

Student Reflections about How Universities Support High Level Student Achievement

**HEIR NETWORK CONFERENCE 2015:
Friday 11th September**

Will Bowen-Jones and Lerverne Barber

Rationale and Aim

- To better understand the extent to which recently graduated students perceive that their academic potential was realised during their studies.
- Students have differing conceptions of achievement (Strauss and Corbin 1998)
- This supports Hattie and Timperley's (2007) assertion that the student experience is a complex issue

Research Questions

The principal question that we wished to address was:

“To what extent do students perceive their academic potential was realised during their undergraduate studies?”

Four subsidiary questions were:

1. What were students' expectations and ambitions at the start of their courses?
2. What are students' views of the quality of teaching?
3. *How effective do students perceive the institutional learning support systems to be?*
4. *What were the key interventions/transformations in the student learning experience?*

Methods

- Study undertaken during June and July 2014 (pilot study took place Oct 2013)
- We asked all students from one faculty who had recently graduated to complete an online survey, followed by a series of individual telephone interviews
- 19 students completed the online survey - 1 spoilt response taking the number to 18.
- 13 of these participants subsequently participated in the interview.

What did we want to know in the interviews?

- Interviews drew on the outcomes from the online survey, seeking to add more depth and clarity.
- Students were contacted by telephone and asked a series of open-ended questions that sought to identify factors they felt either *supported or inhibited* their progress during their studies.
- Why? To use the responses to support the development of future quality enhancement strategies.

Questions

- 14 interview questions (a – n) in both questionnaire and interview, with 5 additional responses to questions framed in the form of Likert scale responses in the interview.
- These ‘follow-up’ questions (1 – 9 scale) sought to ascertain opinions on certain more critical aspects of their courses.

b. What were the most effective ways that your academic (personal) tutor supported you during your 3 years at Worcester?

Huge range of responses, but most popular in descending order were:

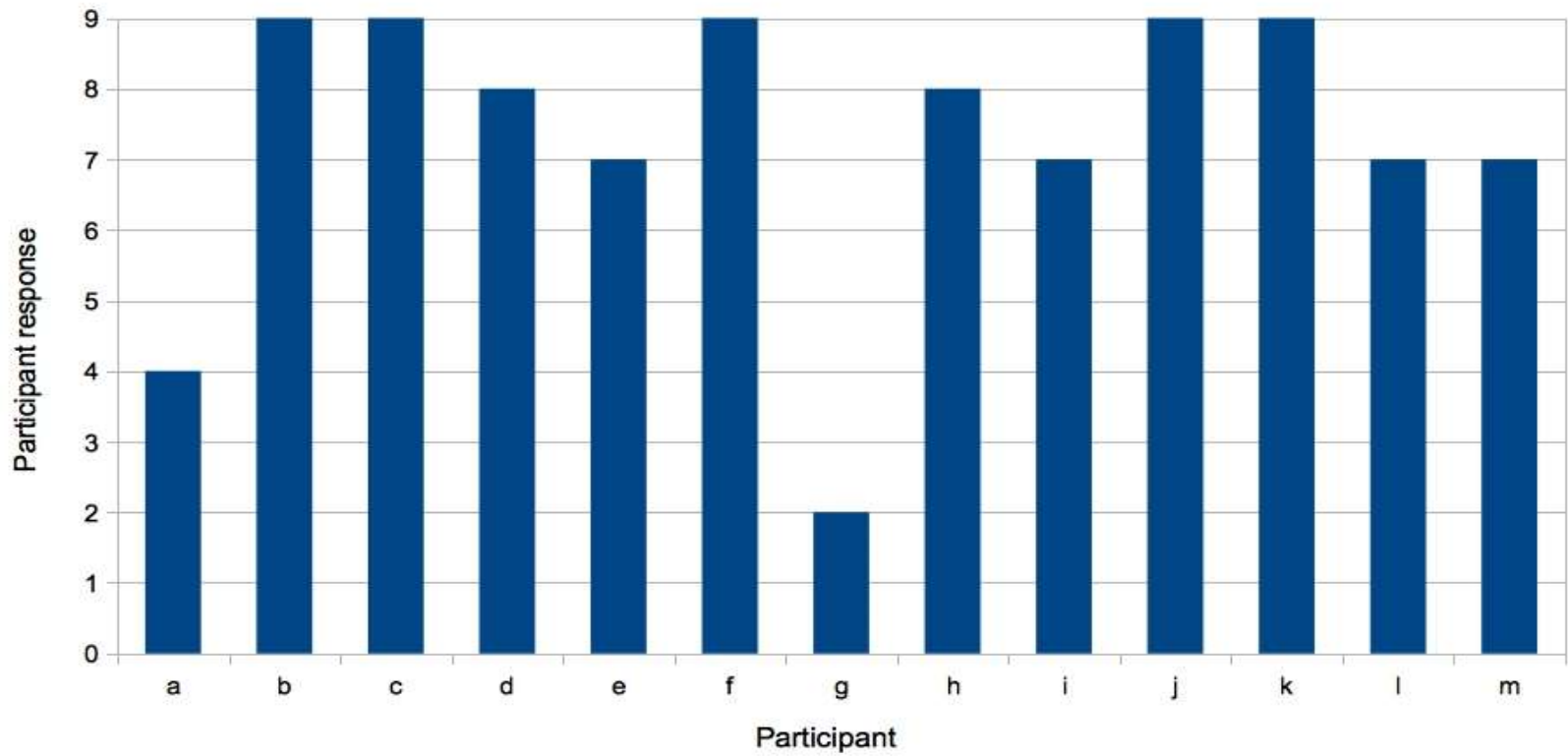
- Email
- Tutorials/one-to-one meetings
- Talk on the phone

