Bangor Students' Union's Student Voice Team
Annual Student Statement 2015-16

Introduction

Since the introduction of the Students' Union Annual Student Statements in 2012-13, the University and SU have been increasingly working together in order to improve the academic experience of all students. In 2014-15, we produced a Postgraduate Annual Statement, in addition to an Undergraduate one, and are pleased to see how seriously the institution is taking these reports. More and more, we are seeing the University identifying areas that could be enhanced and improved and are working together in order to embed students as active partners in their education.

We have always highlighted the strength of the relationship between the SU and the University senior management team in these documents, and it is also fair to say that our relationship 'on the ground' with colleges and schools, has also been strengthened over the last academic year. Last year we noted that;

"It is abundantly clear that the University appreciates the work of the Students' Union in improving the experiences of students at Bangor, and there is a mutual respect between University senior staff and Students' Union Officers."

This has once again continued to flourish and we have further developed relationships with new staff, such as the PVC Research, and key departments such as the library, international office and schools and colleges.

Student satisfaction remains at an all-time high in Bangor, and this is no doubt due to the partnership work between the Union and University. There have been further developments this year in terms of library and resources, development of codes of practice, a focus on the individual learning experience of students and also work is underway to eliminate hidden course costs, including the possibility of reducing some of the more common costs to students. The Students' Union is extremely pleased to see how positive discussions with the SMT have been around the issues we have raised this year, and are looking forward once again, to

working closer together in order to ensure that students really are shaping and leading the changes made to their education.

The Higher Education sector is forever evolving, and we believe that Bangor University is at the forefront of developments. This year we have been working with students to develop the first student-led Teaching and Learning strategy, and we are proud to say how supportive staff in the University have been in order to truly enable our students to be the driving forces in their education. Although this work is ongoing, and embedding this approach in all schools may see some challenges, it is a huge step in terms of the sector and is evident how Bangor University truly sees its students as more than just partners in their education, but as leaders of it too.

Section One: University update since last statement

There are two particular areas we would like to highlight from the previous year's Annual Student Statement. Whilst we are aware of progress across the majority of recommendations made by the Students' Union last year, and are working with the University on projects and plans for future implementation, we would like to highlight the work we have been doing this year around Hidden Course Costs and an area that we would like to see developed further over the next 12 months concerning student feedback.

(i)   Hidden Course Costs

"In our view, among other things, it is important for students to have full information about courses and their costs up front" **– CMA guidelines, March 2015**

This year we produced a Hidden Course Costs paper with the aim of working with staff in the SMT and schools to reduce hidden course costs and to, where possible, eliminate some of the costs that students incur whist studying at Bangor.

There has been a significant amount of research into student costs, hidden or otherwise. NUS produced a report entitled **'Pound in your Pocket'** and **Which?** Also produced a report entitled **'A degree of Value'** highlighting the need for Universities to invest in this area. In March 2015, the **Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)** released guidelines to advise Higher Education (HE) providers on the information and support they need to give, to both

existing and prospective undergraduate students about the costs associated with the chosen/potential programmes of study.

The CMA guidelines state that students need to be kept well informed, with clear, accurate and consistent information. Additional guidance from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) in collaboration with NUS Wales, also states that Institutions should consider 3 different forms of costs when developing a strategy towards hidden course costs. Although, the CMA guideline refer specially to prospective and undergraduate students, we would like to see the Institution ensuring that all costs are made available to all students, including postgraduates.

We are pleased to report that since our initial discussion with senior management in the University, there has been some clear progress on identifying mechanisms to collect data, and solutions. We are really keen to ensure that this dialogue is a continuous one, and would like to see staff considering these costs as part of programme and module revalidation. Additionally, we would like to see an additional question for students in their module evaluation, in order to enable students to regularly feed in, any costs that have arisen that were not expected as part of their course.

(ii)   Assessment & Feedback

"Assessment practices in most universities have not kept pace with the vast changes in the context, aims and structure of higher education. They can no longer do justice to the outcomes we expect from a university education in relation to wide-ranging knowledge, skills and employability" – The Higher Education Academy, 'A Marked Improvement'.

Last year we recommended the following in relation to assessment and feedback:

"The University to ensure that marking criteria is available in all schools and publicised in the same place in order to ensure students are aware of the documentation.

The University to ensure there are clear guidelines on what detailed feedback should look like for students and ensure this is available to both staff and students throughout the year.

