out; and time is something that teachers have less of as the resources at their disposal are inexorably stretched.

Q2: How do you make sure you keep your curriculum up to date, responding to (a) current developments in your subject (b) the changing needs and expectations of employers (c) the requirements of professional bodies, while continuing to engage and motivate students?

Introduction

Effective teachers keep on top of their subject and ensure that the curriculum – content, methods and assessment – reflects changes taking place not only in the subject itself as more become known about it but also in its applications, particularly to the world of work which is the intended next destination of many of the students in the university. In this section we show how this is being done within the university through teachers conducting their own original research as well as learning from that of others; by attending to their own professional development; by engaging with employers and with professional bodies in different ways; by making the subject relevant to their students and drawing on their experience; and by creating triangulation and dialogue between the key partners in the educational enterprise.

Research and scholarship

Several teachers conduct their own original research as well as keep up-to-date with research conducted by others. Through their scholarship they seek to ensure they are at the cutting-edge of developments in their subject. In the Law Department a research committee has been established and is well attended. Efforts are made to bring teaching and research colleagues together to show that both are valued; as is the interaction between them. In Informatics there are a small number of Knowledge Transfer Projects (KTPs) that provide opportunities to conduct short-term research projects with the industry.

In the Faculty of Humanities, indeed in the whole university, English is a top-scoring department as far as research is concerned:

> "We're really proud of that. We've got a lot to offer and it would be a terrible shame if we didn't teach to our research strengths. And that's what students are attracted to as well when they come here. One of their criticisms of us is that we don't make enough of it in our publicity". (DC)

In Business and Law, globalisation is a subject that lends itself to current debates:

> "I try to encourage students to look at the impact of the subject on themselves – make the subject matter relevant to them and make it a live issue. This gets a positive response. My own academic research involves talking to employers in the sector and I try to feed this into my teaching, to make it live and relevant to the students. I try to alert students to the changing context of the world. That's what employers want nowadays – people who can think and make connections, rather than those with just the skills set". (GL)

Professional development

Another way of staying in touch with current thinking is to attend conferences and seminars. Some travel great distances to do so, for example to San Francisco to learn about the latest innovations in Game Art. Taking part in research seminars and being part of international networks are also important. In teaching professionals in the public services – housing, community justice, youth and community work - it is important for staff to attend national events and regional forums. In some subjects, such as globalisation, where change is a constant, frequent visits to web sites are essential.

In some subject areas, including Historical and Social Studies, subject conferences which used to be principally concerned with developments in content (what is known and taught) are now as preoccupied with matters of pedagogy (how it is taught). Some subject conferences how have specialist groups on teaching and learning, on assessment and feedback. Some high-ranking specialist journals cover this as well.

In the Department of Informatics there are three or four successful research groups and, in addition, there is a small number of staff who teach courses for industry as a means of generating further income; this enables staff to keep up to date with developments. The same applies in Pattern Technology. In Education, practitioners are invited into the university for open seminars, a two-way process of mutual learning between the teaching profession and the university. Guest lecturers, for example in Game Art, who are at the leading-edge of their profession or vocation are often invited; this helps to keep the subjects fresh and gives students valuable insights into current thinking in the sector.

Employer engagement

This sums up what most of the university departments do to ensure that what is taught and learned is relevant to the labour market. For those subjects, in particular those of a vocational kind, which offer sandwich courses and work

experience, placements provide an important source of current knowledge and practice. In Pattern Technology specifications are used that are derived from the industry, for example a fit log with details and alterations marked on. Use is made of the Association of the British Clothing Industry (ABCI) which students join as members. This affords them access to people in the industry, for example the Head of Technology at a major retailer. The lecturer gets information by attending ABCI conferences and the students get access to people and places to visit as well as student conferences and sector networks. It also gives them access to placements. There is no doubt that close engagement with the sector in which students are orientated for work does much to enhance motivation and consequently achievement.

In Informatics:

> "We have a member of staff who co-ordinates fieldwork placements and this enables us to be kept aware of what employers want and need. When at a conference he asked people in the industry what skills students were short of he was surprised when they said 'not turning up for work on time'. The Department has taken these comments on board. Tutors are talking to employers when they conduct industrial placement visits. In this way we get feedback from industry on how well students are fitted for work." (ML).

In Social Sciences the curriculum is kept in line with developments and preoccupations in the sector by both the professional bodies and the involvement of employers. Although the academic staff write the curriculum it has to be in line with the requirements of professional bodies such as the Social Care Council and the British Psychological Society. While there is flexibility it can be fairly prescribed. Some professional programmes actually go out to competitive tender:

> "We write and say what we're going to do, which they then compare to what other universities say they're going to do. We can make some changes, but any moderately substantial changes would have to be discussed with the employer - any major structural changes probably wouldn't be permitted without a full re-tender. We go through that re-tendering process quite a lot. We obviously won't do anything that's out of line with our own academic integrity, but we have to do what they want us to.
>
> This re-tendering keeps the subject up to date both in terms of curriculum and delivery methods. It's an interesting contradiction that where we've been the most prescribed, is also where we've seen in

> some places the most innovative methods because of the challenges of working with distance learning students and those who are employed." (BS)

In Media Technology students learn early on about the multimedia skills they will require for work and their teacher acknowledges that the transition to work will vary for students because of the diversity of working patterns in that particular occupational sector.

> "We talk about skills sets in industry so there are examples there of how you could be just one individual working on your own freelance and doing everything from making the tea to being the director, the video person, or you could be in a large team where you have a very specialist role. So you could have a very narrow focus or a very wide remit. We cover all of that and the module allows them to choose, so they could work in a team and take on a handful of the roles and other members take on different roles, so they could experience the team working model. Or they could experience the individual model by saying I'm going to work on my own for this and therefore have to do everything. So they experience the possibilities of industry but they make the choices themselves. So we do discuss what happens in different industries. I also point them to literature where they can read about specific case-studies, so I signpost where to find examples from industry". (LM)

For aspiring teachers, the Education Department enjoys active partnerships with the local authorities, with schools and with relevant Whitehall departments. In the Law department, there is continuous interaction between the academic and research staff and with practitioners from the city. Garden parties are held for staff from the City Council, the Crown Prosecution Service and for barristers and solicitors from local law firms. In addition there are projects in the community such as a pro bono law clinic where students do much of the work. In the Business School for those interested in developments in human resources there are Research into Practice lunches.

Professional bodies

Membership of professional bodies is also a standard way of keeping in touch with professional concerns and how these might be incorporated into curriculum design and development. Examples include the British Computing Society, the Information Management Institute, the Association of the British Clothing Industry, the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, the Chartered Institute of Housing, and the Law Society. Where there are none,

subject teachers ensure that students know what is going on in the field; for example, taking drama students to the local theatre to see performances and to talk to backstage staff about what is involved.

Teachers can be extremely innovative in their curriculum design and development as a means of ensuring that their students are well versed in understanding 'real-life' situations and how to deal with them. One nursing lecturer developed a whole module that was interactive, based on characters who had certain medical profiles and characteristics. The programme, called Azalea Close, was built into Blackboard so that:

> "we can look at whole issues, such as breast cancer, around the life of one fictional character. The characters and issues they have are linked and woven in within the whole module. And we also wanted to meet an actual patient who had recovered from breast cancer, so I linked with the local breast unit for a patient who would be willing to come and share her experiences. It was fantastic and completely cohesive for the students. It was superbly evaluated and identified as good practice". (AM).

Nursing is a good example of a vocational area in which students value the proximity of learning to practice. Probation is another where in this case the law and theory emerge from the practice:

> "This works for me and seems to work well for the students. I teach about sentencing, so I think a really good way into this is to say 'here's a scenario – here's someone who's committed an offence, here's a little bit of info about them and their previous convictions, how would you like to sentence them now? Get into groups and talk about what you think you would do if you were the sentencer'. You give them some info about their sentencing powers, and it's relevant to their work as probation officers too. So in this way they're absorbing the law without even knowing it, they're absorbing what the court's powers of sentencing are. After they've done that I will then validate their work by saying you've actually covered pretty well everything we need to cover, but I'm now going to put a bit of theoretical shape to that. So I follow it up with a half an hour or so input about sentencing theory and practice". (RC)

Teachers are often in continuous negotiation with employers about the curriculum to ensure that it meets the requirements that employers have for practitioners to be equipped with the current skills, knowledge and understanding, but broad enough for students to develop a critical

perspective. Again the probation service provides useful insight into this process:

> "Employers do have a heavy input because they have a clear notion of what they want their staff to know and be able to do, and we accept that, but we've also wanted to insist that if they want a higher educational experience for their staff, then we have to reserve the right to say we're not just going to teach how to do the job, it has to be broader than that. For example, police have to be exposed to the sort of people they might meet, and coming here is part of that experience.
>
> Employers have been proprietorial about the curriculum, which has led to constant negotiation with them about what should go into it, because we want to be able to ask the students to reflect critically on their employer's policies and express our own views about that. It's not about going into classroom and saying 'forget about your organisation's policies' but we want to encourage them to think about why their organisation does things in certain ways and how they may contribute to doing those things better. This critical aspect is a really interesting part of the job.
>
> If an employer says that what we want is higher education for our staff, then they are legitimately and nobly opening themselves to criticism and reflection of how they do things. The phrase 'reflective practitioner' captures the essence of what we are trying to achieve on these programmes". (RC)

Housing studies have

> "a suite of housing programmes, but two are run on a distance learning basis with the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH). We work collaboratively with CIH - they directly employ a team of tutors, who are approved by us at DMU and who receive a bi-annual training session which taps into the resources of APDU, the library, faculty academic practice officers and so on. We have a close working relationship with administrators at CIH and whilst there are always challenges in different computer systems and ways of working, we put our heads together to try and resolve issues quickly. We are involved in the design of the curriculum and the assignment briefs, we internally verify samples of work and feedback on issues of quality and consistency of tutor marking and we feel that this ensures a high standard of programme delivery in partnership with the CIH.

> We don't do housing education in a tick box approach, we look at industry standards and requirements from the housing professional body, but we also look at the needs of employers in the housing sector as well as the pedagogic needs of our students. It must work, because on word of mouth we have graduates recommended their staff to come and study on our programmes." (JR)

Subject relevance

In most disciplines it is common to make the subject 'real' for the students, so that it prepares them adequately for what they will encounter in the workplace. In Pharmacy a change in degree gave the teachers the chance to redesign less what they taught but more how they taught it:

> "It was fantastic to just get rid of everything and say this is what we're going to do now. So even though we follow the syllabus, and all other schools of pharmacy have to follow the syllabus, we do it in a completely different way to other schools. So we try from level 1 to make the patient the focus for the students, because that's what's going to be important when they start working. You have to do the subjects, but there is room for innovation in how we do it.
>
> The innovation comes in the way we teach and structure the experience for the students, for example our hospital visits are brilliant as the students are very much left on their own, whereas other universities visits may be just a meeting at the end of the ward. Our students actually get to meet patients". (KP)

Constant and continuous contact with employers is important if the university is to continue to provide what they require. This is as important for international companies for whom the most important requirement is that students, many of whom are sponsored by their employers, are able to apply what they have learned in a western higher education institution to their own countries and cultures. Such a successful transfer of knowledge depends on making the curriculum relevant; hence the reconsideration of case studies that has been introduced in Business Studies.

