Reading Student Survey 2008

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Confidentiality

This report represents one view of the strengths and weaknesses in student learning at Reading. It is in many respects a commercially sensitive document, so due caution should be taken in the circulation of this information.

A separate subject-level report with restricted information will be circulated to Schools as a PDF which can be circulated to all staff and students to engender discussion.

CETL in Applied Undergraduate Research Skills
Reading University Students' Union
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Executive summary

Context

The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy 2007-11 has the following vision:

'As an established and highly successful research-led UK university, we aspire to produce graduates who have developed skills and knowledge of life-long value, have the confidence and enthusiasm to fulfil their personal ambitions and seek to make a difference in the world in which they live.

This vision will be enabled by providing a stimulating and challenging educational experience which is responsive to the needs of students and society at large within a welcoming and supportive learning and teaching community'.

How can we tell if we are challenging our students? How supportive is our learning and teaching community? One of the first action-points to implement the strategy was to survey current students about our provision. This is that survey.

Purpose of this report

The aims of the Reading Student Survey 2008 were: (1) to investigate the change in engagement and challenge as students pass through their studies from Part 1, 2 and their final year at Undergraduate level, to tuition in taught masters programmes; and (2) to investigate the comparative strengths and weaknesses of different academic disciplines, providing an evidence-base for where effective practice is taking place within the University, so that managers can foster the transmission of these ideas and practices from one part of the University to another.

Since this survey instrument has some questions in common with surveys in North America and Australasia, an additional purpose is to benchmark ourselves against these institutions, to examine the strengths of our provision in the Anglophone HE market.

Key points

The survey

This was an online census survey of 9,831 undergraduates and taught postgraduates. There were 2,442 valid responses (25%). The survey took place between 11 April and 11 May 2008, after the NSS had effectively closed. In comparison NSS 2008 is based on 1,588 respondents, and the online response rate was virtually the same until telephone-chasing brought it up above the required 50% threshold.

The survey was divided into a series of core themes (the headings below), for each of which a series of questions came together to form an overall indicator. This figure provides a headline for the strengths or weakness of subjects in these core themes. The responses to individual questions can then be analysed to investigate the detail of the data.

All indicators used in the report are on a 100 point scale, 0 representing least engagement and 100 representing most. Figures are always the median response of the student group unless otherwise stated.

Internationally, Reading out-performs the average performance of Australasian institutions in all categories. The picture when compared to the US and Canada is however more mixed with differing strengths and weaknesses.

Level of Academic Challenge

Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to a quality learning experience. Ideally we encourage high levels of student achievement through promoting the importance of academic endeavour and setting high expectations for student performance.

- Students' perception of their level of challenge rises as they progress through their degree. But should this be the case, or should students always feel they are being challenged and stretched?

- Reading students do not feel challenged as much as their US/Canadian counterparts, especially in Part 1, but they are stretched more than students in Australasia. However, our students do feel that during their learning they are asked to make more judgements about the value of information, arguments or methods than students in North America or Australasia.

- Students in FAH perceive lower levels of integration of ideas from one module to another than in other Faculties. By 'ideas', students when answering the question may be thinking of the applicability of 'specific knowledge' rather than the development of transferable and analytical skills that can benefit other modules.

Active and Collaborative Learning

Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems, or mastering difficult material, prepares students to deal with the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily during and after University.

- The comparison with the US 'Very Research-Intensive Universities' data suggests broad comparability at Part 1. There does appear to be less collaborative learning in the final year, especially in terms of informal peer-assistance outside the classroom.

- Collaborative working is a key skill sought by employers. FAH consistently has the lowest scores for team-working and, unlike other Faculties, does not show a growth in levels of Active and Collaborative Learning as students' progress. However FAH is consistently ahead of all other Faculties in terms of its students engaging and interacting in other ways in class (e.g. asking questions and seeing themselves as active participants).

Research-based Learning

- At Faculty and University level, a gradual progression from tutor-focused to student-focused teaching can be identified, and a shift from information content to research-based learning. Nonetheless, this masks significant variation at the subject-level.

- Many subjects show a transitional development from slightly didactic teaching in Part 1 to more research-based teaching to Finalists and Masters students. However some show no shift whatsoever.

- There are some subjects that are consistently research-based (e.g. Social Work). However there are others, particularly within some science disciplines, that appear to be very staff rather than student-focused. Without comparative data from other HEIs it is difficult to tell if this is due to the nature of the discipline, or the particular way the subject is taught here.

Student Interaction with Academics

Interaction with academics is a fundamental aspect in the student identifying themselves with their discipline (becoming a member of a 'community of practice'); much of this is done by observing and interacting with academics. Feedback from assignments is one of the key ways in which this takes place.