The University to investigate using and either/or system where students can provide either an online copy or a hard copy depending on their preference."

Bangor Students' Union, Annual Student Statement 2014/15

Whilst it is clear to see that some schools have been working with their course representatives in order to address some of these issues, and schools have identified solutions in their NSS action plans, it is clear from the **National Student Survey**, that quality and promptness of feedback is still problematic for students. One of the main issues appears to be the lack of parity across schools and colleges when it comes to the detail of feedback and how students can use this to improve for their next assignment. Trends in the NSS have seen satisfaction with the question *'feedback on my work has been prompt'* increase from **61% in 2011 to 78% in 2015**, however, we are seeing an increasing number of students complaining about the lack of detail in their feedback, and that the feedback they are receiving, is not helping them understand how to achieve a better grade in their next assignment. This issue, although more prominent in some schools, is definitely not isolated to just one college or school and we would like to see an institutional approach to working towards solving this issue.

Commendations

- The University to continue to work with the SU to reduce the number of costs associated with student's degree programmes.
- The University to continue to work with course representatives in order to address issues raised through SSLiC's and NSS action planning days.

Recommendations

- The University to ensure that all costs associated with student's degree programmes are made available to students prior to the start of their studies.
- The University to take an institutional approach to developing student feedback, specifically to ensure that detailed feedback is given to students, with clear reference to how work can be improved for future assignments.

Section Two: Library and Resources

"Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities" **– R. David Lankes**

(i)   Library Investments

This year, Bangor University's Library Service was recognised by the **Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey** as being the best library in wales, and ranked in the top 5 of Libraries in the UK. The library have been working closely with students, and the Students' Union in order to promote their services more, and also collate more student feedback. Initiatives such as the more books poster campaign, the newly rebranded 'click and collect' service for library book delivery has gone a long way to improve student satisfaction in this area. The SU also held the annual **'Studyaid'** stalls in both Main Arts and Deiniol Library over the January examination period, and we were pleased to see the vast numbers of students accessing the learning and resources available. During the fortnight we gave out over 900 cups or tea and coffee and discussed with students any issues or areas of success that they wished to highlight.

One issue that was raised in terms of resources and the library, was the availability of readings lists in schools. Whilst some have online lists available for every module, others are significantly more sporadic. Last year in our Annual statement we reported the following;

"We are pleased to see that the University has invested in the student:book ratio through the introduction of software such as Talis Aspire. We welcome the investment in this area however, at present the uptake of the use of Talis Aspire software varies significantly across schools and modules."

Bangor Students' Union, Annual Student Statement 2014/15

We recognise that this is an area, both then and now, that the University is continuing to invest in. However, we do have some concerns about the parity of experience, some 2 years later, and would welcome additional support in this area to ensure that all reading lists are available online for the start of the 2016-17 academic year.

(ii) 24 hour library

The introduction of a 24 hour library has proven to be extremely popular with students, and we know that, particularly during exam periods, this is a valuable resource. However, we are increasingly in a dialogue with students in relation to issues for the need for more books. We are aware of the inter-library loan system, and those students aware of it, appear to be more satisfied than those who are not. However, the SU is concerned that given student feedback is telling us that there are not enough resources available in the library, the opening times becomes futile, when students cannot access the books they require for their course.

We have begun some preliminary investigations as to why students value the 24/7 opening times and our initial investigations are showing that students are using the library for its study space, and not necessarily for the access to books. Whilst we would not want to see a resource for students disappear, we are keen to further investigate the usefulness of this resource, and have a wider conversation with the University, in relation to what space is open and available to students on a 24 hour basis.

(iii) Referencing

Referencing is an integral part of a student's academic career, giving them the opportunity to expand their knowledge from other's work, develop their knowledge on how to cite for their degree and research in the future, while also crediting the necessary sources. Students note that while it is both good experience and practice to reference sources in any work that they produce, this can be difficult when styles are varied across their modules, schools and college. This is particularly more difficult for joint honours students, who are expected to reference in assessments as prescribed by their school but the referencing styles in each school can vary significantly. Course representatives were asked about their referencing requirements in their schools and whether they knew how to access this information, with the majority of them not knowing. This suggests that communication of referencing styles is causing students problems, particularly with students being unaware of the forms of referencing they are required to do for each assignment. From our short survey with course reps, we noted that, **76%** of course reps **did not know where to find the information about the referencing styles in their school**, although all reps were able to confirm what style they believed was expected. Some noted that the style varied from lecturer to lecturer. Some comments are as follows;

"Style sheets by the school are different for BA and MA but the module handbook doesn't reflect this."

