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AMOSSHE Insight projects 2014/15



AMOSSHE

The Student Services Organisation



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About AMOSSHE Insight

AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation, is committed to a research agenda led by our members' priorities, to support professional development and broaden the evidence base for student services in the UK. AMOSSHE is keen to support our members' project work in order to share innovative research, expertise and good practice across the Student Services sector, and enable continuing development and improvement.

These short, focused pieces of research address topics of interest to Student Services practitioners and include intended outcomes that have potential for sector-wide impact or application.

This is the purpose and goal of **AMOSSHE Insight**: to develop and share insights for the benefit of all members.

About the 2014/15 projects

In 2014/15 AMOSSHE commissioned three small projects from member organisations as part of **AMOSSHE Insight**.

Here are the projects AMOSSHE funded in 2014/15:

- **Understanding the value of a pre-arrival transition summer school for mature students** (University of Bradford)
- **How can the positive design and management of university faith and reflective space improve campus relations and support the student experience?** (Northumbria University)
- **MOOCs in the community: a blended learning approach to FE to HE transitions** (University of Edinburgh)

You can find summaries of each of the projects in this document, and more details about them online at www.amoshe.org.uk/projects/insight

Understanding the value of a pre-arrival transition summer school for mature students

University of Bradford



Principal investigator
Ruth Lefever, Student Experience Coordinator



Total award from AMOSSHE
£2,550

Overview

This project aims to understand the value of participating in a pre-arrival transition summer school for mature students. Value is considered as the “regard, importance, worth, or usefulness that something is held to deserve” (AMOSSHE 2011) – in this case the ‘trans:it summer school’. This two day event is run by the University of Bradford in September each year to support the academic transition of new mature students who are due to start their programmes of study.

Project aims

Most importantly, the project attempts to understand value from the student perspective and to capture the summer school’s role in their early transition through university. It also aims to capture, through a series of vignettes, the personal stories of individual mature students in order to further appreciate their journey. The work is placed in the context of existing sector practice and understandings and also tries to uncover wider issues for mature students and their suggestions for supporting ongoing transition. The study will assist developments at Bradford, but also has wider implications for the sector, as it hopes to aid institutions in considering the implementation of their own pre-arrival programmes or to enhance existing mature student support activity.

Methodology

The project adopted a mixed, but largely qualitative approach, undertaking the following activity:

- Literature review in the area of mature student transition support.

- Online questionnaire of the 2014 summer school participants.
- In-depth semi-structured interviews to uncover individual understandings of worth and suggestions for enhancement.

Key findings

A range of practice exists in the sector, both face-to-face and online, to support early transition. Various understandings of the mature student experience are offered and it is clear that successful student transition and engagement at university is seen as key for retention and success. However, there is limited evidence of the value that particular transition support activities have on the individuals that are involved and therefore this study focuses specifically in this area.

The questionnaire activity established that the trans:it summer school programme was well regarded by the participants. 96% of respondents agreed that attending the summer school had helped prepare them for starting university, and 98% agreed that they felt more confident about starting their studies.

Building on this, the questionnaire open comments and the interviews identified six interrelated areas of value of the summer school programme:

Expectations and awareness:

- Understanding what was expected of them and what university would be like.
- Awareness of the support on offer and accessing this being normalised.
- Attendance confirming or consolidating their choice to come to university.



Preparedness and confidence:

- Feeling more prepared, confident and less anxious when they started.
- Being able to focus on their studies once university began.
- Involvement of the Student Ambassadors in helping students realise they could achieve.

Familiarity with the campus:

- Being able to see and experience key campus places and study areas.
- Knowing where to go helping them to feel relaxed and prepared.

Relationships and community building:

- Knowing others and making early connections.
- Meeting other mature students, sharing experiences and realising they were not alone.
- Establishing friendships and supportive communities.

Development of good academic practices:

- Being able to hit the ground running with their studies.
- Utilising techniques and information they had learnt/seen at the event.
- Doing well in their course and accessing support.
- Feeling empowered and supporting others.

Establishing an early sense of belonging:

- All the above aspects linking to belonging academically, physically and socially.
- Feeling valued and part of the university.

Recommendations

This project concludes that the summer school is of value to mature students and demonstrates how they themselves value and perceive this worth. The personal narratives give insight into

individual experiences and provide suggestions for enhancement for both the summer school and ongoing mature student transition. From these combined, the following recommendations are made for consideration:

- Hold a pre-arrival summer school to support mature student transition that focuses on the key areas of value identified.
- Build on the summer school by enabling ongoing interaction and wider mature student community development. This includes follow-up events and offering more social opportunities.
- Increase student engagement in the summer school through further promotion of the event, and addressing the practical suggestions made by students for improvement. Ensure greater awareness of support services for those unable to attend.
- Consider enhancing mature student support during the programme of study, such as more consideration of mature students in programme induction events, utilising mature student experiences and being more aware of their issues.
- To further understand how the summer school is of benefit, undertake tracking activity to determine if any trends can be established regarding participants academic outcomes.
- Aim to expand the summer school concept to other groups of students. For example, those entering through clearing, BTEC routes or those arriving after September.