The Facebook account that has been set up for students on the Game Art degree has opened up a means of communication between the industry and the course on the work of the students and the way the programme is being run. For example, people from industry have been invited to submit critical commentary on students' work in the visual design page of the web site:

> "Ideally we would like to be able to set up a website with a holistic shell for the 3 years, a syllabus, and a visual gallery where people can put their paintings, drawings and 3D models and the industry partners can look in and see how the degree is being run. It could also contain discussion forums and critical blogs". (CW)

The Faculty of Health and Life sciences has more courses that are professionally accredited by awarding bodies than any other:

> "This is actually a benefit because it ensures that we take account of the changes required by professional bodies. Foundation degrees are employer-led. We ensure that the curriculum includes content that the employers want. If you have worked the curriculum well in the Foundation degrees, it should be mapped against occupational standards and any changes required by employers will be incorporated". (A O'S)

Triangulation

The same faculty's collaboration with stakeholders on recruitment illustrates how the university encourages the development of on-going dialogue between the university, employers and professional bodies.

> "it has adopted rigour in quality and adheres to professional standards, for example by working closely with the NHS as key stakeholders. They require a culturally diverse workforce and this has been a driver in developing widening participation recruitment activities to recruit a diverse student body in our faculty". (A O'S)

The university has also created structures which encourage collaboration. Programmes have management boards and advisory committees attended by representatives from the occupational sectors. In the School of Nursing and Midwifery there is a curriculum development group on which different interests, including the students, are represented. It comprises

> "senior academics who come from a regulations and professions point of view. Then we break down and have programmes, then have modules and module teams, so there is a feeding up and down. Some innovation is very localised, and not everyone shares the same enthusiasm for certain things like practice-based learning. But what happens is that the students experience something and think it's great and want it all the time. That creates a disparity which gets fed back up to programme management boards which can encourage the

> discussion of creating more innovation and sharing ideas between the team. It doesn't always happen, but sometimes it does". (AM)

Nursing also secures the support of professional patients in order to ensure that the patients' perspective is incorporated in the development of the curriculum. It is important to ensure the appropriate patient involvement:

> "Some have had really positive experiences and want to say how fantastic it was, whereas others had a horrendous experience and want to grind an axe. It's about getting their insight rather than focusing on their experience at a particular hospital or clinic". (AM)

In summary

Research and scholarship, attendance at conferences and seminars and continuous employer engagement through representation on programme management structures, arranging work placements, visiting lecturers, external courses, curriculum development, membership of professional bodies, active partnerships are all tried and tested means of keeping both the content of the curriculum and the pedagogy up-to-date. By making the learning practice-related, teachers of vocational subjects in particular ensure that the learning is fresh and real. Employer engagement means that there is open and clear communication between the university and the world of work. There are too creative tensions and negotiations inevitably associated in striving to strike a balance between, on the one hand, providing what the different sectors need from the workforce; and, on the other, giving students what they need from a modern university to ensure their development as holistic learners.

Q3: How do you ensure that your assessment practices contribute not only to students' development as autonomous learners but also to improving your own teaching and the programme?

Introduction

This question focused on two aspects in relation to assessment – the development of students as autonomous learners, and also the development of the programme and individual teaching. In most responses however, the importance of developing the learner specifically took precedence and this forms the primary focus of this section. It should also be noted that the term 'assessment' refers in this context to the processes used to assess the quality of students work. The term is often also used to describe the specific tasks set for students to complete but in this report those tasks will be referred to as 'assignments'.

Overall, many of the responses received suggest that there has been a shift in the way that assessment is used. There is a discernible move away from focusing on the final end product, to assessing the process of learning undertaken and the application of knowledge. Additionally, more formative methods are being utilised and examples are given of the ways in which various forms of technology have enhanced this. However, the challenges remain of making assessment, particularly the formative type, and the feedback received from it helpful to the student's development.

These aspects are discussed below in which the main themes emerging in relation to this question are presented. Examples of specific strategies or approaches used by interviewees are also noted within.

Assessing the process

A number of interviewees described the importance not only of assessing an 'end result', but of focusing on the skills and learning that have gone into creating it. One interviewee, for example, in the Health and Life Sciences faculty commented on her move within some modules to mark the procedure undertaken, rather than focusing on an end report, in order to make the assignments and learning from them seem more relevant to the students.

Another interviewee from the Technology faculty described a particular assignment she has designed for a module in which students are required to create a media product. However, the assignment is based on a reflective report that the students have to write detailing their learning journey throughout the module and focusing on how they and their skills have

developed. They also have to reflect on and evaluate the decisions and choices made in the creation of the product. For this assignment, the final product is worth only a small percentage of the marks, with the bulk being attached to two draft versions and the final version of the report. The rationale for this is that students are required by the industry to develop reflective skills, such as evaluating and justifying decisions, and identifying changes or improvements that could have been made or can still be made to future iterations of a piece of work:

> "What I'm trying to help the students develop is the skills for making the right decision for the right task. But even if they don't make the right decisions, as long as they can reflect at the end and say 'well, in hindsight…' As long as they can reflect on questions like 'was that the best way for you, for the project, for the type of product, the other people involved, etc?'. There are so many different approaches taken in the industry that the module gives them the opportunity and the flexibility to choose one. What I do is a lot of awareness building to the alternatives - you could do this, or could do that. It's a lot of guiding and signposting, and making connections and building awareness of alternatives to help them build confidence in the decisions they're making. They could make all the wrong decisions and still get a good mark if at the end they reflect on their decisions and what they should have done instead, or would do differently next time." (LM)

Related to developing conscious and critical thinkers, another interviewee from the Technology faculty described a tool he and colleagues have developed to enable students to evaluate information resources more effectively. Students use this Evaluation Matrix to score sources against key criteria, such as who the author is, the relevance and context of points made, when the source was published, and why was it written, thereby increasing their competence and confidence in making critical judgements.

Application of knowledge

Assessing the application of knowledge, rather than the end result, was mentioned by some interviewees in relation to two aspects; firstly, making the learning that is to be demonstrated in the assignment more relevant and meaningful to the student, and secondly, as a method for reducing the opportunity to plagiarise.

Making learning more meaningful and relevant was mentioned by two interviewees within the School of Applied Social Sciences (Health and Life Sciences faculty). Many of the students within this school are already

professionals working within the particular area they are studying. One of these interviewees, talking specifically about the Probation programme, therefore discussed the importance of linking assignments to what the students are actually doing in their workplace, thereby linking the theory back to the practice of work. For example, an assignment for a module based around law involves students tracking someone they are working with in their probation job role through the legal process. A reflective element is also always incorporated in which critical judgements and evaluations of decisions made and actions taken are required in order to support the development of the student as a reflective practitioner. The interviewee suggests that linking assignments in this way to the workplace gives them a 'face validity' for the student.

> "I'd never want to lose touch with practice. There has been a tradition in universities of starting with the theory and then trying to get students to understand how it relates to practice. That has often proved quite challenging, so what I have tried to do is start with their practice and build up from that, find out what theoretical assumptions are behind that practice, whether they are sound, etc. So I don't bring theory down to practice, but try to start with practice. Also it gives it an immediate validity as they're keen to know about their practice, and then I get them to see why the theory matters to them and is not remote or abstract." (RC)

The second interviewee from the school supports this concept of applying what is being learnt to the working role as a way of making assessment relevant and meaningful. An additional benefit he suggests is that it makes plagiarism much more difficult. He notes that the descriptive types of assignments, which mainly involve writing about material/information that has been found, leave themselves open more to students copying or plagiarising from others. However, this becomes much harder if assignments require the students to draw on their own experiences and apply what they have been learning to their own particular contexts.

Another colleague from the same faculty but within the School of Allied Health Sciences also commented on the increasing problem of plagiarism:

> "The big problem we have now is plagiarism or students getting other people to do their assignment. How do you know someone knows something? When testing application of knowledge, you have to design assignments that are original, unique and innovative, ones that cannot be 'googled'. That means looking at all the learning objectives

> and then devising an assignment that tests whether or not they have been achieved." (A O'S)

She related an example in a health science module in which she created a video resource of a 'pretend' health consultation. For the assignment the students then had to analyse and evaluate the consultation, and the focus was on how they each individually interpreted the evidence.

> "Each person interpreted the evidence in their own way and this allowed for a much more nuanced analysis and assessment. Writing assignments like this takes a lot of time and planning but the rewards made it all worthwhile. Each account was refreshing to read, it wasn't death by marking." (A O'S)

Formative assessment

A number of interviewees commented on the increasing use they are making of formative assignments as a way of trying to engage students in their own developmental process. However, many interviewees also noted the challenges of this for students who are becoming more and more grade-focused and strategic in their learning. One interviewee from the Technology faculty suggests students are increasingly 'mark chasing' and so focused only on the end summative mark achieved. Others, such as an interviewee within the School of Nursing and Midwifery, comment on the many additional commitments students, particularly mature students, have, such as families, jobs, work placements, which necessitates a more strategic approach to studying and focusing only on aspects to which summative marks are attached:

> "Students can be focused on whether something is graded, and if it's not I'll try to get them to think about how it will be useful for them developmentally. But if they don't have to do it, then they won't. But they are working 37.5 hours a week and have families, jobs etc. So they do become focused on what they have to do not what would be nice to do if they had the time. It's a challenge for students when they are juggling work, families, studying. It's strategic, surface learning, just doing what needs to be done to get by." (AM)

Whatever the reason though, the challenge of overcoming this is recognised by all.

There were, however, a couple of examples given of some of the methods that have been used to try and combat the lack of engagement with formative

assignments. One interviewee from the Humanities faculty discussed one module taken by first year students that has four assessed projects throughout the year. Two of these projects (one in the first term and one in the second term) are formative. She states that the benefits of these formative pieces of work are that:

> "It is a way of us being able to mix up the groups without them feeling that it will affect their module mark, and to encourage them to take risks, and that's what the first year is about." (EP)

However, all formative and summative marks are recorded together on the system and the final mark sheet received by the students, which this interviewee felt helps to build equality across both types of assessment.