- Reading compares very poorly against the US in terms of Student Interaction with Academics. This is likely to be more of a cultural divide between UK and US universities than between Reading and the US. Nonetheless in a global market for students these data are instructive.

- The proportion of students who describe themselves as having worked with an academic on a research project is the same for Finalists (23%) as in the most research-intensive US universities, where National Science Foundation research-funding places far more emphasis on undergraduate involvement in research. Unfortunately there is no benchmark data to compare ourselves against Russell Group or other 1994 group members in this respect.

- Interaction with academics generally rises, but is no greater at Masters Level than for Finalists. To benefit retention and give a significant boost to new students, we may wish to see greater interaction in Part 1.

Social Inclusion and Internationalisation

Experiencing diversity teaches students valuable things about themselves and other people's points of view. Many activities can broaden student interaction with diverse communities or perspectives. Some are within the context of a degree programme, but many may also be from opportunities within the broader student life.

- In comparison to the US, Reading students are significantly less likely to interact with students of other faiths, political opinions, values or ethnicity. This may say more about UK vs. US campus environments than about Reading students in particular. Nonetheless it is also noticeable from the International Student Barometer that overseas students at Reading find it harder to make UK-based friends than at other 1994 Group universities.

- Students' interaction with people of different cultures/age groups/belief groups tends to drop off from Part 1. This may reflect the 'melting pot' of the Halls versus the self-selecting peer group of shared houses.

- Reading material in foreign languages is to be expected in Modern Languages and Classics, but it is notable that it is also takes place in certain others disciplines, such as Archaeology.

- While FESS has probably the most diverse student population (and this reveals itself in students talking to more people with other views and perspectives), FAH appears better at getting students to include other perspectives within coursework.

Engagement with E-Learning

Used appropriately, technology facilitates learning and promotes collaboration between peers and instructors. Students will generally be using IT both socially and within the context of degree programmes. Mapping congruence and disparity between personal and degree experience will be worth capturing.

- Blackboard receives a positive response from the vast majority of students, nonetheless this response tails off as students advance. This may be related to students finding Blackboard primarily being used as a repository of information rather than as an interactive medium less satisfying as they develop and become more research-focused.

- Law was one of the pilot Schools to have a student logon-portal created, placing on the front-page a link to their subject-gateway and the library. Unsurprisingly, their students had the highest reported rate of using subject-gateways rather than Google when searching for information. Other Schools should consider this when developing their own portals.

- Across all subjects there is only a very slight rise seen in academic IT literacy as students progress through their degree in terms of 'the usage of subject-gateways' and 'focused online working when preparing assignments'.

Supportive Campus Environment

Students perform better and are more satisfied at Universities that are committed to their success, and that cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus.

- Reading is significantly better than US colleges in providing the support and environment for students to thrive socially; and also better at supporting them with their non-academic responsibilities.

- Students were asked about the quality of their relationships with certain individuals/ organisations, with an opt-out to say 'there was no relationship'. 20% of students chose to exercise this option in respect of RUSU, and 31% in respect of their Student Academic Representatives (StARs).

- Overall students feel more supported when they arrive than after several years at the University. Some students who spend little time on campus feel less supported than others (e.g. Social Work).

Career Planning and Employability

Students entering graduate-level jobs is the key rationale behind government investment in Higher Education. Developing students' confidence and preparedness for this, whatever their first degree, is one of our principal obligations. It can also focus the mind of students on the purpose of their own education.

- There is a consistent correlation between the results from first destination data and these results. Broadly speaking FESS performs strongest and FAH the weakest.

- 47% of students say they have *never* had a discussion about career planning with their personal tutor, and 72% say they have *never* had such a discussion with a Careers advisor. Even amongst Finalists the figures are worryingly high; 39% say they have *never* had a discussion about career planning with their personal tutor and 65% say they have *never* had such a discussion with a Careers advisor.

Action required

Various sections of this document will be reported to the relevant University Committees; however, the key place for action is at the subject level by Boards of Studies.

The intention of the report is to facilitate the identification and spread of good practice around the University. While some headlines can be pulled out at an institutional level, it is at the subject-level where the detailed knowledge of provision will exist, and where the data will best be interpreted, drawing on the expertise of both staff and students.

Resources are available to manage change through the Teaching and Learning Development Fund (TLDF), the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Applied Undergraduate Research Skills (CETL-AURS), the Centre for Career Management Skills (CCMS), and specific training needs can be discussed with the Centre for Staff Training and Development (CSTD).