The project team intends these findings and recommendations to be used to develop practice internally at the University of Bradford and by the sector for those aiming to enhance transition support for mature students.

Find out more at:

www.amosshe.org.uk/projects/insight/2015/Bradford

How can the positive design and management of university faith and reflective space improve campus relations and support the student experience?

Northumbria University



Principal investigator
Simon Lee, Student Support Manager (Policy, Projects and Inclusion)



Total award from AMOSSHE
£3,200

Overview

In recent years universities have been moving away from traditional Christian chaplaincy models to a multi-faith support offer, often with multi-faith rooms designed to be used actively by peoples of all faiths and none. However, these spaces tend to be bland and uninspiring, featuring flat white plasterboard walls, lowered ceilings and cheap flat-pack style furniture. They also often have no natural light and little decoration, especially religious paraphernalia or iconography, for fear of causing offence or excluding people of some faiths. This “negative” style of decoration and management is often upheld by stringent rules on the management of the space, implemented by an overseeing committee. This research project therefore set out to investigate the feasibility of a more “positive” design and management of multi-faith and contemplative space. It considered this with a view to producing practical guidance for use across the sector, investigating the difficult issues of iconography, the use of shared space, praying together and how to make people of all faiths (and none) feel that the space is genuinely open and available to them.

Project aims

To investigate the positive design and management of multi-faith spaces, its feasibility, and to make recommendations for the sector through the following objectives:

- Investigate the religious, secular and practical arguments that have been posited in support of the “negative” management of faith and contemplative space.
- Investigate how the design and management of faith space can help improve the student experience, promote good campus relations and promote interfaith dialogue.
- Produce practical best practice guidelines for universities based on the research findings.

Methodology

In order to meet the project aims, two strands of research were undertaken. The first looked at the architecture of multi-faith spaces and what physical options were available to create more positive spaces. The second strand considered the theological and cultural arguments that have led to the current predominantly “negative” management of space. This was researched through consideration of literature as well as speaking with students of faith.

Key findings

While there are historical examples of multi-faith spaces, these tended to be serial rather than parallel: that is, one faith making way for another to assume ownership of the space, not different faiths using the space at the same time. Multi-faith spaces in their current form are a relatively new phenomenon emerging across society. Whilst a significant



proportion are of the “negative” style described above, a good number are more creatively and inclusively designed and managed, with a substantial number of these being in higher education institutions.

These positive spaces fall into two broad types, which the project team has termed “single-space” and “multi-box”. The “single space” model proposes a single large space for all faith groups to use. The benefits of this model include a compact physical footprint on campus, the encouraging of interfaith dialogue through the negotiation of the space, and its ease of management. The negative aspects are that furnishing and decorating the space are not easy, difficulties remain with paraphernalia and iconography, and religions with regular prayer times can be perceived as dominating the space.

The second option, the “multi-box” option, proposes a larger space that has individual prayer rooms within it for each faith, as well as shared communal and social areas. The benefits of this option are that it allows permanent furniture and iconography to be fitted, and minimises arguments over space and perceived ownership while still providing many of the benefits of interfaith dialogue through the shared spaces. However, such a facility would be big, and expensive to build and manage, and it may be difficult to ensure effective oversight of all the activities taking place.

Recommendations

Practical recommendations for designing and managing university multi-faith spaces include:

- Agree exactly what the university wants to develop before making a start, whether this is a “single space” or “multi-box” approach. As part of this the university should consider the current and projected demographics of its students and staff, the space available on campus to develop the provision, what resources such as funding and staff time are available and what facilities are available nearby in the community.
- Dialogue is absolutely key to developing and managing the provision. This dialogue should establish the cultural preferences and religious interpretations of existing and if possible prospective students. This will help to identify

possible options and tolerance points.

- Develop any space as near as possible to the centre of campus, thus making it a central part of the university both physically and metaphorically.
- The space should provide some “moment of awe” on entry to ensure it is psychologically separate from the wider campus.
- Agree the design and management of the space:
 - Any single space should be circular with no fixed or semi-fixed furniture.
 - Central tables with chairs facing the front should be avoided as this replicates the usual prayer arrangements for only a small number of faiths.
 - Some appropriate decoration can be included on the wall but the area facing Mecca should be left blank both to provide a directional indicator and to ensure no distractions for Muslims in prayer.
 - Holy texts can be present in the room but imagery is best avoided.
 - Iconography must be avoided, especially that depicting humans and those used as a focal point for worship.
 - Issues of sound should be addressed, both to create the appropriate ambience and to ensure proper sound proofing.
 - The principles apply similarly to the shared areas of the “multi-box” model, although there is greater scope to be more creative in these spaces, particularly in terms of iconography on display, due to the separate prayer rooms.
- The needs of all faiths on campus need to be considered so the room does not end up as a Christian and Muslim plus others space.
- Any written materials should be in English unless absolutely necessary.
- Any name should be inclusive but also meaningful to the university; avoid clichés.