The second example came from an interviewee within the Technology faculty who attaches summative marks to formative pieces of work. The assignment for the module she leads requires students to write a report based on a media product they have created. This is a more reflective report focusing on the process of creating the product and the learning that has taken place. The final report is worth 40% of the overall mark with the product being worth 20%. The remaining 40% is attached to two draft versions of the report that are submitted at points earlier in the year (20% for each version). This is the formative aspect of the module and detailed feedback is given by the interviewee to each of these versions to help the student improve them for the next draft or final version. The interviewee states that she has attached the summative aspect in order to combat the lack of response from students that a purely formative piece of work may get.

> "It is formative but there are summative marks attached to each draft otherwise I don't think there would be the same level of response." (LM)

Overall, most interviewees recognised the benefits of formative assessment for developing the learning and autonomy of their students:

> "You will only get from surface learning to deep learning and even profound learning if assessment is formative and on-going." (SY)

However, this is compromised by an increasingly grade-focused student culture, and the challenges remain of how to overcome this within each faculty and each area effectively.

Use of technology

Some interviewees discussed the use of technology in developing their assessment practices. For example, one within the School of Applied Social Sciences described the advantages of tools such as Wiki's and Blogs when working with distance learning MA students. Additionally, within his area they are making use of Skype for one to one supervision. This is a software application that enables voice calls to be made over the internet.

> "We are now also exploring the scope for 'synchronous chats'. These provide for live talk between students. This allows the students to work directly with each other on-line. We are also using Skype for one to one supervision. And we are researching the possibilities of providing feedback on assignments though video." (JC)

The benefits of Blackboard, and the tools provided within it, for creating different learning and assessment opportunities were also endorsed by many interviewees. However, for some within the Technology and Art and Design faculties, the internet networking site Facebook offers additional capabilities. An example of this was given within the Art and Design faculty.

> "We have set up a separate Facebook account for students. All students can log on to the same account. On the Visual Design page they will have their own preparatory sketches, developments and final works demonstrating the student's progression. The facility is only accessible to our students in the three years but we invite people from the industry to submit critical commentary of the students' work. It means I can give evaluations of students work by getting on the Facebook account and maybe 'critiquing' 25 students work in lunchtime. The introduction of these web 2.0 techniques and processes means that the third year students and second year can post comments on first years work and vice versa." (CW)

Facebook therefore provides a way for students to gain valuable feedback from both their peers and industry professionals. A further benefit is that work can be evaluated and critiqued by the interviewee in a much more convenient and timely manner.

Consequently, technology, and especially web 2.0 applications, is making a significant contribution to the ways in which some are creating and developing their assessment methods.

Feedback

The discussion above noted the challenges many interviewees expressed about getting students to engage with feedback given. The importance of dialogue as a way of responding to this is the focus of a research project being carried out in the Humanities faculty. This project is comparing the assessment and feedback practices at DMU with those in the University of Warwick and the London Metropolitan University. The project is investigating a number of different aspects about feedback from the academic and student perspective, but is focused primarily on the importance of dialogue within it. It is still in the early stages, but the project has already begun to gather baseline data across the three universities and to assess the effectiveness of different types of feedback, such as audio, peer or blogs.

Regarding audio feedback, the interviewee comments that technology can have a big impact on issues such as timeliness and accessibility, as compared to traditional paper-based methods:

> "Tone of voice can be much better registered in [audio] feedback [e.g. podcasts] than in written feedback." (AB)

The project is also focusing on the distinction between formal and informal feedback. The interviewee recognised the challenge informal feedback can pose for busy academics needing to keep up with their work when students want to knock on the door and have an 'off the cuff' discussion:

> "Structurally this can pose problems, for example, sharing an office makes it difficult. Students want reassurance they are on the right track with their assignment. Also students like to engage with academics – it's what students expect. One of the problems is that academics need to get out to keep up to date with their subject, network with colleagues, and engage in writing books and journal articles. But we do have to be careful that feedback is not just taken up by those that are the keenest or can access staff the most easily. Some students need development in terms of feeling confident about asking for feedback." (AB)

This suggests that how feedback is given and how it is received needs further addressing from the viewpoint of both the academic staff and the students. The interviewee does note that contact is very important:

> "Students still want contact with each other and with academic staff and it is important to continue to provide learning spaces, actual and virtual, where students and staff can engage with each other." (AB)

Another interviewee within the Humanities faculty also discussed the benefits of talking feedback through with the students. She devotes an entire week to the return of essays by suspending seminars and having one to one tutorials instead:

> "If you just give annotated work back the tendency for the student is not to look at it, and it's also difficult to understand what the tutor is saying. It's difficult to write down about how to engage with literary criticism within an essay, but a lot easier to be able to talk it through with the student. And they can ask questions too, which makes a huge difference to the quality of their work. It's very difficult to explain in writing where the grammatical errors are, you can correct them but it's difficult to actually explain why that sentence is not complete for example, whereas if you can tell them it's much easier." (DC)

Though time-consuming, she states that it is worth it:

> "Almost every student has gone away saying it's been really helpful". (DC)

Peer review/assessment

Many of the interviewees indicated an increasing trend towards the incorporation of peer review or assessment within their teaching practices. The reasons for this relate to the numerous benefits perceived to be achieved from it. For example, an interviewee from the Art and Design faculty uses it to build the confidence of first year students:

> "The first years are not always brilliant at written evaluations. I use a lot of small group and peer review. This builds confidence in particular for those who find it hard to take part in a larger group. I get them to explain what they feel about the outcomes they have achieved and how they got there; once they have done this I get a much better written evaluation." (HB)

The interviewee discussed earlier, also in the Art and Design faculty, who utilises Facebook encourages peer review and evaluation across the years, i.e. third years commenting on second years work, etc, as a way of developing a supportive learning community:

> "It creates an environment where people can give each other a lot of feedback, which supports our learners' needs." (CW)

The process is also used formally within studio work in which they must all give and take feedback on each other's work as a way of collaboratively developing:

> "Everybody has to make a positive comment on other students' work but also has to identify areas for development." (CW)

This is linked to developing the ability to work collaboratively, which is essential within the industry, and so, as the interviewee states, "we create the kind of cohesion in the university that is needed in the industry." (CW)

Peer marking was also recognised as a surprisingly effective method for getting students to engage more meaningfully with feedback given:

> "Peer marking was a big eye opener. The exercise was for students to do a drawing down a microscope, which usually I collect in and mark and hand back. In that way they had some feedback from me but they probably didn't even read it they just looked at their mark, but with peer marking it was like the mark became less important. I drew up the marking criteria and they really enjoyed giving reams of feedback. I think they learned so much more by getting the peer feedback than just getting a mark out of ten. I thought they would hate it, but they didn't and that was over 100 students." (VR)

Others noted the benefits of peer review/assessment for creating more diverse assessment strategies, and as a way of responding to increasing marking workloads in consequence of the larger numbers of students.

Self-assessment

A particularly good example of using self-assessment came from the Technology faculty. This relates to the self reflective report required following the creation of a media product, as discussed earlier. When handing in draft versions of the report, the students are also required to fill in a self-assessment sheet that aims to highlight the understanding the students have of the work they have just handed in:

> "I get them to fill in a self-assessment sheet when they hand in their work which has some quite vague questions, i.e. What have you been

> doing? What haven't you been doing? What's present in your work? What's not present in your work? So I can understand what they think they've been working on and what they think they've been putting in, for example, if they think I've covered enough research, but there's no evidence of research in their work, I can address that gap. Whereas if there isn't much research in their work but they write that they haven't covered enough research, then I know they're aware of where they are. They also have to describe what they've learnt from the experience, which is deliberately vague so they can write about anything, and what they would do differently in the future, which could relate to the next iteration of that piece of work, or for another module, or in terms of time management, etc." (LM)

As well as helping to understand the self-awareness of the students, the process of self-assessing also helps to improve the feedback given by the interviewee by allowing her to tailor it more to the needs of the student. For example, if the self-assessment sheet shows a student is aware of a problem they have in understanding something, then her feedback can be directed to how the student can overcome this. In contrast, if the sheet demonstrates that a student is unaware of the misunderstandings they have, then her feedback can be tailored to, in the first instance, helping the student become aware of this, and then towards helping to overcome it.

> "I tell them that that's why I get them to fill them in as it helps me provide them with better feedback. It helps me improve the quality of feedback to an individual." (LM)

Furthermore, this process also ensures that she can respond more effectively and in a timely fashion in her teaching to any potential problems:

> "The iterations of the report and feedback process mean I can respond more quickly to any issues arising. For example, I had a session before the second draft was due where I gave advice about the common mistakes and good elements made last time and I could see where a lot of them were getting confused so I could address those issues." (LM)

Employer/industry involvement

A number of interviewees invite people in from industry to deliver guest lectures or provide some sort of input to their teaching. A couple of interviewees within the Art and Design faculty linked this directly to their assessment practices. One, for example, teaches Pattern Technology and

always bases her assessment methods on 'real world techniques' in order to build confidence for working in the industry. For final project 'briefs' she invites in external lecturers 'to motivate [the students] in a different way.' (HB)

The second interviewee also uses industry briefs for third year students to develop their autonomy in learning. Feedback from the sector is gained through guest lecturers firstly talking to students about technical processes, and then critiquing their work from this perspective. Additionally, as described above, industry professionals are invited to submit critical commentary on students' work via the Facebook account.

The examples of peer and self-assessment, and the involvement of employers show how other people can be used within assessment practices to create engaging, relevant and meaningful learning experiences, and also to respond to the challenge of encouraging students to attend to feedback given.

Creative assignments

> "Freedom to be creative is important…creativity gives them a flavour of what they can do…what they come up with is mindblowing." (VR)

This amalgamated quote is taken from a range of statements made by one interviewee within the Health and Life Sciences faculty. She gave two examples of creative assignments she has used. Firstly, students were required to produce some health promotion literature but they had the freedom to choose the format used:

> "One student got hold of a camera and did a 20 minute video. The creativity was staggering, from just giving them a bit of freedom." (VR)

Her second example involved second years learning about clinical trial design for which they had to bid for (chocolate) money in a Dragon's Den-style assignment. Again she said that the freedom they had to come up with whatever they wanted, and use any kinds of supporting props or aids, stimulated their creativity and led to some incredible 'pitches':

> "The creativity gives them a flavour of what they can do. In one of the Dragon's Den sessions, one student had videoed half the presentation of him at home in the kitchen, so he was on the screen in the video but also standing there, and he was saying 'now over to you…now over to you', and this went on for about 20 minutes. He must have practiced it for weeks. It was incredible, and it gives you a flavour of what you can

> do after university, what your talents are. Essay or powerpoint presentations don't necessarily give that. " (VR)

She does however note that the ability to allow creativity and freedom in assignments is being constrained by larger student numbers. She states that the Dragons Den-style assignment will not work next year when she has 30 students to see in a morning rather than four.

