The Enhancing Series Case Studies: International Learning Experience

Listening to International Students

Philip Warwick
York Management School
University of York

Introduction

This case study describes the outcome of a project which listened to the views of a large cohort of largely international students. Taught masters students were asked to give their opinions on their teaching and learning experiences. An action research approach was used to identify issues, implement appropriate changes and review the outcome.

Key Words
Teaching and learning experiences, Student Survey, Action Research

Summary

An annual student survey focused on teaching and learning can help programme leaders make incremental changes to their programme. This type of approach is particularly suited to a one year taught masters programme. By repeating the survey, it is relatively easy to judge how effective changes have been and this approach can quickly build into a longitudinal survey, illustrating how student perceptions vary over the years.

The York Management School (TYMS) became aware of the needs of a diverse, largely international, student population as a result of conducting an annual Listening to Masters Students Survey. It is anticipated that the annual round of survey, review and incremental change is likely to continue for some time to come.
Objectives

The aim of this project was to survey a largely international student cohort so that the staff at TYMS could learn from the students’ experiences, and find ways to improve the programme and others like it in the future.

The following specific objectives were identified for the Listening to Masters Students project:

- To engage international, EU and home students in a dialogue about their learning experiences during the second term of their one year masters programme.
- To review the programme in the light of the research findings.
- To disseminate the understanding gained from this project to other departments around the university.
- To use the survey as a basis for a longitudinal study to determine if changes to the programme led to greater student satisfaction.

Rationale

The research strategy adopted by the project team used a mixture of inductive and deductive approaches to gather student views. In year one, two temporary research assistants (both international PhD students), conducted loosely structured interviews with 25% of the students. Four focus groups were arranged, covering a further 25% of the cohort, to discuss the main issues that arose from interviewing individuals. Finally, the views of the whole group were captured by a short questionnaire. The questionnaire (Appendix 1) was given out at the end of the second term and repeated in 2006/07 and 2007/08.

At the end of the second term students who had completed all their taught modules were about to embark on their dissertations. The questionnaire covered the following issues:

- Induction - did it provide the student with the information, skills and knowledge they needed to start the programme?
- Assessment – were the assessment formats what they were expecting?
- Teaching Styles – did students prefer lectures, seminars or group work?
- Working with others - how did they find working in groups?
- Workload – was the workload too onerous?
- English Language – did the international students improve their English while studying in the UK?
- Overall satisfaction – would students recommend studying at York to friends?

In order to make the questionnaire as relevant as possible (and to overcome problems of evaluation fatigue) it was given-out during a dissertation
preparation workshop, in which students were not only asked to fill-in the questionnaire but later in the session they were asked to critique the questionnaire and the survey methods. The completed survey rate varied as follows: 65% in 2005/06, 46% in 2006/07 and 76% in 2007/08.

In addition to the questionnaire, three student focus groups (one of home students, one EU and one of Chinese and Taiwanese students) were arranged in 2007/08 to discuss the results.

An action research approach was adopted from the start (Saunders et al 2003) with adjustments made to the programme in response to each survey. Outcomes were reviewed subsequently using the following year’s survey as a measure of success.

Context

In October 2005 TYMS started a new taught masters programme that attracted a largely international student cohort (see table 1). Teaching and support staff in the School were at this time not used to working with large culturally diverse groups of home or international students (Warwick 2007); many faced a very steep learning curve. The action research project was seen as one way to evaluate the outcome and learn from the experience.

### Table 1: York University, taught masters programme student numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005-06</th>
<th>2006-07</th>
<th>2007-08</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Union</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(EU)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other international</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Description

Survey results

Several interesting themes emerged from the survey results. This paper concentrates on: teaching styles, student workload; working with other students, use of English, the induction arrangements and assessment tasks.

i. **Teaching Styles**

In 2005/2006 the one-to-one interviews suggested that students liked clear speaking, well-structured sessions, useful handouts, etc. Students were more critical of teaching styles in the focus groups. The 2005/2006 students said they were unhappy with staff who did not allow time for questions at the end of sessions and those who were not available in the school or who did not answer emails.
In 2005/2006, the majority of modules were timetabled and taught in two-hour lecture slots. Perhaps as a result, the 2005/06 questionnaire identified considerable dissatisfaction that most teaching was done in large groups with much less group work than students had expected to encounter on a UK based masters programme. In 2006/07 and 2007/08 once seminars and group work became a routine part of the programme, responses to the statement, *I preferred doing group work...to lectures*, changed from clear support in 2005/06 (40% in favour 23% against) to a slight preference in 2008 (38% for 36% against).

