Better student outcomes at University of Portsmouth: how data informed targeted intervention can support student success.

Tom Lowe
University of Portsmouth, UK

Harriet Dunbar-Morris
University of Portsmouth, UK

Natalie Dutka-Bowskill
University of Portsmouth, UK

Dominic Owen
University of Portsmouth, UK

University of Portsmouth Students' Union
University of Portsmouth, UK

Presentation Abstract

Learning Developers are increasingly asked to conduct targeted work with certain student groups and areas of academic provision to respond to an outcomes and target-focused English higher education sector. This paper presentation offered an example of practice from the University of Portsmouth Students' Union (UPSU) and University of Portsmouth (UoP), where a funded pilot to better support student outcomes has run since 2022, to address the above challenges. This substantial investment of increased staffing, student-staffing and non-staffing resources in UPSU, has led to supporting targeted solutions to improve student outcomes, in partnership with course teams and students. This project offers an example of a cross-university enhancement project for Learning Development teams and shared practice in approaching timely and targeted intervention.

Presenting as a cross university team, the session outlined how the university is working collaboratively between different services and teams to better support student success through curriculum enhancement consultancy. The team shared recommendations to the Learning Development community, introducing

Lowe, Dunbar-Morris, Dutka-Bowskill, Owen and University of Portsmouth Students Union

Better student outcomes at University of Portsmouth: how data informed targeted intervention can support student success.

Portsmouth's timely response framework to support future targeted response activities when working collaboratively across a university. In the pressured context of English Higher Education Regulation from the Office for Students, recently produced national student outcomes benchmarks, by programme and by university (B3 Measures see OfS 2022a and 22b), have threatened fines for universities where there are lower metrics in retention, graduate outcomes and student satisfaction (for context see Advance HE Governance Alert 2022). It is therefore critical for timely intervention, with data sources feeding quickly into actionable staffing resources in time for relevant intervention, which will increasingly include the work of Learning Developers. Therefore, this presentation highlighted Portsmouth's story from the Student Outcomes Project and disseminated a framework for data-informed intervention to support universities during a time of accountability and emphasis on student success.

Keywords: student success, students union, student outcomes, co-creation.

Community Response

This presentation examined an initiative at the University of Portsmouth which aimed to systematically improve student outcomes through reconfiguring diverse student support bodies to address challenges in an evidence-informed way. There was some really valuable context-setting at the outset which, as well as explaining the drivers behind the initiative (See Figure 1 below), also allowed for the audience to make connections across institutions, as the same data is collected at each institution. It seemed clear that these drivers apply across the sector.

Lowe, Dunbar-Morris, Dutka-Bowskill, Owen and University of Portsmouth Students Union

Better student outcomes at University of Portsmouth: how data informed targeted intervention can support student success.

Figure 1 Metrics of regulation that drive learner development across the sector

The presenters explained how a user-focused design approach (See Figure 2) was used to standardise initiative-design and project management, in order to target support where it was most needed. This is an apt methodology to apply, which actively involves users at every stage of the design process, and applications of user-centred design can be seen across the sector with institutional examples at Nottingham Trent University and the University of Leeds. Applied to higher education this is the means to scale up improvement initiatives and ensure they are appropriately targeted. In some ways this can be seen as a means to project manage and deliver improvement at scale at a large university (See Figure 3 for update of initiatives in the pipeline).

Lowe, Dunbar-Morris, Dutka-Bowskill, Owen and University of Portsmouth Students Union

Better student outcomes at University of Portsmouth: how data informed targeted intervention can support student success.

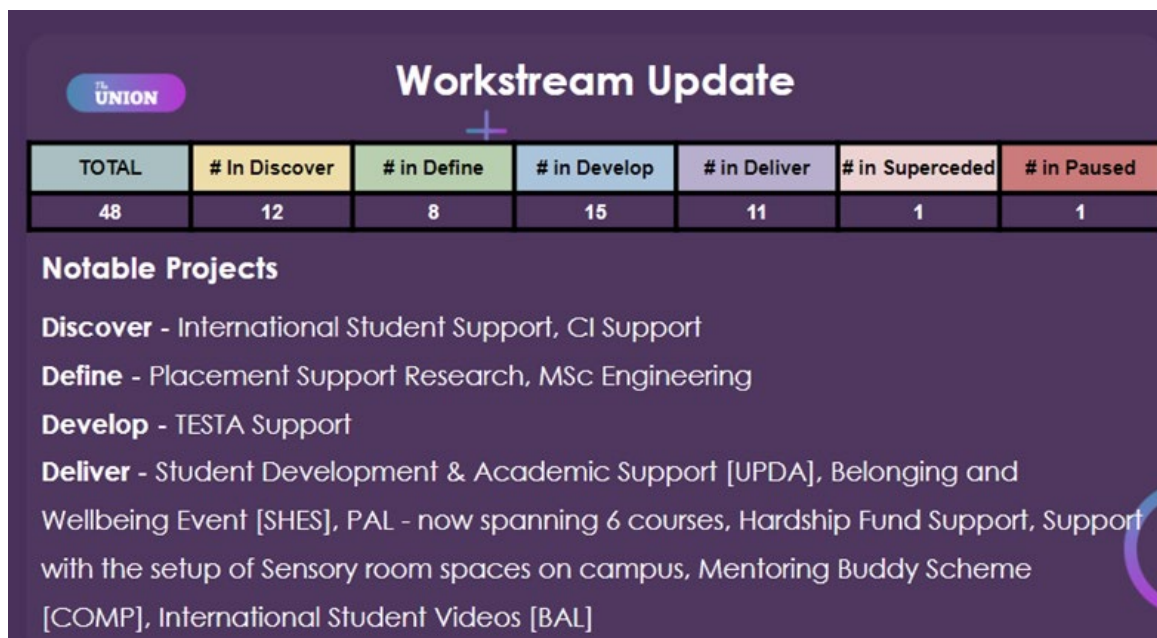**Figure 2 Design Process applied to improving Student Outcomes**