Variety of assessment types

An interviewee within the English department in the Humanities faculty noted that the majority of their assessment is coursework based. However, their strategy is to incorporate a range of different assessment types rather than focusing continually on traditional essay-based work. Examples of some of the different types of assignments include creating a poetry anthology with a written introduction justifying the choice of poems, and writing a screenplay based on text that has been studied. This is also important for enabling the students to develop their own self-awareness:

> "We have a range of assignments in the first year that allow students to discover what skills they actually have, what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are, so they are required to do a review, a standard essay, a creative portfolio, an adaptation of a chapter in a book. Students have a range of things they've done and they're often quite surprised about where their good grades are. They think they're good at one thing and discover they're good at something else, which is important to them in choosing what they want to do in the second and third year as well." (DC)

In summary

Overall, there appears to have been a discernible shift in practice to assessing the process of learning rather than the final product. Formative assessment is also increasingly being used, and the benefits of it are overwhelmingly recognised. Assessment for learning is more commonly regarded as a means of both demonstrating the quality of the programme being taught and of judging and differentiating students' achievements within them. Assessment is less something that is done to students and more a process in which they meaningfully engage, understanding assignments and the criteria by which they are judged and graded, and learning from feedback whether it comes from their teachers, their peers or their own self-appraisal. However, there are significant challenges associated with this as students become more strategic and grade-focused in their approach to learning.

Q4: How in your role do you account for and enable students to manage different transitions into, through and out of the HE experience?

Introduction

This question focused on the three main transitions experienced by students within the HE experience – into HE, progression through it, and the transition out of it into the world of work. Overall, the responses received from the interviewees suggest that enabling students to manage these transitions is a continuous process. Some common themes are apparent and these are discussed below. Following this, three additional examples are presented that further demonstrate some of the specific methods used to enable effective transitions for students at different stages of the HE experience.

Explicit expectations

There was clear agreement from many interviewees that setting out clear and explicit expectations of what is expected at university and what will be expected of students is essential for an effective transition into university, progressing through it and moving on into the workplace. In particular, some interviewees commented that a large proportion of first year students do not enter HE with a sufficient understanding of what is expected of them as higher level learners. This relates to aspects such as how to write an academic essay, how to engage in seminar sessions and the level of responsibility they should be taking within their learning. One interviewee stated that she has become much more explicit in lectures by telling students which particular points they should be writing down in their notes:

> "Sometimes in the first couple of weeks in the first year they struggle and don't know what to do. So sometimes in lectures I will tell them 'you need to write this down', because they're not used to making notes. So I spend time with first years telling them what they need to do to demonstrate understanding. I never used to do that, but I think things have changed in the way the schools deliver the curriculum, so the students aren't as used to doing things the way we are used to doing things." (KP)

This demonstrates the shift she has made in her practice from expecting students to know or be able to develop the knowledge themselves of how to take notes in lectures, to recognising that they do not have these skills and that developing them needs to take an explicit form.

Regarding the transition through the years, another interviewee stated that she now explains to students at the end of their first year that the second year will emphasise interactivity and active learning from them. She also explains the reasons for this and the advantages that this will have for their overall learning. Students then enter their second year aware of what to expect and with an understanding of the reasons behind the change in teaching styles that they will experience:

> "As I'm the first year tutor and see them in their classes, I do have an opportunity when they're choosing their second year modules to talk about what I do in the module. I pre-warn them that I teach differently and it's more interactive. I also make sure in the first lecture back, where students are coming back keen, that I explain that it's not going to be me standing at the front but they will be doing some work. I explain what the reasons are behind me doing that style of teaching. I say that some might not like it, but they won't be getting this from every other lecturer so it's a different experience to be embraced." (LM)

Other aspects of student behaviour, such as attending sessions or keeping pre-arranged tutorial meetings, were also felt to necessitate clear and explicit expectations of what is, and more specifically what is not, acceptable. Interviewees from various disciplines within the Health and Life Sciences faculty often referred to the use they made of their professional standards or code of conduct documents. These are used from the very beginning of the degree to set out the professional behaviour students are expected to adhere to throughout their time in HE. This also then benefits their transition into employment by ensuring they have already developed a professional attitude and approach to their work:

> "We have a student code of conduct as we're professionally accredited, and we've ran that out properly this year for first time, and it's been helpful to say to students 'look this could be a fitness for practice issue'." (KP)

Expectations also include academic staff themselves understanding the previous learning experiences students have had, which may be forming the expectations they are coming to HE with. One response to this in the Business and Law faculty has been to invite an experienced A level examiner to come in and talk to staff about the teaching of A level students:

> "We got an experienced A level examiner to come in and show us how these students are taught and assessed, and our staff were surprised at their short concentration spans, the level of activity and moving

> around, and the degree of student-centredness in their learning. This is not necessarily the best preparation for sitting in a tiered lecture theatre listening to lectures for an hour at a time." (SP)

Learner independence and autonomy

The setting of clear and explicit expectations throughout the HE experience was seen to benefit not only the students' awareness and understanding, but also their progression from dependent learners to those with more autonomy and taking greater responsibility within the process. One interviewee noted the challenge of students entering HE with the expectation of being 'spoon fed'. However, understanding their own role as a HE learner and knowing (and being helped to develop) explicitly the skills required at this level was seen by some as a way of helping students as they progress forwards through their second and third years, and to progress also as learners and achieve greater self-reliance and independence. Some interviewees also commented on moving their focus in their teaching practice to the process of learning rather than emphasising the final outcome, such as an essay, report or created product. Students instead are encouraged to reflect on choices and decision made throughout the process, how their learning has progressed from the beginning of the task to the end, and how they may have done things differently. This changing focus was discussed in the section above about assessment practices, but the benefits of it were also emphasised for the transition to employment, in which skills such as evaluating choices and understanding where improvements can be made are valued:

> "We talk about multimedia skill sets, so quite early on we talk about the skills required and they do an analysis of their and their team's skills. Then in the final version of the report they will reflect on those and say which ones they've developed, which ones they now think are important…The module allows them to choose, so they could work in a team and take on a handful of the roles and other members take on different roles, so they could experience the team working model. Or they could experience the individual model by saying I'm going to work on my own for this and therefore have to do everything. So they experience the possibilities of industry but they make the choices themselves… What I'm trying to help the students develop is the skills for making the right decision for the right task" (LM)

A further example of the gradual development of student autonomy is from an interviewee in the Humanities faculty. In this subject, the first year is treated much like a foundational year in which students take the same modules to ensure all cover the same areas and topics, and are developing the general

knowledge and skills needed for the second year. A limited amount of choice is then given to them for this second year to choose some of the modules they would like to do. Finally, their third year is accompanied by even greater choice in recognition of the progression they have made to more mature and responsible learners:

> "The students are now doing very general courses in the first year, which are foundational, and we're not assuming, as A level courses are very different, that they're all coming with the same qualifications…When I first arrived here students, in their first year, were allowed to choose which courses they wanted to do in English, and now we tell them what they're going to do. And I think they're much happier with that because it's a level playing field for everyone, they're all doing the same courses. In the second year they've got a bit more choice, they have to do some core choices, but they have the opportunity to choose out of a small number of options. In the third year they have almost complete choice. So as they progress from year one to year three they become more mature students, more in charge of their own degree." (DC)

It is clear that as they progress through their course, students are expected to take greater responsibility for their learning and become more autonomous. Though many may enter HE with expectations of being 'spoon fed', there is an increasing gradient of learning autonomy expected by interviewees as the students progress.

> "In first term we are almost spoon-feeding the students. But as we go through we reduce the support and we make it clear to them we are doing this and why." (RB)

The Health and Life Sciences faculty gives an example of how building students' confidence may help to begin developing their independence and autonomy. An online resource was developed in response to increasing numbers of students coming into HE with little or no lab-based experience.

> "[The resource] shows them videos and animations of things like 'this is a microscope', 'this is a pipette'. They look at that in weeks one to four before going into the lab. They really enjoy it. For the ones who haven't seen a lab before it boosts their confidence, they feel more relaxed and know what to expect. That's been a really successful project. It's had external funding and is viewed globally. Staff also say the resource means they are not repeating themselves so often to the students… Students have also said that it's been useful throughout the

> degree as a refresher resource, for example when they come back after the summer and feel they may have forgotten some things." (VR)

University support mechanisms

With regards to the transition into HE, many interviewees commented on the use made of the university mechanisms already in place to help students with this process. The three most commonly mentioned were the Transitions team, the library service and the Centre for Learning and Study Support (CLaSS).

The Transitions team appear to be used frequently and in three distinct ways. Firstly, one interviewee commented on using the team to deliver workshops at the beginning of term for students about what they should expect from university and what would be expected of them as students. This links into the theme above about setting out clear and explicit expectations. Another took this further by working with the team to develop the whole induction programme, thereby building in transition support throughout. The third distinct way involved working collaboratively with the team to deliver bespoke transitions activities/workshops with identified feeder colleges:

> "As a faculty we work closely with our Transitions team in Student Support. We provide bespoke transition activities with the colleges with which we have progression agreements. The university does its own generic transition activities, for example, taster days, university experience days, master classes. I have developed a referencing and resources workshop and taken it out to the colleges. It is enormously helpful to get students to recognise the importance of developing these key study skills before they come here. Also we take them to the basement in the library and show them the range of journals we provide; this amazes them and gives them the confidence to use the resource and not be intimidated by it.
>
> These transition activities are important but they also provide the incoming students with the chance to recognise a 'face' so that when they come here they feel more familiar with their environment." (A O'S)

The library and the services offered by those within it were also mentioned frequently by interviewees because of the support they give to the academic transition into the university. People most commonly use the library services team to deliver particular skills sessions, such as finding appropriate and reliable resources, and referencing. Additionally, the library appears to be an

integral support factor in many responses for working individually with students to develop and enhance specific academic skills:

> "Our Housing librarian is also very good. We can encourage a student to make an appointment with him and he will then work with the student, perhaps by telephone, taking them through the housing website, showing them how to access databases, academic articles, etc." (JR)

CLaSS was also mentioned by some in addition to the library as a support for developing students' academic skills on entering the university. For those who mentioned it, it is used in a referral sense, i.e. students referred to it by tutors for help with particular aspects, rather than as an integral element of the module/course/programme:

> "We've never really got the students to write many essays…but science students essay writing skills are not good anyway because they don't really do them. But last two years I put an essay into level one that they get feedback on to help them with their exams. I tell them that even if they don't do well in the essay, the feedback will be of real value for their exams. I refer students to CLASS to get them to do online writing skills tests to help them." (KP)

Developing a learning community

A particular example of this was given by an interviewee within the Humanities faculty. Within this particular programme, students from different modules and years are encouraged to mix and interact through trips organised by the teaching team. These include trips to places such as museums and external workshops, together with an annual field trip, which this year involves taking 40 students to Paris. The benefits of this were expressed as the connections made between the students within the different year groups:

> "As part of the Drama field trip the students will go and see a performance, and there's an itinerary in terms of them going to art galleries as well. So they're encouraged to think beyond their degree and the work they're doing here, and to think about the kinds of connections they can make between the work they're doing on the modules and performance-related work beyond that. One particular virtue of the Paris trip and other trips opened up across the years is that there are connections between the first, second and third year students, which does have an impact. There are third years about to

> graduate who still have connections with those that graduated last year. They're aware of what students have gone on to do through those connections that they've made. There's also discussion about connections between modules, again happening across the years, which is important and can be useful." (EP)

This sense of a community, therefore, helps to build students' awareness of career paths, possibilities and options that may be open to them after they graduate.