Even more noticeable were the answers to the seminar group question. In 2005/06, 72% said they wanted the class broken down into smaller groups but this figure had dropped to 53% in 2007/08, perhaps because this had been a daily occurrence on their programme. Responses to questions on class discussions show less interest in class discussions in 2007/08 than in the two previous years (41% said they liked sessions where the class discussed questions, compared with 48% in 2005/06 and 2006/07). The 2007/08 focus groups revealed that home students were the least happy discussing issues in seminars (they preferred lectures).

The questions about understanding lectures did show a marginal improvement over the three years. In 2005/06, 54% said they could understand lectures, while 16 percent said were not able to understand. By 2007/08, 64% of the students said they were able to understand lectures although worryingly, 14% still said they could not understand the content of lectures.

ii. Workload

Given the figures for understanding lectures, it is not unexpected that the questions about workload also led to a mixed response. In the interviews and focus group meetings in 2005/2006, there was near universal agreement that students had had to work extremely hard to complete the required reading, prepare work for the next week’s lectures and any assessments, with some students estimating that they were working for 18 hours per day on their studies. Many of the East Asian students on the programme indicated that language problems meant that they spent long hours getting through the required reading. However the questionnaire results painted a different picture; 38% of the 2005/06 students indicated that they had not had too much work to do and 30% agreed with the statement: *the workload has been about right*. These responses seem to indicate that although many of the 2005/06 class had to work extremely hard and felt under intense pressure, around a third of the cohort did not have any difficulties keeping up with the workload.

The 2007/08 students have answered in a similar way with a significant spread of answers: 45% suggested that they have had too much to do, 32% thought the workload is about right, the rest gave neutral answers. The 2007/08 focus groups reflected this range of views. The EU student focus group seemed the least concerned about workload pressures.
iii. Working with others

The 2005/06 student interviews and focus groups provided a range of views about group work and working with other students. Some clearly indicated that they did not like group work and that they avoided taking an active part in it. Some did not feel they should be asked to do group work as part of a lesson, while others indicated that they liked working with others. Some enjoyed working with fellow nationals, while others enjoyed meeting and working with people from other nations and cultures. These different opinions carried through into the questionnaire. Nevertheless, in 2005/06 group work exercises seemed to be popular overall, 59% of student agreed with the statement, *I enjoyed doing group work exercises with other students.*

In contrast the 2007/08 group seemed more orientated to working on their own, 37% saying they preferred working on their own and less than half, 46%, saying they enjoyed doing group work. Only 29% of the 2007/08 group felt they had *... learnt a lot from my colleagues.* In the 2007/08 focus groups the home students were the least satisfied with their group work experiences, while the EU and Chinese students appeared much more enthusiastic.

iv. Use of English

In 2005/06 many East Asian and European students were concerned and disappointed that there were so many Mandarin speaking students, so that 70% agreed with the statement, *I have not used spoken English as much as I wanted to.* In that first year, only 40% agreed with the statement, *My English skills have improved while studying at York.* The 2006/07 and 2007/08 students’ responses to these questions did show a significant improvement, so by 2007/08, 70% felt their English had improved while studying at York. There is of course still much room for improvement.

v. Induction

Induction arrangements are vital for one year masters programmes because students have so little time to adjust to studying at a new level often in a new country. The questionnaire results show a gradual improvement in the response to induction but there are still some problems to overcome. In 2005/2006, 63% of the group said they did not have enough information about workload and class size before they arrived in York. This figure fell to 28% in 2007/2008. Despite a significant effort to improve the induction programme over the last two years, 18% in 2006/07 group and 16% of in 2007/08 still said the induction programme was not useful to them.

vi. Assessment

Detailed questions about module assessment strategies are posed in individual module evaluations; this survey placed the emphasis on prior expectations of assessment. In the interview and focus groups in 2005/06, students were mainly concerned with the time available to
complete exams and to write assignments. They said that time pressures meant that they adopted strategies based on coping rather than doing their best work. In the questionnaire students were asked about expectations of assessment. Many students said that they did not understand what type of assessment to expect before starting the course. This figure has remained fairly constant over three years at around 40%.

vii. **Overall Satisfaction**
The final question in the questionnaire survey was essentially marketing research. In service industries it is generally held that there is a very strong link between an organisation’s success and the proportion of customers who are ‘promoters’ of the service (Reichheld 2003). Promoters are those people who are most likely to give a word of mouth recommendation for the product or service. The questionnaire asked: *How likely is it that you would recommend studying at York to a friend?* (question 19). The responses were used to calculate the net promoter figure by excluding the neutrals and undecided to leave a figure for those who would recommend minus those who would not. The net approval rating was 59% for 2007/2008, compared to 42% for 2006/07 and 10% for 2005/06. The School is pleased that net promoter figure has improved over the three surveys. However, *Amazon* and *Ebay*, the most successful companies Reichheld studied at the start of the current decade achieved net promoter figures of around 75%, so there is still some way to go.

