

# **BMAF Survey of Key Teaching and Learning Issues in UK Business Schools December 2005**

## **Background**

Since August 2005, the new Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance (BMAF) has been hosted by the Business school at Oxford Brookes University.

The purpose of BMAF is to help staff in all discipline groups in this field provide the best possible learning experience for students undertaking higher education.

A decision was taken at the outset to conduct two Baseline Surveys of key stakeholders in the Subject Centre: Business School Deans and institutional Key Contacts.

The two online surveys were undertaken during December 2005.

The design of the surveys was broadly similar, with some slight differences introduced to reflect the differing roles and responsibilities of our two target groups. The aim of these surveys was to enable the Subject Centre for Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance (BMAF) to assess awareness and satisfaction with Subject Centre activities so that we can prioritise our activities over the next three to four years.

The Association of Business Schools (ABS) co-hosted the Deans' survey, which was sent to over 100 UK Business Schools. About 150 Key Contacts received an email asking them to complete the survey. Thirty completed surveys from the Deans (and Senior Managers) of Business Schools and Departments of Management, and sixty-three completed surveys from institutional Key Contacts were received.

Responses were made by people across the whole spectrum of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) now engaged in teaching BMAF subjects; from some very old and some very new HEIs. Twelve of the returns from the Deans' survey were made by Deans located in pre 1992 Universities (or specialist HE institutions). Most, but not all Business Schools and Departments of Management have at least one identifiable institutional Key Contact for BMAF. Approximately 33% of the Key Contacts respondents were based in pre 1992 Universities (or specialist HE institutions).

## **Key issues in teaching and learning**

The first major issue was to ascertain what were perceived to be the most important learning and teaching issues facing Business Schools. Following discussions with the Directors of other Higher Education Academy Subject Centres, plus discussions with Academy staff, we compiled a list of what were widely perceived to be the most important issues currently facing Business Schools and Departments of Management. Deans and Key Contacts were asked to rate the importance of the following issues on a five point scale as being either very important, quite important, of some concern, not very important, or not important at all:

- Teaching large groups.
- Providing timely and good quality feedback on assessment.
- Designing creative assessment.
- Plagiarism.
- Teaching international students.
- Achieving active learning in classes.
- Using e-learning.
- Using virtual learning environments.
- Addressing issues of recruitment and retention.
- Introducing Personal Development Plans.
- Widening participation.
- Work-based learning.
- Finding reliable evidence-based evaluation to measure the effectiveness of Teaching and learning interventions.
- Relating research to teaching.

The results of the surveys found that the key issues were as follows:

| Issue  | Deans            |                   | Key Contacts     |                   |
|--|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|
|  | % Very Important | % Quite Important | % Very Important | % Quite Important |
| Providing timely and good quality feedback on assessment | 77               | 17                | 71               | 20                |
| Teaching international students                          | 57               | 37                | 47               | 37                |
| Plagiarism   | 40               | 47                | 47               | 39                |
| Teaching large groups                                    | 47               | 33                | 44               | 41                |
| Addressing issues of recruitment and retention           | 63               | 27                | 37               | 36                |
| Achieving active learning in classes                     | 33               | 47                | 36               | 39                |
| Designing creative assessment                            | 33               | 50                | 31               | 46                |

There are some variations between the views of Deans and Key Contacts, but the degree of consensus is quite discernible. We have included the responses for both

Deans and Key Contacts on both ‘very important’ and ‘quite important’ to give an indication of the strength of views.

The issue of student assessment and feedback stands out from the rest, and there is a broad consensus that the next three issues (international students, plagiarism and large groups) are highly important. Two closely-related issues then follow – achieving active learning and designing creative assessment. The issue of recruitment and retention of students is given more weight by Deans than it is by Key Contacts, perhaps reflecting the differing roles and responsibilities of these two groups.

There was then quite a marked drop in perceptions of importance of the following set of issues:

| Issue  | Deans            |                   | Key Contacts     |                   |
|--|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|
|  | % Very Important | % Quite Important | % Very Important | % Quite Important |
| Using e-learning   | 23               | 47                | 25               | 42                |
| Using virtual learning environments  | 27               | 50                | 15               | 47                |
| Relating research to teaching  | 20               | 50                | 24               | 34                |
| Introducing Personal Development Plan  | 13               | 47                | 14               | 46                |
| Finding reliable evidence-based evaluation to measure the effectiveness of teaching and learning interventions | 10               | 53                | 15               | 39                |
| Widening participation   | 17               | 47                | 19               | 34                |
| Work-based learning  | 27               | 30                | 19               | 32                |

Again, a general pattern is observable: while broadly still considered as important, they are not the most pressing issues facing either Business school Deans or institutional Key Contacts. The related issues of e-learning and Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are clearly important. Implementing Personal Development Planning (PDP), widening participation, relating research to teaching and work-based learning are also of importance, as is the issue of finding reliable evidence-based evaluation to measure the effectiveness of teaching and learning interventions. At this (lower) end of the scale, again there appears to be a broad consensus between the Deans and the BMAF Key Contacts.

