Understanding and measuring the value and impact of services in higher education that support students: a literature review

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Executive summary

The literature review is the first outcome of a research project sponsored by the Higher Education Funding Council for England's Leadership, Governance and Management Fund and undertaken by AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation, and the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI), the Open University. The aim of the literature review is to identify and produce a thematic analysis of existing literature and other published resources on the policy and practice of undertaking assessment of student services provision, which is broader than process monitoring and user satisfaction surveys and asks 'how services help students to develop, grow, achieve, learn and succeed'. The scope of the review was limited by a number of factors, including the timeframe and the number of days allocated to it within the project budget.

Conclusions

Many of the publications reviewed point to the fact that, although much has been written about assessment theory and why it is important to assess the value and impact of student services, there is a lack of research into the extent to which evidence-based assessment in student services is indeed taking place. The evidence that does exist remains ad hoc and anecdotal and stems primarily from single institutional case studies.

The majority of literature found originates in the US, so the utilisation of any ideas, methodologies and practices will need to be carefully modified and adapted to the UK context and the very different institutional circumstances found in this country. In spite of historical and structural differences, however, the UK and the US higher education sectors, and the provision for student services within them, are facing similar pressures. Developing the means to assess and quantify the impact that student services make to further the institutional mission and ultimately enhance the student experience has become essential in today's context. How this is done will depend ultimately on the circumstances and strategic goals of student services departments and, indeed, of each institution.

The literature identified in this review is stronger on conceptual frameworks and approaches than on practical solutions for real life settings; and at times assumes that the services or provision to be assessed must first be re-engineered to fit the assessment methods. Such a task may initially appear daunting, but Schuh and Upcraft (2008) remind us that every long journey begins with a first step,

and that it is better to begin with a few small and manageable assessment projects than attempt a large one that is more likely to encounter resistance.

There seems to be more literature on student learning outcomes-based assessment than on other impacts on the student experience that may have only an indirect relation to academic success (e.g. health and well-being, finance, housing, careers, part-time employment). This is probably due to the fact that, as the literature reviewed shows, in the US there has been a shift towards learning outcomes-based assessment since the publication of *Learning Reconsidered* in the mid-2000s. However, it is important to remember that assessment of learning outcomes is only one type of assessment - although as Schuh (2005) states, it is probably the most important and perhaps the most difficult form of assessment, and one which usually requires sophisticated research skills.

This seems to suggest that the 'basket of tools' approach that we intend to develop in the next stage of the project may be most productive, allowing individual institutions and specific services to select and customise the approaches that fit their purposes, circumstances and desired outcomes. The framing questions devised by Schuh and Upcraft (2001) and reported in the review, however, could be used as a guiding framework in all types of assessment projects, whatever their scope or intended outcomes.

The shift from user satisfaction surveys to objective assessment is, itself, a learning cycle that may over time evolve into 'a culture of evidence based enhancement of provision' that is part of the ethos of student services and, perhaps, all institutional provision. To quote Oburn (2005) 'building a culture of evidence requires that practitioners develop shared definitions, ask the right questions to determine what really matters, select the tools that will allow them to find answers, and use these tools and the resulting data effectively' (p. 23). Introducing new assessment methods will have significant implications for staff development, recruitment and promotion, leadership, resource allocation, communications and so on. The process may appear very challenging, and, as for any learning process, there no doubt will be mistakes and disappointment along the way. But 'there will also be many rewards as practitioners succeed in replacing anecdotal cultures with cultures of evidence' (p. 23).

Finally, we should remind ourselves that assessment on its own is not a substitute for either evaluation or improvement. Assessment efforts will be fruitless unless they are iterative and the results of assessments are linked to a programme of evaluation, the ultimate aim of which is to improve the effectiveness of programmes or services.

1. Background and aim of the literature review

This literature review is the first outcome of a research project – Assessing the Value and Impact of Services that Support Students - sponsored by the Higher Education Funding Council for England's Leadership, Governance and Management (LGM) Fund, which is being undertaken by AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation, and the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) of the Open University. AMOSSHE is the UK higher education student services organisation; it informs and supports the leaders of student services, and represents, advocates for, and promotes the student experience. CHERI is a research centre seeking to provide expert and objective analysis of the changes and issues facing higher education systems and institutions in the UK and abroad through research, intelligence and analysis to policy makers at institutional, national and international levels.

This research project follows on from the debate on the financial sustainability of learning and teaching in UK higher education, and in particular the report to the HEFCE Financial Sustainability Strategy Group (J M Consulting, 2008) and the AMOSSHE supplement to it (AMOSSHE, 2009). The latter sets out current developments in the roles and functions of student services in the UK and underlines their value and impact to learning, the student experience and some key government initiatives such as widening participation, retention, employability, citizenship and so on. The AMOSSHE report acknowledges, however, that 'there is a dearth of robust evidence to test or prove the value for money of such services' although some emergent projects are working at a local level to this end (p.1). AMOSSHE and CHERI designed the value and impact project to try and fill this knowledge gap, with the aim of developing a holistic approach to understanding and evaluating the value and impact of services that support students (AMOSSHE, 2010). In order to meet this aim, the project team will identify meaningful ways to measure and demonstrate the impact and value of services in higher education institutions (HEIs); develop potential measures and pilot them; and produce and disseminate tools and techniques to measure value and impact of services.