Figure 3 Overview of current improvement initiatives at University of Portsmouth

As well as delivering more initiatives in a targeted way, what is novel at Portsmouth is the role that the Students' Union is playing. As well as acting in their usual role providing student representation through course representative and elected officer system, advocacy through student welfare, and development through provision of clubs and societies, they have been a key player in this initiative offering a Better Student Outcomes Consultancy service to faculty colleagues. Evidence was

Lowe, Dunbar-Morris, Dutka-Bowskill,
Owen and University of Portsmouth
Students Union

Better student outcomes at University of Portsmouth: how data
informed targeted intervention can support student success.

presented of how warmly this was received by staff, and particular benefits concerning student engagement were identified. Similarly, a participant reflected: "The importance of peer to peer interaction is key here too, and wherever students are able to guide other students to engage with a project/event etc, we see generally quite positive engagement from the wider students we are trying to reach". The details of this bespoke student-led consultancy provided further evidence of the porous boundaries between student support, learning development, and academic development.

On the day there was a really positive response from the audience. The description of the challenges facing the sector resonated: "eager or frustrated nods reverberated across the room as colleagues heard about challenges reported at our universities, such as attendance, financial hardship in society, the long term impact of digitisation, learning and working at distance, and strategic engagements of students". There was also a lot of interest in managing student engagement in specific initiatives: "Presenters were able to anecdotally discuss what has worked within their institution and specific projects that have been particularly engaging to students".

Specifically, "incentivisation to get student feedback, or attendance at events", as clearly this is a challenge faced by many in the audience.

As we emerge from the pandemic the full picture of student engagement remains unclear and there seemed to be agreement on the need to continue to work and share progress in this area to continue to share practice and identify what works and identify collectively what elicits "more meaningful and impactful engagement from our respective students".

Author reflection

Our project has highlighted the value of collaboration between different areas of our university, where our mutual goal of student satisfaction and success is often more easily achieved when we work together. We presented with honesty at the Association of Learning Developers in Higher Education Conference, discussing the current student engagement conundrums we find ourselves experiencing post-global pandemic, and we welcomed the agreement and discussion from colleagues that

Lowe, Dunbar-Morris, Dutka-Bowskill, Owen and University of Portsmouth Students Union

Better student outcomes at University of Portsmouth: how data informed targeted intervention can support student success.

highlighted that there are mutual challenges in our sector about which perhaps we should speak more honestly. The Better Student Outcomes Project began with the ambition to work more closely between the University Management and Students' Union to address measures such as B3, but thanks to the meetings of the project Steering Group drawing together a mixture of leaders across the university, further collaborations have occurred catalysed by this initiative.

In the spirit of coming together to support our academic course areas, and respectively our students taking those programmes, the University's annual quality assurance process has expanded (beyond learning, teaching and quality assurance support) to develop support sessions for staff, with input from the Students' Union relating to student voice and belonging, the careers service relating to graduate outcomes, and sessions on learning resources from learning developers. By recognising we are all in this together, and we all wish students to succeed, old boundaries and siloes have been broken down thanks to our student leaders. This project continues with further collaboration on the horizon through greater sharing of resources, staff development events, and most recently, the formation of a new University Department of Student and Graduate Success, drawing together our outcomes-focused staff members into one team.

Acknowledgments

References

Advance HE Governance Alert (2022) Office for Students (OfS) announces numerical thresholds for student outcomes (Condition B3) (media posting)

Office for Students' (2022a) Condition B3: baselines for student outcomes indicators regulatory framework (briefing paper).

Lowe, Dunbar-Morris, Dutka-Bowskill, Owen and University of Portsmouth Students Union

Better student outcomes at University of Portsmouth: how data informed targeted intervention can support student success.

Office for Students, (2022b) B3 Data dashboard Student outcomes, https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-data-dashboard/

Author details

Tom Lowe is a Senior Lecturer in Higher Education at the University of Portsmouth, where he supports student engagement, voice and employability schemes of work. Tom is also the Chair of the RAISE Network of student engagement practitioners and researchers.

Harriet Dunbar-Morris is a Professor of Student Experience and Dean of Learning and Teaching at the University of Portsmouth, where she oversees the Education Strategy and the Department of Student and Graduate Success.

Natalie Dutka-Bowskill is the Head of Student Development at the University of Portsmouth Students' Union.

Dominic Owen is an International Relations student at the University of Portsmouth. At the time of the ALDinHE Conference, Dominic was the Democracy and Campaigns Officer at the University of Portsmouth Students Union.

Licence