Improving the student experience

Postgraduate Coursework students: barriers and the role of the institution.

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The PCW issue

- Student experience perspective
- Focus on quality assurance
- Project looks for a range of strategies

Today...

- What do PCW students expect from their University experience?
- How do institutions meet the needs of these students?

Part 1 - Context

Characteristics

Diverse population:

- international v domestic
- part-time v full time
- on-campus v external
- ‘professional’ v ‘generalist’
- degree v work experience

Student expectations

- Value - curriculum, teaching, resources
- Respect - recognition of experience
- Flexibility - delivery, contact
- Feedback - regular, individual, constructive
- Networking - fellow students and academic staff
- Support - IT, learning support
- Post-course employment - information, opportunities
Institutional Context

- Numbers rising
- Delivery modes
- International enrolments
- Workload and staffing
- Competition
- Employment conditions

Literature review

DEST (Couthard, 2000)
- High expectations
- Low satisfaction

AUTC (Reid et al, 2003)
- Focus only on ‘professional’ degrees
- Concern re staff administrative workloads
- List of principles including:
  - Curriculum content
  - Student engagement
  - Assessment procedures

What’s missing?

- Overall, few studies on PCW
- Focus on professional degrees gives impression of distinct cohorts
  - but many PCW students not easily identified
- Focus on specific cohorts misses the overall PCW experience:
  - Needs of students beyond the faculty
  - Institutional responses to enrolment, orientation and recruitment
  - Groups of students ‘falling between the cracks’

Trends – DEST data

- AGE
- COURSE
  - Males – Management: 37,431 [IT: 10,553]
  - Females – Management: 25,576 [Society/culture: 11,355]
- GROWTH
  - 15.5% increase since previous year
  - Not possible to extract international enrolments

Trends – DEST data

Notables...

- University of NSW
  - "Postgraduate Coursework Committee"
  - Part of the Academic Board
  - Established guidelines for promotion and support
  - Made a series of recommendations
    - Induction
    - Representation
    - Resourcing
    - Support
Part 2 – The Surveys

Methods
- On-line surveys in 2004 and 2005
  - PCW students surveyed at the end of their FY
    - Response rate of 6%
  - Surveyed course coordinators
  - Interviewed PSA representatives

Student Survey
- About you
  - Pre UWA, domestic/Int'l, faculty, study mode, language
- Transition
  - Smooth, enjoyed, success, friends, activities, balance, preparation, overwhelming. (plus 2 open questions)
- Orientation
  - Attended, enjoyed, improve, booklet, services (plus 5 open)
- Future
  - Plans next year (plus 4 open)

Results - students

- Some positive results vs feeling ‘overwhelmed’

Survey will be extended in 2006

Part 3 - Barriers to Best Practice

- Acknowledge complex situation
- Acknowledge difficulties

$\text{a} + (\text{b} - \text{c}) = \text{?}$
Identity and status

- Heterogeneous group outside ‘professional’ courses
  - variations in study cycle, contact times, delivery mode
- Lack of a ‘home’
  - physically and administratively
- Perceptions of low status
  - within and outside the group

Student comments from 2004 and 2005 surveys

Identity and status

“Sometimes feel that coursework, students fall between undergrads and "real" research postgrads. Have got to know no other postgrads really, but enjoyed working with undergrad students anyway…”

“I don’t have many classes and don’t associate with anyone outside of class. I’d like to socialise more, but with whom?? My classmates see me as ‘old’, even though I am only 35!”

Representation

- Committees
  - Student representation to university groups
- Executive levels
  - Gap between undergraduate and research
- Staff networks
  - Support for course administrators, information sharing

Comments from 2005 and 2006 PSA Presidents

Representation

“It is a notoriously difficult job to find a [PCW rep] for the PSA...The PGCW representatives pulled out in 2003 and 2004. The position hasn’t been filled in 2005 or 2006”.

“It is therefore hard to know what these students want or need. There is a generally low attendance at events although they are always welcome. Can’t get them to Careers Week because we can’t find them!!”

Logistics and admin

- Cohort sizes
  - can be very small, courses not run every year
- Teaching and administering
  - workload, isolation
- Locating students
  - contact details, not administered centrally

Comments from 2005 staff survey

Logistics and admin

“...the main focus [of our welcome] is for the Honours class but covers postgrad as well”

“This year we aren’t having an official welcome function for the postgrad students”

“I am a new staff member who has to teach AND coordinate this course...I enjoy the student contact but the workload can be incredible!”
Part 4 – Recommendations

Marketing
- Consistency of message
  - Requires coordination and collaboration
  - Difficult in a devolved system
  - Exacerbated by issues mentioned previously
  - Quality assurance in service delivery

Welcome
- Orientation
  - First impression
  - Information on services
  - Meet key staff
  - Network with peers
  - Discuss expectations from both parties

Home
- Geographical and institutional
  - Helps define a cohort
  - Representation on committees
  - Figurehead on University executive
  - Study space
  - Involvement in faculty events
  - Potential for on-line ‘communities’

Trickle down
- Reinforcement of institutional goals
  - ‘Institution’ needs to communicate with key staff
  - Teaching relief for administrative work
  - Support and networking for staff
  - Ease the identification of PCW students
  - Set minimum standards (see UNSW report)

Student comments
- Buddy system/mentoring
- Encourage cultural mixing
- General and faculty specific welcome
- Tour of campus
- Don’t assume everyone went to UWA for undergrad
And it’s FREE...

Surveys revealed a number of options:

- Allow PCW to share study space with Research students
- Include PCW students in your ‘pgrad’ email lists
- Invite PCW students to present their projects in postgraduate seminar series’
- Provide a pigeonhole/drop-file/locker
- Involve in Faculty events such as morning teas

Conclusions

Student experience extends beyond the Faculty
Infrastructure needs to keep pace with enrolments
Lessons can be learned from professional courses