Whichever option is preferred, the research has suggested that a more positive approach is possible. Further information and detail on the key findings and recommendations can be found in the full project report.

Find out more at:

www.amoshe.org.uk/projects/insight/2015/Northumbria

MOOCs in the community: a blended learning approach to FE to HE transitions

University of Edinburgh



Principal investigators
Dawn Smith (Community Engagement Developer) and Abby Shovlin
(Academic Induction Planner), Student Experience Project (SEP)

Total award from AMOSSHE
£1,100



Overview

This was a partnership project between the University of Edinburgh and a local further education college (Edinburgh College). This pilot project was set up to investigate how MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) can be used to both enhance the transition of further education (FE) students into higher education (HE) and build community engagement.

Project aims

The project aimed to investigate how a MOOC can be used to both enhance FE to HE transitions and build models of community engagement. An existing University of Edinburgh MOOC was used as the basis of a Blended Learning MOOC (BLMOOC) programme that aimed to help minimise the 'roller-coaster of emotions' that FE students may experience on their transition journeys.

To enhance FE to HE transitions, the project aims included:

- Opening up dialogue between FE and HE staff about how to work together to prepare students more effectively for their transition into university.
- Encouraging FE students to take a proactive approach to their transition from FE to HE.
- Increasing student empowerment and building confidence by allowing FE students to experience university learning before beginning their undergraduate programme.

To build student community engagement, the project aims included:

- Exploring new opportunities for university

students to engage with the local community by developing a Student Tutor role.

- Increasing the digital skills of university students.
- Enabling university students to develop skills through working with young people, such as communication, leadership, and explaining complex ideas.
- Considering the technological challenges of developing MOOC material for new audiences, and using this research to inform the creation of new online resources.

Methodology

The University of Edinburgh's 'Critical Thinking in Global Challenges' MOOC formed the basis of a six week course that was delivered in a blended learning format at Edinburgh College. The blended learning MOOC (BLMOOC) was both designed and delivered by University of Edinburgh staff and students. The university students contributed to the course design in a co-creation themed consultation event, and participated in the delivery of the course through their role as Student Tutors.

The blended learning elements that were added to the MOOC included: group work, peer learning, academic skills and presentations. The BLMOOC was offered to students in two programme groups at Edinburgh College: Higher National Certificate in Social Science (HNC) and Scottish Wider Access Programme (Access). These programmes were chosen because the MOOC complimented the curriculum in each of these college courses and all of the Access group and the majority of the HNC



students at Edinburgh College apply for degree level programmes at university.

Eleven students registered initial interest in the BLMOOC and six (four Access and two HNC) completed the course. The most common reason for drop out from the BLMOOC was related to the timing of the course. College students told the project team that they had to prioritise college course work over the BLMOOC as it was run in the second semester, which is more demanding than the first.

Key findings

Quantitative and qualitative feedback shows that the project was successful in achieving its initial aims of enhancing the transition of students from FE to HE and exploring ways of building community engagement. Feedback from the college students was extremely positive. All six of the students finishing the BLMOOC reported that they would recommend the course to their peers and would also now be more likely to take an online course in the future. All of the 'added extra' elements of the blended learning design were found to be effective by these six students. There was also an increase in college students' confidence about what 'critical thinking' means and in giving presentations.

Recommendations

This project demonstrates how existing university digital resources can be used in innovate ways with new audiences. The BLMOOC that the project team designed was successful in enhancing the transition

into university of the six FE students who took part in the project. It also highlighted the ways in which MOOCs can be delivered in community settings in ways that build university students' community engagement. It is anticipated that the project will be up-scaled in 2015/16 and form part of the university's existing programme of engagement with local FE providers.

Recommendations from the project include the following:

- Six weeks (with weekly classes of two hours) should be the minimum timeframe for future pre-arrival BLMOOCs.
- The blend of online and offline elements was popular with, and of benefit to, both FE and HE student cohorts.
- The Student Tutor role should be based on established mentoring and tutoring frameworks, and appropriate support structures need to be put in place for these students. An appropriate ratio of student tutors to the size of the FE group should also be established.
- Posting to online discussion topic forums should be made compulsory and introduced as an induction activity in order to ensure that both student cohorts benefit from the peer learning opportunities that these facilities offer.
- Any technical challenges should be dealt with in the induction session to prevent them from continuing into future weeks of the project.

Find out more at:

www.amoshe.org.uk/projects/insight/2015/Edinburgh