Is consistency the key to keeping students happy?

Gemma Mansi reveals the results of research into factors for improving teaching practice that might help to produce positive outcomes in the NSS.

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For many academics, the growing focus on student voice and maintaining improving satisfaction for our students in the National Student Survey has been mind-boggling. We are all having to ask important questions – because we have a wealth of data on what students think in relation to the questions, but we're less sure about why they think that.

What do students mean when they say; they agree that their marking was fair? What are students getting at when they disagree that they are satisfied with different aspects of learning support? The danger is that we think we know the answers and implement changes that don't make a difference – or worse, make students even less satisfied.

Hypotheses on what could be implemented across all programmes prompted me and two of my colleagues to investigate whether there are generic factors for improving teaching practice that might help to produce positive outcomes in the NSS.

Our study aimed to understand common expectations for undergraduate students and common expectations for academic staff – and to identify where there are differences in those which may be creating underlying frustrations in terms of how staff and students work together. We found that the simple things are often the best: to ensure good outcomes, we need to get the basics right and build a feeling of coherence and consistency for our students across all modules within a programme.

One major finding was that consistency across a programme – including consistency of its staff team – is essential to developing student expectation and subsequently student satisfaction.

Specific themes highlighted by students which they related to good teaching and learning were; engaging teaching methods, workload and academic support. Differences in student satisfaction related to the parity of these themes being delivered across a programme.

Good teaching methods related to collaborative learning, real life examples to contextualise and deconstruct ideas and embedding different forms of teaching environments – including enrichment activities. Also, we found that a flexible curriculum based on student needs at different points of the academic year triggered high satisfaction from students – because this enabled them to take more control of their own learning. We also found that clear and early communication of what staff expect for their assessments through assessment criteria and briefs was related to string satisfaction.

The data suggested no association between external competing student priorities whilst studying and satisfaction. But qualitative results suggested that student dissatisfaction was heightened when there were inconsistencies between some modules requesting preparatory tasks for upcoming classes and those that didn't.

I don't understand why one class makes us do it and another one doesn't'?

Students questioned the necessity for tasks when they were not requested from all modules; there was desire to understand why there are different expectations, especially on equally valued options. Subsequently, students then commented on their other external priorities and

Effective academic support was associated with scaffolding the curriculum across the programme – to ensure students have developed confidence in academic skills, theory and essential concepts. Students felt this developed their confidence and enhanced their ability to become independent learners.

Also associated with academic support was programme teams' wider knowledge and understanding of university service, and their ability to confidently direct students to appropriate support. Interestingly, there was little expectation that academic staff should be responsible for their welfare outside of their academic studies – it was the signposting that mattered.

Interestingly, the main focus for students when talking about student satisfaction in this study is what we as academics probably consider the mere basics. The findings probably do not highlight anything out of the ordinary – in fact much of it is simply highlighting the importance of good pedagogical practices and awareness of university systems. And statistical results identified that staff responses reflected the pattern of student responses, indicating staff are alert to the needs and priorities of students.

But it cannot be underestimated that students applied for a "programme of study", and in order to have a good quality programme we need to start by being consistent in our thinking and development as programme teams – which essentially sends out a consistent and coherent message to the students. The evidence suggests variations in our practices as module leaders can lead to feelings of miscommunication and misunderstandings between staff and students enabling student dissatisfaction to manifest – and means that we might need to consider types of moderation of our activities to generate that kind of consistency.

That consistency need not mean uniformity. But if two students on different modules both have a 3,000 word essay to finish on Friday – and for one it's worth 80% and another 20% – if we can justify that, we probably need to explain it too.

What we need to make sure we are doing is in effect quite simple; teams need to know and understand programme offers and be transparent and consistent in our expectations of students. These conclusive thoughts are not intended to undermine circumstantial and situational factors, which are often complex and frustratingly can have negative effects on NSS outcomes – but in the midst of academics balancing numerous workloads it is often quite easy for us to forget the simple but effective things in delivering a programme.