(History and Archaeology)

"Welsh students have to reference in English; Feels like more guidance is needed that are more in depth with technical aspects such as figures and citing in essays."

"If we don't reference in exams, we can't get more than 70%"

(Biological Sciences)

"I am not sure if referencing in exams increases our grades. There is an issue with consistency of referencing and joint honours too."

(Medical Sciences)

Student Comments from Referencing Survey given to Course Reps at SU Course Rep Council

It is clear that there is a need for the University to investigate the referencing styles used in schools and for schools to explore how this information is conveyed to their students. We would also like to see consideration being made for a universal approach, at a minimum across a school, or more preferably, across a college.

Commendations

- The Library to continue to work with students and the Students' Union to further promote the services it offers to ensure that they can be used to their full potential.

Recommendations

- The Library to work with the SU to investigate the use of space outside of 9-5 working hours.
- The University to ensure that all reading lists are available through the Talis Aspire System.

- The University to investigate the variety of referencing styles in Schools, and streamline the number used across the University. In addition, Schools should provide clear guidelines in the referencing style expected in the department and this should be readily available through myBangor.

Section Three: Inclusive Curriculum

"Liberating education [is] through dialogue, the teacher of the students and the students of the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students- teacher" – Paulo Freire

One of the main focusses of last year's statement was inclusive curriculum. The Students' Union has been continuing to focus our efforts in this area over the last academic year in order to ensure that all students are having an equitable academic experience.

Many academic programmes are still structured around this idea of a 'traditional' student; the 18-21 year old, away from home for the first time, straight out of an FE college or Sixth Form. There are, however, an increasing number of students studying part-time, mature students and students with caring responsibilities and a whole host of other students who have none of the traits of these so called 'traditional' students. The sector has acknowledged this, quite rightly so, however, there is still a gap between the designing of the curriculum and the type of students accessing it.

The National Union of Students have released several reports highlighting the following issues:

"42% of Black students said the curriculum did not reflect issues of diversity, equality and discrimination."
"33% of Black students they did not feel able to bring their perspectives as Black students in to lectures, seminars and tutorials."

"One in 10 trans students never feel comfortable to speak up in class."

"Almost one in four women do not feel confident to speak up in the classroom."

"16% of incidents of sexual harassment occur in a learning environment"

Sources: 'Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow', An NUS report into LGBT students' experiences in Higher Education

'Race for Equality', An NUS report on the experiences of Black students in further and higher education.

Tackling this issue will not be easy. It requires a huge commitment from Institutions in order to work with staff and students to change and challenge culture, and comprehension of what higher education is and how students should be able to access it. However, in doing so, the University should see an improvement in retention, and also a higher student satisfaction rate, with more students being able to access and be a partner in a curriculum that is more reflective of themselves, more balanced and more diverse.

In order to build up a picture of how inclusive the curriculum currently is, we asked some questions in our annual survey. Students reported comments such as;

"Although I am enjoying my course, I feel that BTEC students are left behind compared to A-level students."

"Need more older women lecturers."

"As a White British female, it's a lot easier for me to feel included than many other ethnicities. However, I have been studying texts and films from all around the world, including all ethnicities. Furthermore, as a bisexual woman I look to engage in LGBT fiction on my course and get not only the chance to, but actively encouraged to."

"Possibly more focus on "minority" aspects of history (gender, race etc) integrated into the main teaching rather than as an "extra" lecture/slide/seminar"

Student comments, Bangor Students Survey 2015/16

Although these statements show that there are students who do not feel that their education is inclusive, the overall picture is far more positive with organic developments in education

meaning that many students do feel that they can access academia. What this highlights is the need to do additional work to ensure that academic structures are developing in a way that is equitable and accessible to all.

This is something that we are particularly proud to see staff working with the Union. It is encouraging to see students begin to engage in what an inclusive curriculum is, how inclusive their current programmes are, and what they would like to see happen in order for their curriculum to become more diverse. We must commend the University for its commitment to building an inclusive community as part of its Student Experience Strategy, and for encouraging more student to be involved in auditing their curriculum, through the SU's curriculum audit toolkit, and more recently, the developments in relation to student input into programme design and revalidation. We are keen to see this being rolled out even further throughout the next academic year and are excited about the development of future projects in this area.