**Action taken as a result of the survey**
For the last three years the survey results have helped the programme director and staff teaching on the programme to identify issues concerning significant numbers of students on the programme. Action has been taken in the following areas:

i. **Recruitment and expectations management**
   In response to feedback on workload, a clearer separation between the students on the MSc Management with Business Finance and those on the MA in Management has allowed for both more optional modules and less pressure at the end of the first term.

   There is little point in admitting students who are likely to fail the programme because of poor language skills. The problems faced by some students have led to more detailed scrutiny of IELTS scores to ensure no components of the score fall below 6.0 and the creation of an alternative entry route for students with IELTS score of 6.0. These students can choose to attend a two-month summer school in York prior to beginning their studies. Results for these students clearly indicate that they perform as well if not better than those students entering with an IELTS score of 6.5 (Soden and Warwick 2008). All international students are encouraged to attend English for academic purposes support in the first term.
Over the summer months a monthly newsletter is sent out to all students who have been offered a place providing them with information about assessment methods, preparatory reading, likely workload, module choices, social events and staff activities.

ii. **Induction processes**

The importance of induction is referred to in the literature (Turner and Acker, 2002; Carroll and Ryan 2005) as well as being an issue in the survey. ‘Drip feeding’ the most important information at appropriate moments is the recommended approach (Ladd and Ruby 1999, Wisker 2003, Gannon-Leary and Smailes 2004). In 2007/08, induction was spread out over an extended period. Talks about preparation for assessment and academic misconduct take place in the second half of the first term, at a point where they are more relevant and less abstract. In an attempt to improve group work, additional social space and a team building exercise were introduced in the 2007/08 induction programme, with more emphasis laid on getting to know each other.

iii. **Group work**

To facilitate group work in 2006/07 and 2007/08, students were arranged in a series of multi-national and multi-cultural study groups. In 2006 the groups were mainly designed to act as peer support groups and were not particularly effective. In 2007/08 students attended seminars in their study groups and most modules leaders used study groups as the basis for case study preparation between sessions. Wherever possible the tasks assigned to the groups have an international theme, requiring home students to take an international perspective while at the same time avoiding putting international students at a disadvantage (De Vita, 2001, Carroll and Ryan 2005).

It is interesting to note that as group work has become a more onerous requirement of the programme rather than an occasional treat, students have become less enthusiastic about doing it. Discussion in the 2007/08 focus groups identified that it was the home students who are the most sceptical about the benefits of working with their colleagues (Leki 2001 and Parks and Raymond 2004 refer to this type of home student scepticism).

iv. **Access to staff and supervision**

As a result of the survey of 2005/06 survey students all staff set up 4 hours per week of office hours. Staff were also encouraged to allow time at the end of lectures for students to ask informal questions. Access to staff has not been raised as an issue in 2006/07 or 2007/08, suggesting this action has been effective.

v. **Teaching and learning strategies**

The majority of the 2005/06 students said they preferred smaller groups, indicating dissatisfaction with the prevailing class size. To overcome this problem, classes were broken down into smaller seminar sessions whenever practicable. The standard teaching model was changed from
a two hour lecture slot to one hour lectures supported by weekly seminars in smaller groups. Responses to the 2007/08 survey suggest that as with group work, students are less keen to attend seminars when they become a routine requirement of the programme.

In 2005/06, students said they liked staff to provide a clear structure for modules and for each lecture. They wanted staff to deliver material at an even pace, not speeding through lectures. This message was passed on to staff who have been encouraged through their module evaluation reports to reflect on the adaptations they have made to their modules to accommodate the international student population. Comments made by students in 2007/08 suggest that most staff have adapted their teaching over the last three years. It would be incorrect to say that all lectures by all staff are well received; however student experiences seem to be improving and staff continue to learn from their teaching experiences.

Many international students have a limited vocabulary (Carroll and Ryan 2005) so many find it hard to work with complicated academic language both in lectures and when receiving feedback and assessment instructions. Staff are encouraged to avoid using unexplained metaphors, to explain technical language and above all to use straightforward language in assessment questions and exam papers. The management school has a peer review mechanism in the assessment process. As part of this, colleagues are now asked to review questions for any language or contextual understanding that would inadvertently penalise international students (Hayes and Introna, 2003).

vi. **Assessment and workload**
The timing of assessments and the uneven distribution of workload that this implies have been a concern for around a third of students in all three surveys. In the 2007/08 focus groups the home students and Chinese students said they were concerned about assessment workload. In an effort to reduce the pressure, hand-in dates and exams have been spread out towards the end of the 2007/08 programme, but more needs to be done on this issue and it is a priority for action in 2008/09.

**Evaluation**

The information provided by the annual survey served to focus attention on specific teaching and learning issues. Following discussion among staff teaching the programme, it has been possible to agree actions to address specific teaching and learning issues. Some, but not all, changes have had a beneficial effect on student satisfaction, (the 2007/08 response to group working being a good example of an unexpected adverse outcome).