The Education programme in the Humanities faculty provides another example of how more experienced students can support those newly entering:

> "We have also developed mentoring programmes. New first year students are paired up with year two or year three students like the buddy system at the primary-secondary transfer." (SY)

Additionally, the Art and Design faculty is using the facilities offered within Blackboard as a way of creating a virtual online community:

> "The Blackboard shell itself has allowed us to create more of a community of learning between the year groups." (CW)

Personal tutors

The importance of personal tutors has been discussed previously as a response to the significant increase in student numbers. A number of interviewees also commented on the role personal tutors play in supporting students' transition through the HE experience. An example of how this role has been specifically developed and structured to enhance this aspect was given within the School of Nursing and Midwifery. A working group was established within the school to clearly define the roles of both the student and the tutor within the personal tutoring system. Guidelines were then produced matching the student responsibility with the academic responsibility, which emphasised a partnership rather than hierarchical approach. These guidelines are made explicit to both the student and the tutor, and are discussed in the first meetings held in the students' first year. Nursing students are taught on a three semester basis and students meet with their personal tutors each semester over the three year duration of the course.

This approach ensures that the personal tutor role is clearly defined to both tutor and student, and forms an integral part of the students' experience at university. In addition to ensuring structure to the process however, a further

tool is used to help identify factors that may lead to student attrition. This is an evidence-based prediction tool that the students complete at the beginning of their first year, half way through the second, and towards the end of the third year. The process is facilitated by the personal tutor and aims to help students identify any factors, such as employment, family commitments, learning difficulties, which may leave them vulnerable to non-completion or withdrawal. The personal tutor, through the use of this tool, facilitates the students' self-awareness of these factors and the need to manage them as effectively as possible. By identifying what these factors are, the student and tutor can also look to the appropriate support services within the university for further help and guidance. The aim is to identify risk factors and support mechanisms as early as possible to encourage successful completion of the course:

> "We have a lot of people who come on the programmes with a tremendous amount of personal baggage. And it's so admirable of them, but the prediction tool identifies that these factors that they have may make studying at this particular time challenging. So how they manage them and work with the university to manage them is up to them. But it can identify that if these are not manageable, is this the time for them to be here… There might be realistic issues that we can do something about, or that we can simply alert the students to, and that can make a fundamental difference to their experience. It's all about identifying things – how many times have students dropped off the edge simply because they haven't identified an issue they're facing? It's the same for academic failure too. Too often students can fail in their third year after a poor academic history during the programme and not qualify. But if in the first year they can identify that they need academic support, that support can be integrated and accessed early to make sure they can academically succeed." (AM)

Though the personal tutor plays an important role in facilitating this process, a key part is to promote the self-awareness and self-management of the student. Learner independence and autonomy is also then developed, rather than reliance and over-dependence on the tutor:

> "I call it the wedgee approach. In the first year there will be lots of contact with students as they assimilate into university and their professional practice, but as they go through the first and second year the contact becomes less as they develop their professional identity and confidence. Towards the end of the programme they are finding their feet to go on to the transition from education to profession." (AM)

Overall, there appear many different support factors that help to enable the students' transition into and through the HE experience.

Employability

The final theme to emerge from the interviews was focused around the transition out of HE and into the world of work. There are various ways in which this transition is supported.

A number commented on the importance of encouraging students to think beyond the degree regarding their employability. To this end they encouraged students to widen and build their CV or personal portfolio with aspects such as voluntary work, work placements, and work experience, which an employer would see as useful and beneficial:

> "I try to broaden their ideas of what they might possibly do, and how they might get experience that an employer may see as useful, for example, going out and doing some voluntary work. I try to encourage them to see that the degree is not always the passport, and get them thinking about how to build up a personal portfolio." (GL)

Some interviewees described their use of invited key speakers from industry to talk about particular work sectors and the types of skills that would be required:

> "We bring in guest lecturers who talk to the students about the technical processes that are going on in the sector, what it takes to be a good games artist, for example the importance of life drawing, anatomical form, etc." (CW)

The challenges of the transition of out HE and into work for international students were noted by an interviewee from the Business and Law faculty. She specifically highlighted the need to help students make the transition between what is learnt here and their situation back home. Research she has conducted on this topic suggests that some students struggle to reintegrate with their home culture once their degree is completed:

> "I did an interesting piece of work with some Indian students who had done a Masters programme. Two years later I identified 20 students and asked them what they thought of their MA. Hardly any mentioned the technical or academic content as the most important things they had learned; what they recalled and talked about was personal confidence, a sense of direction, those soft generic skills. The other

> thing they mentioned was their struggle in reintegrating with their home culture. Families will not allow students to implement what they had learned in an English university programme because it did not suit their relatives' businesses where they are now working. Families pay for this education and then the students come back and tell their families their HR practices are not good enough." (JP)

One suggestion she gives to help with this particular transition is to reconsider the case-studies and information used in sessions to reflect an international focus and the specific contexts (geographical and subject-based) that the students are coming from.

In summary

Throughout the themes discussed above a number of ways and methods are given of how students' transitions into, through and out of the HE experience are managed and enabled. Apparent within all is an understanding that it is a continuous process in which one of the ultimate aims is to develop the independence and autonomy of learners so that they can begin to effectively manage the transitions themselves as well.

Q5: In this time of decreasing resources, have you any examples, or suggestions about how you, your team, the wider University can maintain, or even improve the learning experiences of your students?

Introduction

The responses received for this question focus on three main areas: examples given of ways in which the individual, or their team, has improved, or sought to improve the learning experience of their students; suggestions relating mainly to the individual teacher's or team's particular programme or department; and ideas for the university to address.

Steps already taken

- **Taking a partnership approach and delivering bespoke education:**

> "We've started to go down the lines of efficient routes of delivering programmes, through partnership approaches with the professional body and trying to access funding for development of curricula. We've been open to housing providers coming to us with particular needs. We're not shy of doing bespoke education, or thinking how we can parcel education into modules that might be attractive on a one-off basis, or part of a wider UCPD." (JR)

- **Mixing up offices to share practice:**

> "We've mixed up offices, which is good, as it used to be all the practice people in one room and all chemist people in another. But now we're mixed up, so we can see what each other is working on and that helps to share ideas. I think that's something the university should think about, not put same people in the same room but mix them up a bit to encourage sharing ideas." (KP)

- **Incorporating flexibility into courses and programmes:**

> "We try to do multiple things with one output and make sure we've got routes in and out of various different programmes. We try and be flexible to changing student needs so they can easily transfer between courses and routes." (JR)

- **Conducting group rather than individual tutorial sessions:**

  "Something we've been thinking about is how to deliver the same quality with fewer resources. One of the things we've built into a programme trying to achieve this is group tutorial sessions. My view is that it's actually better to offer academic support to a group of students because they can learn from each other, can hear questions asked they might not have thought of, recommended reading could be shared, they can bounce ideas off each other, etc. If a student is not understanding something I'm saying but another does, often they can understand better from that peer. Seeing small group sessions as being equivalent or better to individual sessions is quite a good way of delivering a service that's of the same quality but using fewer resources." (BS)

  "This year I've done quite a few group meetings because pragmatically it would take too long to see 150 students individually. In the second year the students do an individual research project as part of a module, and what I'm going to do next week is rather than have 40 separate meetings with the students, group them related to the nature of their topics. That could have some kinds of benefits such as them talking to each other and I might suggest that they do a reading group so they are motivating each other and talking to each other about what they are doing.

  But, we do need to think about the impact of larger numbers on the hours spent in devising those kinds of strategies. So next week I'm not going to be having my 40 individual tutorials but its taken time to devise groups." (EP)

- **Setting up a working group on assessment practices:**

  "Our working group will contain the head of quality for our faculty, the head of studies and then academics from each of the departments. We're going to look at assessment, particularly procedures and processes for assessment that academics have to undertake. Part of it will include whether we are over-assessing students or giving ourselves too much work to do in marking and feedback, and if there are ways we could be more efficient. Another aspect of it is trying to be imaginative and innovative in the way that we apply the rules and

regulations regarding assessment, for example, if there are any procedures we can put in place that can simplify or minimise the amount of work academics have to go through. Basically it's looking at whether we can be more efficient and still provide a quality experience for the students." (LM)

- **Ensuring effective team working:**

  "We have regular away days every year, and regular departmental meetings. We have programme management boards and we have a staff seminar series that we all participate in. Most of the English staff are on the second floor, so we are located close together." (DC)

- **Utilising support offered by Corporate Development:**

  "We worked closely with a colleague in Corporate Development about how to take things forward. We found it very useful and they gave support and understanding of what we need to do." (JR)

- **Using a software package to reinforce ideas introduced in lectures:**

  "One thing I'm going to do over the summer is use Articulate Presenter. You can animate slides and talk over them so I'm going to have a go at that over summer for first year lectures. I'm going to use it to be able to reinforce things talked about in lectures. I can talk through how to do things in the slides and do mini narrated presentations about topics like how to check a prescription. It may be a lot of work to get them done, but I can then re-use them." (KP)

Staff as individuals and teams

- **Be more thoughtful about how time is used:**

  "For example, I rethought one of the teaching workshops which is one of the few occasions all the distance learners come together. I was very enthusiastic about the subject and wanted to tell them everything I know, but I had to think whether this was the most effective use of this valuable time for them to be together. What was distinctive about that time was that they

> were together and together with me, so how do we exploit that. I can send powerpoints and reading for the inputs, so it's that kind of thing we need to think about more." (RC)

Also think carefully about how students with distinctive educational needs, or those who do not have much of an educational background, can be better supported.

