Students' Voices: Valuing & Recognizing our Life-Wide Learning Panel and Breakout Discussion 13 April 2010

Panel:

Lisa Shah, VP Student Societies and Individual Development, University of Surrey Students' Union, Chair
Sarah Campbell, Level 3 Psychology, University of Surrey
Mahash Santiapillai, Level 2 Business Management, University of Surrey
Mark Shappard, Level 3 Business Management, University of Surrey

Context

Students and their learning and personal development lies at the heart of the idea of life-wide learning. We are attempting to highlight that they themselves are contributing in a very significant way to shaping their own educational experience and becoming the sort of human being they want to be through the things that they are doing in addition to their academic or research studies. Its essential therefore that any discussion of the idea of life-wide learning is informed by students themselves. Professor Ron Barnett in his opening keynote drew attention to the fact that students are learning in different ways and in different places while they are studying for their degree. In this session we have brought together three students who are going to offer a range of perspectives on the idea of life-wide learning drawn from their own experiences and some of the research that has been done at Surrey with students.

Student presentations

Sarah Campbell talked about her own life-wide learning and about some of the research that had been done at Surrey into students life-wide learning. Mahash Santiapillai introduced a film made by students who had undertaken a volunteering trip to Uganda and talked about how he had changed as a result of the experience and Mark Sheppard talked about his professional training placement and his work with the food and wine society. Their presentations can be found at: http://lifewidelearningconference.pbworks.com/Students'-Voices

Issues raised:

If there are strong emotions involved with life-wide learning, is extra support needed?

- o Emotional support is provided through peers and those outside of the situation.
- o Within the University, support is already provided (ie counselling).
- o Individual staff may be willing to provide support but they may have to remain unconnected for objectivity.

Professional training opportunities are important to students.

- o For some students, the deciding factor to choose Surrey is the professional training year and the links to industry.

What motivates students to actively engage in opportunities?

- o Students are exposed/encouraged/inspired by friends and peers.
- o They are drawn by the prospect of meeting people.

What was the one thing from within the University that made the difference (or something that could have made a difference) to the students on the panel?

- o The professional training orientation that was provided prior to placement helped Mark know what to expect and how to prepare, as well as proving ongoing support throughout his time on placement.
- o Mahash was given guidance on how to make the Uganda project happen through the students' union. Without that support, he would not have known where to start or who to contact.
- o Sarah found the support and flexibility offered by SCEPTrE was not offered anywhere else. It provided experiences and feedback that made a real difference to the applications for her PhD.

Breakout Discussion

Importance of transferable/life skills

- o Students do not realise the importance of skills (other than academic ones) until final year when they panic about getting a job.

  - It would help if from day 1 lectures emphasised the importance of these skills.

- o When students come to university they do not see themselves as young professionals; this is the attitude that must be combatted.

Being open to opportunities

- o When are students open to hearing about the extra opportunities available to them?
  - Providing information within the first few weeks is useless as freshers are overloaded with information and may miss sessions which are not compulsory for their course.
  - The lack of enthusiasm from academic staff is off-putting for students. Only by changing this can students be convinced of the value.

Students' sharing their experiences

- o Would a mentoring system for different years work?
  - Previous schemes have left it to the L1s to contact L3s; this is too much responsibility for the L1s who are probably quite nervous at this point.

- o Would enabling a session for students who have returned from placement to talk to lower years help?
  - L3 students would need to be fully briefed as they potentially could focus on the dramatic horror stories of their experiences.

Engagement

- o Students engage more when they have some form of ownership over their learning.
  - The USSU Festival had a successful pass through of 2000 students due to the 30 volunteers who took the organisation and publicity into their own hands.

- o The USSU ran skills based training programmes, yet take up was low. However, they have since created tailored sessions based on student feedback and these have been much more successful.

- o Should we stop trying to rescue those who are not interested and focus instead on helping those who are already actively involved?

University support

- o How can we get separate departments (central services) within universities to link up?
  - A culture change is needed as currently each department is too focused on its individual roles.
  - With the restructuring, there is more pressure on departments to focus on themselves and thus have limited resource or interest in engaging with others.

Careers Service
- o How do they fit in?
  - They are helpful for corporate and graduate schemes, but not so good with SMEs (where the majority of graduates may end up).

Reflection
- o Students are asked to do it but as its importance is not explained some do not take it seriously.
- o There are different ways to reflect, which is not accounted for with the prescribed methods that are currently being used.

Placements
- o Are all placements valuable to students' learning?
  - They enable students to open their eyes to other options and to have different experiences.
  - Specific subjects need relevant work experience so placements need to be directly linked to this.
  - Mature students may have learnt key skills from previous work experience but not realise this, or be able to articulate it.

- Are courses ensuring that students are provided enough support before, during and after their placements?
    - Arguably not: for some the assessment of the year is a tick-box exercise, which does not allow the student to reflect on what they learnt and thus they can not easily apply it back to their academic studies or in future careers.

- How can we make it possible for all students to have the opportunity to undertake a period of professional training?
    - Currently financial pressures are a big constraint.

Accreditation
- Many students will name the same activity/experience/responsibility, but this does not indicate how much effort they put in, or what they learnt.

Awards
- On a CV, university awards, as they are, are hard to discriminate between.
    - It is therefore important that in interviews students are able to articulate what their award actually means and their skills and achievements.