An open-ended question, allowing respondents to add any concerns not listed (above) was also included. Approximately 39% of respondents added up to three additional issues of concern. We grouped these according to broad recurring themes. Some of the responses were at least partially covered by the structured questions (above), such

as engaging students more thoroughly. Other issues where Deans and Key Contacts shared concern included continuing professional development for teaching staff, and managing learning and teaching within severe resource constraints. Generally, these responses varied too widely to draw any firm conclusions, often focussing on the needs of a particular Business School at a particular time, however the notable exception was that of the need for more resources (expressed in various ways).

## Support for teaching and learning

Another major area of interest for the two surveys was the extent to which Business Schools and Departments provided their staff with support in learning and teaching. Again, based upon our own knowledge of the different indicators of Business school 'engagement' in support for learning and teaching, we drew up a scale of questions by which we could gauge the strength of support: starting with the more formal requirements (Heads of Teaching and Learning, committees and strategies), moving through active encouragement, to finally providing resources and taking a proactive stance. Both Deans and Key Contacts were asked to gauge the level of support for teaching and learning in their Business School or Department of Management.

### Results from Deans:

| Support Provided   | %            | Response Total |
|--|--------------|----------------|
| You have a Head/Director of Learning and Teaching  | 63.3%        | 19             |
| You have a Learning and Teaching Committee   | 86.75        | 26             |
| You have a written Learning and Teaching Strategy.   | 90%          | 27             |
| You have a Learning and Teaching Strategy that is regularly reviewed.  | 83.3%        | 25             |
| You hold regular workshops and seminars on learning and teaching issues specifically for your Business School/Department   | 80%          | 24             |
| You encourage staff to undertake learning and teaching development projects.   | 96.7%        | 29             |
| <b>You provide remission from workload and funding for this activity</b>   | <b>43.3%</b> | <b>13</b>      |
| <b>You offer a career track for staff who specialise in learning and teaching matters (this can include promotion to senior lecturer/principal lecturer, and University teaching fellowships).</b> | <b>63.3%</b> | <b>19</b>      |
| You regularly review learning and teaching as part of annual individual performance review   | 76.7%        | 23             |

### Results from Key Contacts

| Support Provided | % | Response Total |
|------------------|---|----------------|
|------------------|---|----------------|

|  |              |    |
|--|--------------|----|
| You have a Head/Director of Learning and Teaching  | 51.7%        | 31 |
| You have a Learning and Teaching Committee   | 86.75        | 52 |
| You have a written Learning and Teaching Strategy.   | 76.7%        | 46 |
| You have a Learning and Teaching Strategy that is regularly reviewed.  | 71.7%        | 43 |
| You hold regular workshops and seminars on learning and teaching issues specifically for your Business School/Department   | 73.3%        | 44 |
| You encourage staff to undertake learning and teaching development projects.   | 81.7%        | 49 |
| <b>You provide remission from workload and funding for this activity</b>   | <b>33.3%</b> | 20 |
| <b>You offer a career track for staff who specialise in learning and teaching matters (this can include promotion to senior lecturer/principal lecturer, and University teaching fellowships).</b> | <b>38.3%</b> | 23 |
| You regularly review learning and teaching as part of annual individual performance review   | 70%          | 42 |

## Discussion

Generally, similar results were received from both the Deans and BMAF Key Contacts. It is clear that (unsurprisingly) most Business Schools complied with the formal requirements (although it was clear from the responses of Key Contacts that only about half had a designated Head or Director of teaching and learning). However, there are some areas of discrepancy between the responses from Deans and Key Contacts, which are highlighted in the tables. These relate to perceptions of the resources provided to support staff in learning and teaching activity. These indicate that while there is a formal strong acknowledgment of the importance of encouraging staff to undertake teaching and learning projects, both the resources to do so, and the rewards for such achievement in terms of career opportunities are not always available. So while 97% of Deans claim to encourage their staff to undertake learning and development projects only 43% provide resources for staff to do so, and the Key Contacts' perceptions of such support were less favourable figure (33%). Similarly in the area of career prospects for staff specialising in teaching and learning. 63% of the Deans indicated that a career track is available for staff specialising in teaching and learning, whilst only 38% of the Key Contacts perceive this to be the case. It is possible that the Deans who found the time to complete our survey are generally more supportive of teaching and learning than those who did not. However, it may be that Key Contacts simply do not perceive that Deans value good teaching as much as the Deans themselves would claim.