- **Rationalise some of the modules where the same information is being imparted on different programmes:**

> "By bringing people together to share the resources they have and convert them into distance learning materials, we could reduce overlap and duplication. Then the groups could come in and apply their knowledge to their own particular situation, making the best use of the time and the teaching available while they are here." (A O'S)

- **Address the increasing trend for students to enter HE without the requirements for the course:**

> "The National Curriculum has not been focusing on drawing ability and there is no analytical thinking. We need to get out more to tell schools and colleges what they need to do if they are to enable their students to have the visual skills that are going to equip them for working in the game industry. We could use successful students to go back to their schools and colleges to get these messages across." (CW)

- **Disseminate own successes more across the university:**

> "We [School of Nursing and Midwifery] have been dealing with increasing student numbers for the past decade and we have developed strategies, passion and innovation to be able to deal with that, and we've also relished it as an opportunity. I think the more we are recognised and shout about the things we do really well, then we can share that experience with other parts of the university." (AM)

- **Use more online formative assignments:**

> "Having more formative assessments online would be a benefit as students want to monitor their progress and test themselves.

> That would stop them coming to us all the time for feedback as they'd be getting that themselves as well." (VR)

- **Encourage students to debate, discuss and question underlying assumptions:**

> "The key is to awaken intellectual curiosity in the students…..and in the lecturers." (FW)

The university

These relate to aspects that the university at a strategic level needs to look at, address, or specifically do.

- **Encourage the sharing of good practice:**

> "[The university can help to] share good learning and practice, and it is good to set out what the expectations are." (BS)

> "It's about creating that culture… I don't think somebody else in the university has a clue about what I do in my classroom because they don't have to." (AM)

- **Recognise excellent teachers and help others improve:**

> "We are good at recognising excellent researchers with status and pay but there is no equivalent recognition for outstanding teachers. In schools they have advanced skills teachers with additional status and pay; why can't we explore something similar at HE level? I am a great believer in coaching and mentoring and other kinds of interventions that help people improve their teaching practice." (SP)

- **Send the message and give permission for staff to try different things, e.g. provide examples of how they can be less resource intensive without losing academic quality:**

> "Sometimes people need permission to try different things, people can often get stuck in what it is that they're doing. For example, a portfolio assessment in social work was being over-assessed as it was marked by a lecturer, then a practice member of staff, then internally moderated. It was very resource intensive and a proposal was made that internal moderating

would only take place with a sample. This was strongly resisted as it was viewed as diminishing quality in some way. There is always a risk whenever there is an increase in numbers and resources are diminishing that trying to cut back a little bit is seen as dropping academic standards. Sometimes the university needs to give permission and examples of things that will be less resource intensive but still in line with academic standards. This message needs to come from the university because it's quite a sensitive message that you can still have quality by doing things in a shorter time." (BS)

- **Keep class sizes small to ensure personal contact with students:**

  "The central thing in teaching is the human/personal relationship with the student. It's important to keep classes fairly small so you get to know the student and they feel part of a cohesive group. If we limit the physical resource of the teacher being there, we will diminish the experience of the student." (GL)

- **More technology support/training for staff:**

  "Sometimes technical help would be good. For example, a colleague did DVD role plays about how to give prescriptions to patients, etc, and she put a lot of time into the technical part like editing. Sometimes that kind of support would be helpful so the academics are spending their time on the learning bit and not the technical bits." (KP)

  "Using different technology platforms may be the way forward but there needs to be adequate training and resources for staff." (JC)

- **Recognise the increasing workload of staff, but also address any inconsistencies:**

  "The numbers of students has had an impact in delivery of modules, but I think it's also had an impact on pastoral contact, i.e. contact on an individual level between the tutor and the students. I teach 150 students across the three modules and I know that staff loading is worked out on hours rather than numbers of students. I think there ought to be some kind of recognition in thinking about the staff/student ratio because it does make a difference if you've got a class of 25 or a class of

12, and then in terms of the amount of time that you can give them in the class but also outside of the class too. There is an impact outside of the classroom that it's perhaps useful to be thinking about and talking about." (EP)

"There should be greater staff audit. Some staff are probably not working to capacity. It's not their fault but the system's." (JP)

- **Incorporate the monitoring and tracking of student data into the e-learning strategy:**

"The massive area the university needs to address is how to monitor students and do the administration online on a database. There is no way of looking at student progress until the end of the year when it all gets inputted, there's no electronic way of knowing if students are here or not. Tracking and monitoring the entire student experience is a really exciting area, not just to benefit staff but to benefit students too as they are always emailing asking what mark they got for something and I have to say 'I don't know', I don't have that on a database. Those kinds of things make these huge numbers really open to disorganisation and errors.

We have no way of monitoring or tracking students here and I know there are IT solutions out there. It makes me baffled as to why we're not addressing some very fundamental things. Part of the problem is that the e-learning strategy is focused on teaching, learning and assessment, it's not looking at the whole student picture. It doesn't flow into what the admin teams are doing and how the university operates. I think the strategies can be made broader to address efficiency and cost saving and time saving.

Throughout the year, modules look at students in isolation, so if I see a student has plagiarised I don't know if that student has been a problem to anyone else. You could be addressing a lot more things earlier on. These sorts of systems are better for the students too so that they can monitor their own progress. I think I've had more than a thousand emails from students this year and a lot of those might have been prevented if they could do things like checking what marks they got online. It might require time and money to set these things up, but in the medium-long term it would be such a benefit." (VR)

- **Ensure there are enough teaching rooms and spaces that allow for different teaching practices:**

  > "We've always had large student numbers and have enough staff to deal with that, but that may get harder as the demands of the students increase. Physical space is a real problem; we don't have enough large lecture theatres. So we do need more room. The rooms are sometimes quite small and can only just fit the students in, so if you want to do anything different with them other than have them in rows it's very difficult." (KP)

- **Reduce the risk-aversive approach:**

  > "We should be less risk-averse and more creative. I am just back from Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Their universities want letters of co-operation but DMU is struggling over words like 'transnational' and 'collaboration'. We are seen as slow and questioning of other countries' requirements and demands. We should also be more creative about the way we teach and if we really want to be cost effective then we have to wake up and respond to these new demands." (JP)

- **Invest in technology, for example in one programme:**

  (a) A software package which provides good quality on-line tutorials would free up lecturer time to give students more one to one support.

  (b) Video and flat-screen in the studio would help demonstrate certain techniques and skills, and provide instant tutorials.

  (c) Pod casts to support student learning would allow for smaller teaching groups and more rotations, giving students more studio time and more one to one tutorials for those students with particular needs and learning difficulties.

  (d) An interactive voting system that livens up teaching and learning inviting students to give instant feedback on whether or not they are 'getting it' during the lecture/demonstration. This would make teaching and learning more interactive, dynamic and exciting.

In summary

Many ideas, suggestions and examples are presented above. Some important elements do appear to be emerging, though, about what the university can do at a strategic level to help improve the learning experience of students. These include supporting the development of a culture of collaboration, in which sharing practice and learning from each other becomes the norm and part of academics' daily working lives. Additionally, in light of the increasing student numbers, explicit recognition of how hard people are working to maintain and enhance their students learning would be valued, along with a review of teaching workloads and staff to student ratios. Furthermore, providing direct guidance or examples of how to maintain quality with fewer resources, and giving 'permission' to do this, is another specific action the university can take to support staff in this challenging climate.

Q6: Can you give a couple of examples of students undertaking exceptional learning in your programme? How do you account for them?

Introduction

This question proved quite challenging for some to answer. Though several could provide examples of students who have had an exceptional or very successful learning experience, accounting for how and why that occurred was not immediately straightforward. The following quote encapsulates some of the views taken about this aspect:

> "I can't answer that question. I think it's partly because the combination of circumstances is so distinctive – it's about personality and temperament, it's about where people are in their own lives. The combination of the workplace experience, personal lives, personal temperaments, backgrounds, all the many things that make us different, and the university experience. A combination of those things is probably unique for everyone. I don't really think there's anything I could pinpoint there as a magic ingredient." (RC)

However, though a 'magic ingredient' could not be identified, many did begin to discuss some of the factors that they believe play an important role in successful and exceptional experiences for students. These factors relate to four aspects: lecturers, teaching methods, student qualities, and the programme design. These factors are the focus for this section of the report and are discussed below.

Additional support from lecturers

Though lecturers by their very role will always have a significant part within students' learning, it was the qualities they offer beyond the academic input that many felt contributed to positive experiences. Support and encouragement were vital elements within this, particularly for less confident students:

> "One student was very good, but had a lot of self doubt. She needed a lot of encouragement and support to believe in herself. I was her personal tutor and gave her encouragement and tried to help build her confidence. This support is important. We are a supportive, friendly, close knit team which students can see and find valuable." (JR)

> "Staff always strive to do well. Colleagues go out of their way to provide extra guidance and support to students, enlivening the student experience." (AB)

> "The reason why these students have succeeded is because of the tremendous support from personal tutors and student services…It is important to anticipate problems before they emerge and nip them in the bud. It requires staff to be attentive and vigilant, in particular when working with students who come with a lot of baggage and who may find the HE environment very challenging." (A O'S)

Additional to support is the importance of how it is conveyed and how accessible it is:

> "The key to our success is constant communication and engagement, which is always a challenge on a distance learning programme but one we can meet, given sensible use of the technology and unstinting hard work and dedication by teaching colleagues and those who provide pastoral support." (JC)

> "One of things that we're really good at is accessibility. I think they especially benefit from having a single tutor when they do their dissertation in the third year. They see them on a regular basis and we forge a close relationship. With my students, I'm not just interested in how they're doing in their dissertation, but in how they're doing across the whole course. And I think they all feel that makes a huge difference and it makes them confident in applying for jobs." (DC)

Teaching methods

The importance of lecturers is also matched by the methods they use. In particular, flexibility within teaching methods was seen to offer numerous advantages to the learning experience:

> "A student was moved to write something about Haiti. She was unsure how to make it relevant to the subject [Globalisation] so we got a lot of materials, reports, news items etc and she's just sent me an email saying she's so motivated by this that she wants to write nothing else. We need to get the subject flexible enough so that students can find something that really interests them. It's really important to write about things they're interested in as that's when they become excited and enthusiastic. Enjoyment of doing it is very important." (GL)

> "It is important for people to have the time to attend to student's particular special needs, and to be flexible with the curriculum and arrangements to give them the best prospect for succeeding." (A O'S)

Linked to flexibility is the opportunity it provides to be more creative in teaching approaches, and particularly with assessment:

> "Freedom to be creative is so important…It's the freedom for them to come in with whatever props they want [in the Dragon's Den style assessment], and what they come up with is mind blowing, it's really wonderful.
>
> Good learning experiences come from assessments, because that is when you tell the student to go off and do your thing." (VR)