Commendations

- The University to continue to build an inclusive community for its students and work with the SU on developing ways of ensure the curriculum is accessible to all.
- The University to continue to ensure that its programmes are accessible and inclusive.

Recommendations

- The University to work with students to ensure that the curriculum represents all students, and is accessible due to student partnership working and feedback.

Section Four: Pastoral Support

"She is nothing short of a life-saver. She goes above and beyond for student care and if you need anything she is first in line for help. She is caring and always aims high to help. She is great at making students believe in themselves,

myself included, which is no mean feat." – SLTA 2015/16 Nomination for Award for Outstanding Pastoral Support

(i)   Personal Tutor System

The Personal Tutor system is a huge success story in Bangor. We know from schemes such as the Student-Led Teaching Awards that students really value the support they are given from staff, and even when discussing teaching and learning, pastoral support is a strong feature.

However, we have seen this year, particularly from our work with course reps and student submissions to Internal Quality Audit panels, that information around Personal Tutors, such as how to change tutors and what should be discussed during meetings, can vary quite dramatically from school to school. Comments such as;

"Student support has been excellent throughout my 3 years here, including academic and personal support. There is a good relationship between students and staff."

"Both my personal tutors have been very helpful…."

National Student Survey student comments, Bangor Business School, 2015

"I feel that staff were always able to help when needed (particularly one lecturer who provided a 'happy hour' in which she would always be present in her office"

National Student Survey student comment, Biological Sciences, 2015

"My personal tutor is amazing!"

"First year there was a lot of contact with my personal tutor, however this year I am slightly unaware as to whether they still have that position. Although, I know that I would be able to see them if I needed anything/my course organiser."

National Student Survey student comments, SENRGy, 2015

It is clear that there is some excellent best practice across the institution, however, more could be done in order to ensure that students are fully aware of the procedures around Personal Tutors, so all concerned can get the most out of the experience.

(ii)   Personal Tutor meetings

One area that we would like to see the University move to improve, is the transparency of how information is recorded during Personal Tutor meetings. Currently, staff record notes on the Personal Tutor App, however only some show this to students before it is submitted. The SU has some concerns about the transparency of the process, as there appears to be a gap on ensuring that the student also feels the notes are accurate reflection of the meeting and the personal circumstances they have reported/disclosed. We know, anecdotally that some staff ask students to initial the notes in order to ensure that the data recorded about them is known to them and they are happy with what it says. This is something that we would consider to be best practice, and would like to see implemented across the University as standard practice.

Commendations

- The University to continue to invest in pastoral and wellbeing support for students.

Recommendations

- The University to ensure that students are aware of procedures around changing Personal Tutors and are informed about the topics they may wish to cover in tutor meetings.
- The University to ensure that all students can see notes entered onto the Personal Tutor app, prior to them being submitted.

Section Five: Student Leaders

"This has been an amazing year for me, I did most of the things I wanted to and I thrived… Being a course representative granted me the power to impact

student experience and the university actions or working, and I am glad I used that power to create positive change…" – Course Representative, Bangor Business School

(i)   Partnership Working

Over the last few years partnership has become a way of working at Bangor University, with students not just being asked for feedback on changes, but playing an active part in shaping their student experience. There are several examples of best practice of this work from the embedding of the course representative system, NSS action plans and students being involved in programme revalidation and curriculum design. This development is crucial as there is no prescriptive blueprint for how to create an education system that is fully inclusive and accessible. It is therefore only by giving students the opportunity to become actively involved in how their education is being run that education will begin transforming into an education that is as inclusive as possible. Over the next few years more can be done to ensure that students are active partners in shaping their education from co-curricular design to students being more involved in changes and decisions made at the central services level. However, it would be fair to say that the University has and is continuing to fully embrace and embed this ethos into its day to day running, and we are keen to develop this further, particularly on the ground in schools and colleges.

(ii)   Student-led opportunities

If you take the idea of student as partners one step further, you come up with a system that develops and creates student as leaders of opportunities. We know that all courses need to have engagement with the students, but for this to be truly effective, it needs to be relevant and even owned by students. Providing students with opportunities to lead on events and projects that contribute to the enhancement of their educational experience is a way of ensuring that not only is there true partnership, but that you are further developing students with transferable skills, and the future leaders of society. It also recognises the valuable contribution students can make to education, and puts their expertise as students and educational practitioners to good use. Students leading on developments such as Course Reps Dragon's Den and the Student Led Teaching & Learning Strategy is a way of ensuring

that students are at the heart of developing and improving their own education and this year in particularly, we have seen huge development and growth in this area at the University.