## The value of the activities of the BMAF Subject Centre

A major objective of the Baseline Surveys was to gauge awareness of and satisfaction with the activities and services provided by the Subject Centre to date. As the new

hosts of the Subject Centre (Oxford Brookes Business School), we considered it important to investigate this with a view to planning future Subject Centre activities and services. The overarching questions were designed differently for Deans and Key Contacts, although the same activities were named. Deans were asked if they were aware of BMAF activities (as it was presumed that many were not), whilst Key Contacts were asked to rate the usefulness of these activities.

### Deans' Awareness of Subject Centre activities and services

| Activity or Service   | %          | Response Total |
|---|------------|----------------|
| Responses to e-communications                               | 33.3%      | 8              |
| Monthly e-Bulletin  | 54.2%      | 13             |
| International Journal of Management Education               | 62.5%      | 15             |
| <b>Higher Education Academy Subject Centre website</b>      | <b>75%</b> | <b>18</b>      |
| External Examiner Database                                  | 45.8%      | 11             |
| National workshop programme                                 | 54.2%      | 13             |
| Regional meetings for Institutional Key Contacts            | 29.2%      | 7              |
| Annual Subject Centre Conference                            | 41.7%      | 10             |
| Small grants for Teaching Research and Development Projects | 37.5%      | 9              |

Although there were only a relatively small number of Deans who responded to the survey, the results indicate that very few are aware of the existing range of services and activities. Only the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre website, was recognised by most respondents. This clearly has implications for the need to promote Subject Centre activities and services more actively to Deans.

### Key Contacts' Perceptions of the Value of Current Subject Centre Activities and Services

|   | Very useful | Quite useful | Of some use | Not very useful | Not useful at all | Total Responses |
|---|-------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Responses to e-communications                   | 6%(3)       | 31%(16)      | 46%(24)     | 12%(6)          | 6%(3)             | 52              |
| Monthly e-Bulletin.                             | 20%(11)     | 29%(16)      | 36%(20)     | 7%(4)           | 7%(4)             | 55              |
| International Journal of Management Education   | 15%(8)      | 43%(23)      | 28%(15)     | 9%(5)           | 6%(3)             | 54              |
| Higher Education Academy Subject Centre website | 11%(6)      | 38%(21)      | 35%(19)     | 11%(6)          | 5%(3)             | 55              |

|   |         |         |         |         |        |    |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|----|
| External Examiner Database.                                 | 8%(4)   | 19%(10) | 38%(20) | 25%(13) | 10%(5) | 52 |
| National workshop programme                                 | 17%(9)  | 41%(22) | 24%(13) | 13%(7)  | 6%(3)  | 54 |
| Regional Meetings for Institutional Key Contacts            | 29%(15) | 31%(16) | 23%(12) | 12%(6)  | 6%(3)  | 52 |
| Annual Subject Centre Conference                            | 29%(15) | 33%(17) | 21%(11) | 12%(6)  | 6%(3)  | 52 |
| Small grants for Teaching Research and Development Projects | 19%(10) | 31%(17) | 39%(21) | 7%(4)   | 4%(2)  | 54 |

In general, these activities were perceived to be useful, but not particularly so. Regional Key Contacts meetings, the annual Subject Centre Conference and small grants for teaching research and development projects were particularly warmly regarded. However, it is clear that while the Subject Centre national workshop programme and International Journal of Management Education are perceived to be of some use, there is more scope for development. Finally, it is clear that the Subject Centre website and External Examiner database require further attention to ensure that they provide a better service.

An open-ended question for both Deans and Key Contacts, requesting further guidance on what future activities of the Subject Centre would be most useful, was included at this point in the survey. Up to three potential future activities could be listed by respondents. Nearly all of the respondents (who added one or more activities in this section) were keen to see more workshops developed to help them cope with the key issues in teaching and learning. Also, there was a strong desire for these workshops to be available locally – if not in the actual HEI of the respondents. There was a broad range of other suggestions, but in particular, there was also a strong desire for more opportunities for networking, including the continuation of the annual conference; assistance for research and development projects; a bank of resources to support evidence-informed teaching; and more focused and regular communications including the website, visits to institutions and ‘roadshows’.

## Conclusion

The results from these surveys will enable the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance to focus its efforts on the areas that Deans and Key Contacts alike perceive to be important. There is much more that could be investigated, and these issues will be followed up by presentations of these findings to regional Key Contact meetings, to the annual Subject Centre Conference, and to the appropriate committees of the Association of Business Schools. We also welcome further feedback on this paper.