A note of caution is added however:

> "In two years time, with larger numbers, the students might not get that freedom as you have to be more controlled…You lose the creativity when the numbers get that big." (VR)

Added to creativity is the importance of a variety of teaching methods:

> "For me the key thing to an exceptional student experience is variety of methods. It allows every student to learn in different ways but also every student will have the opportunity to learn in the way that suits them best. Our probation programme was of an incredibly high standard and that was partly because we had this variety." (BS)

Another way in which teaching methods contribute to positive learning experiences is through the situations lecturers create by them in order to develop specific skills or approaches by students:

> "I took a big risk in including international students in an ITALIS project where academics came from across the country. I asked students on the International Business and Management MA to come and tell the delegates about their experience. The students were suited and booted and were absolutely brilliant; they made a presentation and discussed their issues and how their experience of HE in Britain was so different to that in their own countries where they had largely been spoon-fed knowledge, never done coursework or an assignment and had only been assessed through exam. It was good because students were put in a different context and rose to the occasion. They learned group

> work, presentation skills, time management skills – all the soft ambassadorial and representation skills that employers say they are looking for." (JP)
>
> "The game industry is very competitive but the people who work in it are collaborative. They have to be; a bit like the film industry. We create the kind of cohesion in the university that is needed in the industry. Everyone on a project is given an asset they have to use and develop in the interests of the group and its project." (CW)
>
> "You also have to make a safe space for students to take risks." (SY)

Simulation, a particular teaching method used within the School of Nursing and Midwifery, is highly valued for the more integrated and contextualised learning it provides for the students:

> "Clinical simulation provides a great opportunity to have the reality but in the safe environment. It also gives students the ability to contextualise the theory into practice. We can talk about the facts and knowledge about medical issues, but then you take the student into the clinical skills lab and you've got a mannequin, a patient, with that issue and you can say 'ok, what do we do?' That helps those light bulb moments, and the complete integration. As a nurse I know the theory practice gap is alive. So the idealistic way of doing something and the reality is somewhat different. But this allows us as a profession to work around those deficits. We can simulate the environments the students have in practice and get them to think about what they would do as a nurse. And it makes that integration so much easier, and more visual and hands-on." (AM)

Student qualities

Along with lecturers and teaching methods, the qualities that students bring with them to their learning and the actions they take significantly add to the experiences they have. Their intrinsic qualities were particularly noted:

> "Some year two students on the computer science degree created a database and they researched the technology to ensure they could do a better job. They did this out of genuine enthusiasm to do their best. There have also been two examples of excellent women students who came though the Women's Access to IT course and progressed on to the degree programme, one on to a HND, and are now part-time

> members of staff. They have done so because they are highly motivated and bright." (ML)
>
> "A mature student, who will hopefully go on and do a PhD, came here as a consequence of a personal crisis and has shown massive determination and great intrinsic motivation to achieve." (JP)
>
> "Exceptional students are into meta-cognitive activities, are creative and innovative, and able to transfer knowledge to other contexts…If students are inquisitive, reflective and take responsibility for their own learning then they are well placed to become successful learners. These are students who know when they need support." (SY)

Another important aspect for successful learning experiences is the ability of students to ask questions and challenge ideas. These are qualities that may be developed within HE, or they may be brought to their studies through prior life experiences:

> "I have two very intelligent students who have been out in the world [e.g. VSO] and seen things; they are absolutely right for what I am teaching. What is so dramatic is their engagement, the way they will take ideas and think about them and ask more….and challenge. They will tell me they think I may be wrong. One of them has now graduated with a first class degree.
>
> Another student is on probation. He did not complete last year because he went to prison. I have succeeded as much as I am able to opening his mind. My approach has worked for him. He goes home and talks to his friends and family about the world. He is potentially a disaster, coming from a very violent community. He is learning to understand inequality and why the world is treating him as it is". (FW)

The way in which students interact with each other, both on an academic and friendship level, may also be another crucial component:

> "Exceptional learning depends essentially on individuals and how they cluster. Students can very much influence each other." (ML)
>
> "Some students are a big on-line presence, asking questions and giving feedback." (CW)

Taking an active broader interest in the subject, and the university, was identified in one particular example as beneficial to students' progress:

> "I think the student's being involved in things like the British Pharmaceutical Student's Association or the school equivalent helps them to become really good students. Being interested in the profession beyond the classroom helps them to contextualise what they've done. A girl emailed me today asking for some weblinks about things she's not studying this year, but she wanted to know. She's very involved in the student body too, and they tend to be good students." (KP)

Programme design

A couple of points were also made about the impact the programme itself, and the way it has been designed, can contribute to successful learning experiences for the students:

> "The programme design is so important about how everything fits together; how the learning fits together and how the students experience the programme as a whole…The best learning experiences for me are when they have had everything covered; they've had online seminars, face to face teaching, small group work, they've done the reading, and the assignment is directly linked to their practice." (BS)

The design of particular modules within a programme may also play an important part:

> "I introduced an English in the Workplace course some years ago [for third years] and I found that was particularly rewarding because students were so noticeably happy about what they had achieved. We placed students in schools, like Leicester Grammar, Gateway College, and Leicester College, and also within DMU in places such as Promotions and Recruitment. It was eye opening for the students to think about what they were bringing to that particular work placement as English students and to see that they had a huge amount to offer. That course has made a huge difference in the ways students perceive themselves and the way they understand what they've achieved over the previous two years." (DC)

In summary

As described above, many commented that they could not pinpoint one magic ingredient or technique that ensures students will have a successful, or even

exceptional, learning experience. Instead it is a combination of factors relating to the lecturers and their methods, the qualities that students have and the actions they take, and the overall design of the programme. This mix of elements is perhaps best summed up by the following quote:

> "It's a mixture of technology, and the dedication of the students and of staff who graft." (CW)

Though the research for this project has focused on academic views and perspectives, it is perhaps appropriate to end this section with the voices of the students themselves and their thoughts about particular aspects of their learning experience. These quotes were collected by a senior lecturer in the Art and Design faculty who was interviewed for the project. They centre on the use of Facebook within the course and the opportunities it provides for creating learning communities that can lead on to powerful learning experiences:

> "Facebook has to be one of the best features of the course. It's easy to get feedback from peers and tutors out of hours and is an easy interface to use. The crits we receive on Facebook are well thought out and very helpful, may be because it's easier to write about problems than to tell the student in person." (First year Game Art student)

> "Facebook allows students of all three years to interact and form a collective cohort. This interaction between all the cohorts is a vital part of our learning experience on the course. Being able to have your work critiqued by not only the tutors but by both our peers and by more experienced students in the years above is fantastic. I've personally found the critiques from fellow students incredibly useful and a real help to improving myself." (First year Game Art student)

> "Our course has spawned a fantastic little online society, with students driven to improve their skills through being part of such a close-knit, art focused community…The online community we have here gives me an increased sense of purpose on the course and its friendly, communal disposition bears a positive influence on my development as an artist." (First year Game Art student).

SECTION 4 - CONCLUSIONS

So, how does the university manage to provide excellent teaching for greater numbers of students from a wider range of backgrounds when its resource base is shrinking?

The findings of this research demonstrate that outstanding teaching in the university is not simply concerned with being able to tell students about cutting-edge research, about what a teacher knows derived from their own scholarship or that of others. While research is important to teaching and informs it in a number of ways, on its own it is not sufficient to ensure excellent teaching. There is a discernible move away from teachers telling students what they know and then testing them on that, to teaching that is derived from an analysis of what students need to know, that builds on what they have already learned and demonstrated and what will equip them best for the next stage of their careers. For their part, the students need to be able to understand, evaluate, synthesise and apply these skills and knowledge.

The teacher asks what methods they need to adopt to ensure that students know, understand and can do what is required; and puts in place processes that check how students know that they have acquired this new knowledge, mastered the skills and know how to apply both in their proper settings. Teachers have also to be responsive to a changing and increasingly heterogeneous student population that is open to new ways of gathering knowledge and communicating what they know. The scale, diversity and complexity of the knowledge that is available, of the technologies through which it can be accessed and communicated, and of the students who are the intended beneficiaries of it face teachers with huge opportunities and challenges.

At the same time teachers are under pressure to personalise learning, to approach and respond to students holistically and understand each student's own particular learning journey. These challenges and opportunities are best faced when teachers work together and draw on their shared experiences. Collaboration and learning from good practice enables teachers to adapt and develop their own teaching strategies to meet the expectations of students, employers and professional bodies while maintaining and enhancing standards and principles of intellectual freedom and autonomy. Teachers are seeking to build this community of learning and buttress it with systems and support services for students. In doing so they are enhancing the prospect of all students benefiting from learning experiences that not only accommodate but celebrate the diversity of disciplines, staff and students that comprise the modern university.

This report shows that there is no single or simple blueprint for excellence but more a series of interlocking activities, arrangements and trends that in combination contribute to high standards of teaching and learning. These can be summarised in no order of priority or significance under five themes: teacher responsiveness and creativity, assessment for learning, curriculum coherence and relevance, innovation and application of technology, institutional support

Teacher responsiveness and creativity feature strongly in excellent learning. They need to, as teachers are teaching larger groups of students who bring with them wide-ranging experiences, expectations and abilities. At the same time resources are constrained and will inevitably become less so. Responses tend to be highly differentiated requiring teachers to be both resilient and resourceful. There are examples of teaching becoming something of a performance art as a means of engaging large numbers of students at one time and making the learning process interactive and dynamic. Content alone may not engage all the students so attention is captured and retained by more 'entertaining' methods than the transmission of information and knowledge by talk or Powerpoint. Teachers increasingly introduce simulations and seek to replicate the world of work as a means of making learning real and relevant. Academic leaders recognise that it is important to upgrade the role and importance of teaching and the skills and knowledge associated with the activity as a counter to the primacy of valuing research that has characterised higher education over the last twenty years.

Assessment serves two purposes. It monitors student progress and achievement and, when used imaginatively, it can enhance students' learning. Students are assessed as a means of helping them better understand the skills and knowledge required in their subject and how to use them. Students are encouraged to learn through formative feedback and various measures are adopted by teaching staff and by students themselves to look beyond the grade to the reasons for them achieving it.

Teachers also use different forms of assessment to enhance the learning process, including self-assessment and peer assessment. These skills contribute to student employability because they are increasingly being called upon in different professions. These processes also help students appreciate more what is entailed in assessment, for example how to identify and then apply criteria in grading work. When combined with the usual safeguards such as moderation, they also bring pragmatic benefits, for example the reduction in the increasingly heavy assessment load on teachers. Teachers are also using assessment to make the learning 'real' whereby students are being

assessed not so much on what they know, understand and can do but on how they use their knowledge and skills in a professional setting. This also serves to act as a counter to plagiarism.