**Discussion**

A range of formal quality assurance systems have worked alongside the listening project survey described above. These include computerised
individual module evaluations, a staff-student liaison committee and student representation on formal departmental committees. However for the last three years, the most useful programme specific information has come from this annual listening survey. Changes made to the programme, (the introduction of seminars, changes to the assessment timetable, the organisation of group work, changes to induction and entry requirements and even the adoption of an office hours system in 2006/07) all result from listening to student feedback and making small incremental changes to the programme.

Coupling the survey with an action research approach means that it is relatively easy to identify an issue, make appropriate changes and then measure the impact of the changes. There have been some significant and successful improvements, such as the improvements to the amount of English used by international students and the impact of a range of changes on the net promoter figure. However, not all changes have been well received and there remains much work to be done. The teaching styles and workload responses suggest that language ability remains an issue for international students (Warwick 2007). The evidence seems to suggest that students with the weakest language skills are still struggling to understand lectures and keep up with course work. Exacerbating the difficulties these students face, it seems that home students and others with better language skills are increasingly intolerant of those who they feel are not contributing to the programme.

Similarly, group working arrangements continue to be an issue. Teaching staff feel that group work is an important component of a management masters programme (De Vita 2001, Kaye and Hawkridge 2003). Flowerdew (1998) emphasises that group work is particularly suitable as an approach to learning for students from Chinese cultural backgrounds; home and EU students are generally well used to group work. However, this does not mean that group work is going to be successful for all students in all situations. Despite the introduction of team building work, and clear explanations in the induction programme about why TYMS believes in the need and usefulness of multi-cultural group work, over half the students in 2007/08 said they did not enjoy doing group work exercises. Volet and Ang (1998), Ho et al (2004) and Cathcart et al (2006) all noted problems in the relationships between home and East Asian international students. It seems that inter-student relationships during group work continues to cause problems at York and will need further attention in the coming years.

Staff reactions to internationalisation were considered by Turner (2006). She suggested that not all internationalisation initiatives, changes and modifications are going to be universally adopted and implemented willingly by staff. At York, a lot of changes have been introduced over the last three years. Perhaps the shock of such a radical change in the number of international students in the School (from 12 in 2002/03, to 214 five years later in 2007/08), has led to a willingness to effect changes. A more gradual change in international student numbers might not have had the same impact. A collective will to improve the programme following a very difficult first year has meant that teaching staff have been prepared to reflect on their teaching
and learning experiences (Fry et al 1999, Turner 2006) and listen and respond to the student viewpoint.

Much work remains to be done but we hope that the continued use of the action research approach discussed in this paper will allow for ongoing incremental changes.
### Induction and pre-course information

1. I had all the information I needed before I came to York.  
   - Strongly agree  
   - Strongly disagree  

2. I had enough information about the work load and class size.  
   - Strongly agree  
   - Strongly disagree  

3. I understood what assessments I would have to do before I arrived.  
   - Strongly agree  
   - Strongly disagree  

4. The induction programme gave a useful introduction to studying in York.  
   - Strongly agree  
   - Strongly disagree  

### Teaching and learning

5. I preferred the lectures where the lecturer talked for the whole session.  
   - Strongly agree  
   - Strongly disagree  

6. I preferred lectures where the class discussed questions.  
   - Strongly agree  
   - Strongly disagree  

7. I preferred doing group work with colleagues rather than the lectures.  
   - Strongly agree  
   - Strongly disagree  

8. I preferred seminars when the class was split into smaller groups.  
   - Strongly agree  
   - Strongly disagree  

9. I was able to understand and follow lectures.  
   - Strongly agree  
   - Strongly disagree  

10. Have you any general comments about the teaching on the course?  

### Group Work/study Groups

11. I preferred to work on my own rather than do study group exercises.  
   - Strongly agree  
   - Strongly disagree
12 I enjoyed doing group works/study group exercises with other students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

13 I found it hard to talk with other students during the group work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

14 I learnt a lot from my colleagues when doing the group work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Workload**

15 The work load has been about right.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

16 I have had too much work to do. I have not kept up with requirements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**General issues**

17 My English language skills have improved while studying at York.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

18 I have not used spoken English as much as I wanted to do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

19 How likely is it that you would recommend studying at York to a friend?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very likely</th>
<th>Not at all likely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

20 Are there any reasons why you would not recommend studying at York?
Biography

Philip Warwick has worked at the York Management School since 2003, teaching on a range of programmes from 1st year undergraduate to post experience masters programmes. He is currently head of the school’s taught masters programmes.

Since 2003, he has pursued an interested in teaching international students and has several publications in this field. In 2005/06, he was awarded a university teaching fellowship grant to visit universities in New Zealand and Australia to study their approach to teaching international students. He is currently working towards a PhD on the theme of the internationalising of higher education.

References