NB focus was a discussion of academic performance (grades, feedback, required action)

Follow-up Question

'How effectively did your academic/personal tutor support you during your 3 years at Worcester?'

- Respondents gave their opinion on a 1-9 scale
NB. 1 is the lowest (not at all effective), 5 is the central point (not effective or ineffective) and 9 is the highest (extremely effective).
- Proportion of positive responses (point 6 or more) being 85%.



c. What were the most effective ways that module (subject/unit) tutors supported you during your 3 years?

- Tutorials/one-to-one support – 11 out of the 18 participants indicated that these were the most effective ways: *“Sometimes I gained more information... in a 15 minute one-to-one tutorial than I did in a 4-hour lecture.”*
- Email support – 4 out of the 18 participants indicated that this was the most effective
- The use of the VLE – 2 out of the 18 participants identified this method of support;

Follow-up Question

How effectively did your module tutors support you during your 3 years?

- Actual range of responses was from 4 to 9
- However the proportion of completely positive responses (point 6 or more) was 85%.

d. What did you find most helpful about the feedback you received in helping you to improve the quality of your work?

- Wide range of responses ranging from “Feedback was not helpful, came too late – tick-box feedback made it impersonal” to “Feedback was brilliant as it was all on-line and accessible within a few minutes. It was constructive and easy to read ...”
- Additional comments included:
 - Useful when talked through with a tutor;
 - The marking grid was useful, but the detailed feedback was better;
 - Word document with comments attached was the most useful;
 - It varied between lecturers;



f. What were the significant factors which supported your academic progress?

- Supportive tutors/lecturers – by far the most quoted factor supporting academic progress (11 out of the 18 participants);
- Other significant factors stated by single participants included:
 - Tutors emailing resources;
 - Use of VLE;
 - Self-motivation/determination;
 - Positive learning environment;
 - Support of other students;
 - Library open 24 hours;



n. Is there anything you feel that the Institute could have done better to help you realise your academic potential?

- 6 felt there was nothing more the Institute could have done better to help them realise their academic potential.

Those who felt different cited these areas:

- More help selecting modules;
- Place more emphasis on the 2nd year
- Mandatory/extra tutorials
- More committed teaching staff, who give teaching as a higher priority
- Organised modules more appropriately with regard to student workload
- More feedback as some modules didn't provide it
- Independent study groups / group study sessions outside of lecture time
- Increase the number of journals to which students have access

m. Is there anything more you feel you could have done to realise your potential?

- 7 indicated that they felt that they could not have done any more

The other participants' responses to this question were varied; here are some examples:

- Sought more support for dyslexia;
- Focused purely on the degree rather than the voluntary, additional work;
- Focused and applied myself more and made greater use of the resources available;
- Been better organised in the third year;
- Worked harder at the dissertation;
- Sought more tutorials;
- Worked harder in the 2nd year;
- Gone to a different University;

i. Were you happy with your final award and did you feel that you fulfilled your academic potential?

Yes

16

No

2

Findings

- Our analysis also confirms our previous research (Bowen-Jones, Barber and Breeze, 2011) that highlighted the importance of building effective staff/student partnerships in boosting progression and achievement rates.

Emerging Issues

- **Communication** – how can we better communicate (and make *visible*) access to the range of institutional support, guidance and resources available to them.
- **Consistency** – While wishing to retain flexibility and academic freedom, there appear to be students experiencing differences in the quality of the provision



All the Questions

- a. What aspects of the first year do you think prepared you best for the final two years of your course?
- b. What were the most effective ways that your academic/personal tutor supported you during your 3 years at Worcester?
- c. What were the most effective ways that your module tutors supported you during your 3 years at Worcester?
- d. What did you find most helpful about the feedback you received in helping you to improve the quality of your work?
- e. What were you most happy with in relation to the quality of teaching on your course?
- f. What were the significant factors that supported your academic progress?
- g. What were your personal targets, ambitions or expectations at the start of the course?
- h. Did you give any thought at the start of your course as to what classification of degree you thought you were capable of achieving?
- i. Did you have at any time a clear idea of a future career?
- j. In what way did this have a positive or motivating effect on your approach to your work?
- k. At what stage in your course would you say that you started to focus on your degree classification?
- l. Were you happy with your final award (please state what this is) and did you feel that you fulfilled your academic potential?
- m. Is there anything more you feel you could have done to your achieve potential?
- n. Is there anything you feel that the Institute could have done better to help you realise your academic potential?