Curriculum coherence and relevance ensure that students can see how the different parts of their learning experience fit together and how they relate to professional contexts and issues. This means not repeating material that the student may have encountered elsewhere – for example, at an earlier phase in their education in school or college; providing a gradient of increasing challenge and autonomy in the learning as students progress through the different modules of their courses; and securing continuous interplay between ideas and their application in the world of work. The latter requires teachers to be in continuous negotiation with professional bodies and employers about the curriculum, to ensure that it is relevant and responsive to the particular sector's needs and requirements, yet not totally subservient to them. For example, it is important that probation officers know about the policies that apply in their profession and how they evolve; but it is as important that they develop the capacity to evaluate and appraise them. Programme integrity, in this sense, means that the curriculum combines vocational relevance with independent, rigorous and critical thinking.

There are several examples in our findings of how **technology and its applications** are used innovatively to disseminate information, ideas and intelligence to a dispersed student body; to create a learning community among students and between students, teachers, researchers and employers; and to create learning resources and materials that can be quickly and easily accessed. It is also clear that technology on its own does not necessarily lead to excellent teaching and exceptional learning. Education is essentially a social experience which entails communication between and among students and between students and teachers. Technology assists this process and indeed enhances it. But students and teachers still value and benefit from face-to-face contact, sometimes to derive support beyond the academic.

In order to achieve and maintain high standards both teachers and students sometimes need extra **support from the institution** beyond the classroom, workshop or laboratory in order to meet the challenges of larger numbers and increasing diversity of backgrounds and abilities. Some of the faculty and university-wide initiatives are adding considerable value to the learning experience and contributing to improvements in quality. Examples include the transitions team, the library services and CLaSS. In addition university-wide initiatives such as personal tutoring enhance standards. Different applications are in evidence across the university. The sharing of effective teaching

practices also helps to improve standards of work and to create a community of learning within and across the institution.

There are measures that the university can take to ensure that high standards of teaching and learning are maintained and enhanced. For example,

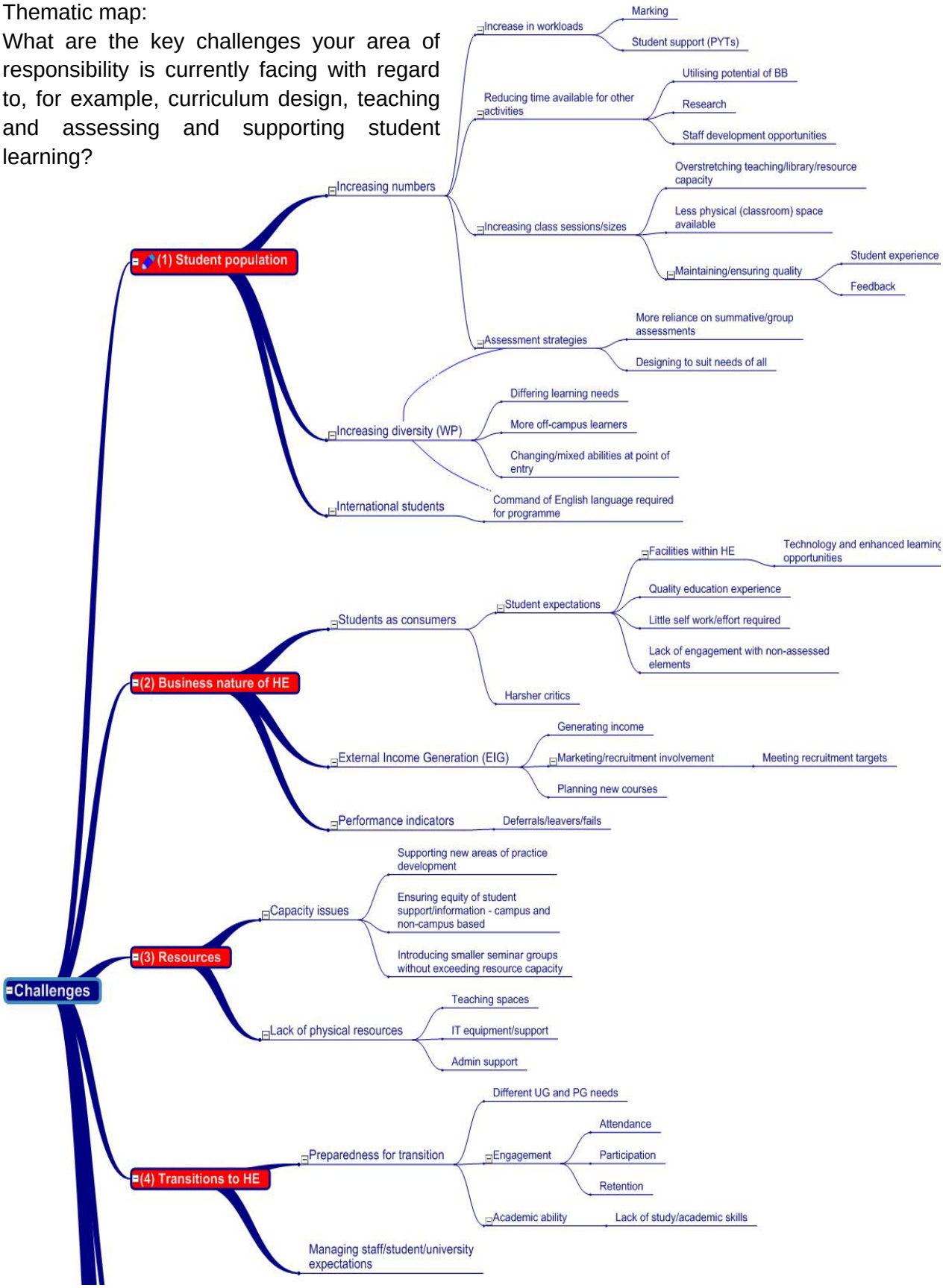
- more can be done to ensure that those applying for a place on a course have the prior skills and knowledge required for entry and are clear what is expected of them as autonomous learners in higher education;
- face-to-face contact time between students and teachers is resource-intensive, but it should be retained although the most efficient and effective uses of it should be made;
- teaching should be regarded throughout the university as a highly valued activity and more ways should be found for sharing best practice within and across faculties;
- innovation and creativity should be encouraged in the uses of technology, accommodation, programme design, teaching and assessment;
- and inconsistencies and inefficiencies in staff workloads should be ironed out.

Students' performance can be enhanced by additional support from teachers beyond the academic; the use of innovative and flexible methods of programme design, teaching and assessment; and efforts made by teachers to build on students' appetite and aptitude for learning.

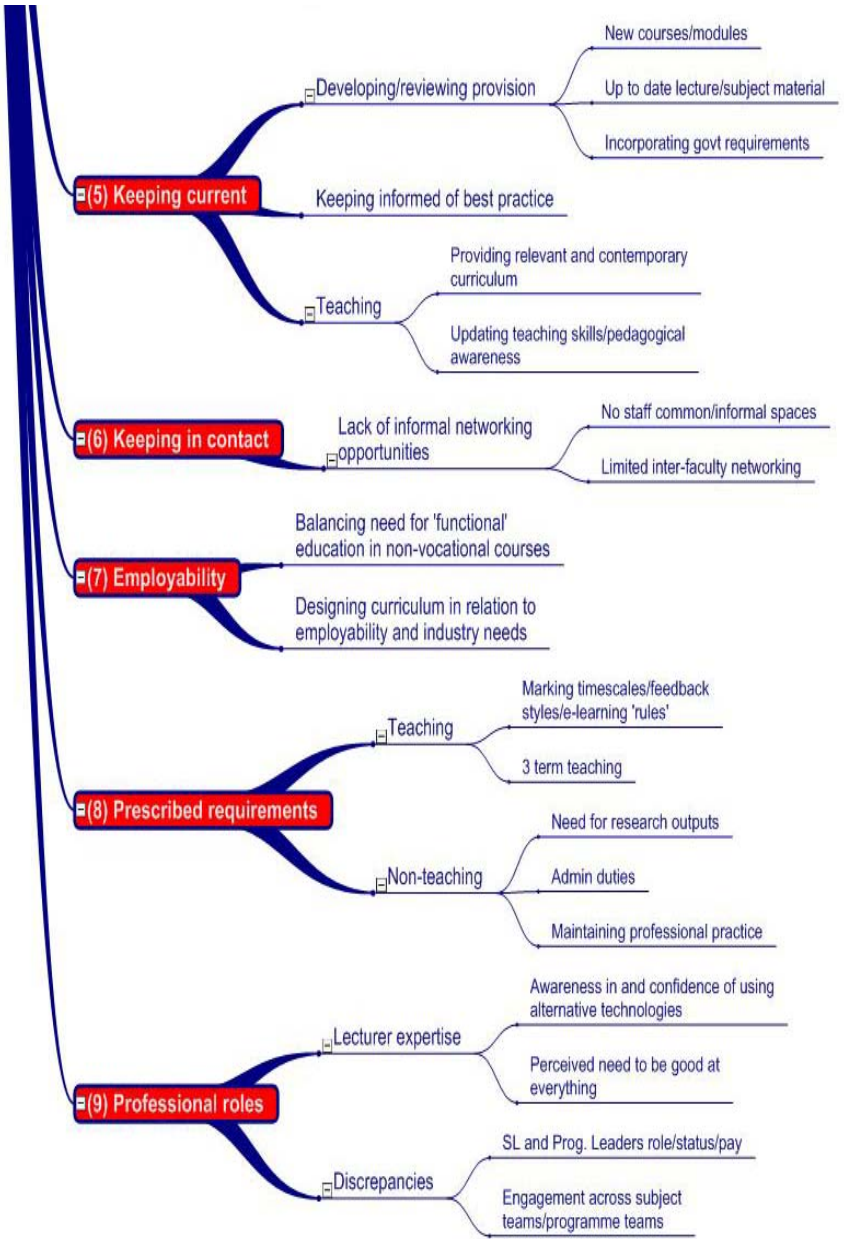
This study has yielded valuable insight drawing on the experience, insight and understanding of teachers. To achieve a more complete picture an equivalent study into the views and experiences of students would be helpful as it would serve to illuminate in which respects teachers and students share common viewpoints and in which they differ. In this way, we would be able to paint a more complete picture and provide a fuller set of recommendations to the university so that it can achieve even higher standards of teaching and learning in difficult times.

Appendix A

Thematic map:
What are the key challenges your area of responsibility is currently facing with regard to, for example, curriculum design, teaching and assessing and supporting student learning?



Thematic map cont.



Appendix B

Thematic map:
How are you intending to respond to these challenges?