The Student Led Teaching Awards, for example, saw the highest number of nominations ever this year and is a real example of student led activity; from the picking of the criteria, nominating and picking winners to announcing the awards on the night. It is also a fantastic opportunity for students to have their say on what they think excellent teaching and learning is, and we are then able to use this as best practice across the Institution. What this also means is that not only are staff being recognised through the process for their contributions, but that students are also recognised by staff, as their contributions feed into teaching developments and support systems within schools. Increasingly, we are seeing staff asking for feedback on nominations, and we will be producing a report this year, highlighting exactly what it is students think contributes to their teaching and learning experiences, in order to help staff shape their work in the future. We commend the University for the support they give student led projects such as the SLTA's and it is encouraging to see that staff value good teaching as defined by students. The support the University has given to the students led teaching strategy is also to be commended because when students are truly being partners in their education, that's when education will be one that is accessible and inclusive to all.

(iii)   University Committee structures

Students and the Students' Union have a seat on almost every committee in the University, mainly through the course representative system and more centrally through sabbatical officer representation. Representation in itself, is somewhat varied across the Institution. It is fair to say that student representation is definitely extremely effective at a senior management level and in most cases at a school level through the course rep system. There are however, some school were we would like to see more proactive and tangible engagement.

In some areas, it would be fair to say that there is less representation than in others and we would like to work with the University to develop this. Structures that allow for student representation promote genuine partnership working and this in turn enables the student voice to be heard and represented during all key decisions making processes. We strongly believe that all decisions should be made with, not for students, and that clear consideration as to what the student perspective is, and how students will be impacted, is assessed. Whilst in

most areas it is fair to say this is the norm, there are small pockets where this is not yet happening. It would be fair to say, also, that in some areas, there is significant best practice in terms of student involvement and representation, for example, Student Reviewers on programme revalidation, student panel members on internal Quality Audits and the development of the student-led teaching and learning strategy. Over the next few years we would like to see more students being active contributors to committee meetings across the University. We therefore encourage the University to ensure that all its meetings are not only spaces in which students feel comfortable contributing but also spaces where their feedback is taken seriously and valued. We would also like to see the University working with the Union to encourage greater participation of postgraduate and part-time students on student representative committees along with investigating areas such as halls disciplinaries, and University Executive committee, to ensure that there is student representation in all areas of the University.

Commendations

- The University to continue to embed the ethos of partnership working across all schools and departments and continue to support and work with the SU to develop the ever growing number of student led opportunities.
- The University to continue developing its excellent partnership work by ensuring that students are shaping their education at every level and are being actively involved in shaping their education.

Recommendations

- The University to work with students to evaluate and to review the curriculum.
- The University to work with the SU to ensure that there is student representation on all University committees and in all University departments.
- The Students' Union to develop student leaders to ensure that students are fully equipped to fulfil their roles as student representatives.

Conclusion

Once again it is clear to see that Bangor University is continually evolving and investing in the experiences of its students. Student satisfaction is extremely high and students are feeding in to almost every decision the University is making, from on the ground, to a senior level. We are continually developing relationships with schools and colleges, and seeing an increasing number of projects develop off the back of conversations between the Union and University staff. We note this year, that there are significantly less recommendations compared to previous years. We strongly believe that the changes we feel the University need to make to continue to invest in the student experience, are more collaborative and our focus is to ensure that as many students are leading on developments and changes to their education, as possible. We see the improvements suggested very much as enhancements and not new ideas or concepts. Whilst the picture is tremendously positively, there are still small pockets in the Institution where we feel we need to challenge perceptions of students and move away from a type of partnership working that is an extension of consultation, to a fully embedded partnership approach. We do not expect this to happen overnight, and are pleased with the progress being made to date. We are extremely keen to see the development of projects such as the Student-led teaching and learning strategy and student input into programme design and revalidation. Additionally, we are keen to work with the University to ensure that every committee and decision making body has a student representative and that the student voice continues to be at the heart of the University. We are, once again, really excited about the year ahead, and hope that together with the University we can work on the recommendations outlined in this document to further enhance the lives of students at Bangor University.