The aim of the literature review is to identify and produce a thematic analysis of existing literature and other published resources on the policy and practice of undertaking assessment of student services provision, which is broader than process monitoring and user satisfaction surveys and asks how services help students to develop, grow, achieve, learn and succeed. Given the above mentioned lack of evidence (research and development projects, metrics or tools) in the UK to demonstrate the cost and value of student support services, the scope of the review includes comparator countries such as the US and Australia. In addition, early on in the project it was decided to keep the review at the general, broad level of student services, rather than focus on specific aspects or their branches/sub-sectors. Specific, branch-relevant issues will be dealt with in the following phases of the project, and will be taken into account in devising the 'basket of tools' approach.

2. Literature review method

In order to identify international publications, as well as UK ones, it was decided that the US Education Resources Information Center (ERIC - http://www.eric.ed.gov/) database was the most appropriate tool to use. ERIC had been used before by the research team with good results. The advantages of ERIC are that: (i) it stores the bibliographic records of a wide range of types of educational publications such as journal articles, books, research syntheses, conference papers, technical reports, policy papers and others; (ii) for a growing number of publications, it provides the full-text or a link to it, which reduces the time needed to retrieve the full-texts via other sources; and (iii) although ERIC is a US database, many British – and other European - journals are indexed.

The following search string was developed and run on ERIC:

STUDENT PERSONNEL SERVICES OR STUDENT PERSONNEL WORKERS OR STUDENT NEEDS OR STUDENT EXPERIENCE OR SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS OR DISABILITIES OR LEARNING DISABILITIES OR MENTAL HEALTH OR STUDENT WELFARE OR FINANCIAL SUPPORT OR CAREER GUIDANCE OR GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES OR COLLEGE HOUSING OR COUNSELLING OR FOREIGN STUDENTS OR PASTORAL CARE	A N D	EVALUATION OR EVALUATION METHODS OR PROGRAM EVALUATION OR PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS OR ASSESSMENT	A N D	HIGHER EDUCATION OR UNIVERSITIES

The first column contains descriptors (selected using the ERIC thesaurus) relevant to the semantic field of student services, the second includes descriptors of evaluation and assessment, and the third of the level of education, in this case higher education. In order to be retrieved, a publication must have been indexed with at least one descriptor from each of the three columns. The search string was further limited by date of publication: only publications published since 2000 were retrieved.

A first run of this string on ERIC produced an initial pool of 390 publications; these were screened by title and abstract (i.e. not looking at the full-text at this stage) and a sub-set of 77 were deemed relevant. Although this discard rate may appear high, in the experience of the research team it is not unusual for research of this kind.

The results of the ERIC search were supplemented by publications identified in other ways, including:

- suggestions of possible relevant literature by the AMOSSHE Executive, the Project Steering Group and the wider AMOSSHE network;
- browsing of the publications pages of relevant websites such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA); the National Association for Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA); and Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA); and their journals (NASPA Journal and JANZSSA);
- some trawling of references in the main texts identified;
- searching the Higher Education Empirical Research database - a database of evidence-based higher education publications developed and maintained by CHERI on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

In addition, to satisfy the requirement expressed in the AMOSSHE application to the HEFCE LGM Fund that the literature review should consider how other parts of the public sector use qualitative and narrative evidence to inform value and impact assessments, an email was circulated to the AMOSSHE JISCMail list requesting information on assessment practices in other public sectors (such as health and local government). Only three responses were received and further searches for similar practice will continue during the project.

A total of 110 publications were thus identified and imported into a reference manager system running on Endnote X0.2. Missing abstracts and, where possible, links to the urls or the full-text of the publications were added to the database. At this stage a more in-depth screening was undertaken and exclusion criteria, derived from the aim of the review, were applied. The main exclusion criteria used were: (i) the publication does not focus on student services; and (ii) the publication does not focus on assessment of student services.

3. Range of studies found

On second-stage screening, 50 publications were deemed relevant for inclusion in the review: 35 of these are from the US; 10 from the UK; three from Australia and two from other countries (Italy and South Africa). The fact that the vast majority of the literature identified is from the US is perhaps not surprising given that it is generally accepted that NASPA's research is the most up to date and relevant global comparator.

Publications vary considerably in terms of type. Of the 50 publication included in the review, 25 are journal articles, 10 are reports and mainly from policy bodies, 11 are books, three are book chapters and two can be classed as 'grey literature' (such as conference papers and sections on websites). It follows that some publications will deserve more attention in this review than others. In addition, 42 publications deal with student services as a whole, and eight focus on a specific aspect of the services (such as counselling/mental health, careers, libraries, disability, international students); 18 are single institution case studies.

Some limitations of this literature review have to be acknowledged. First, it has been already noted that there is a dearth of data and previous research on the topic in the UK. This means that the picture for the UK will necessarily be fragmented and piecemeal. Second, it proved difficult to identify relevant Australian literature. As the project description specifically mentioned Australia as a possible comparator country, when it became clear that no suitable Australian literature had been retrieved via ERIC, some additional steps were taken. For instance, an additional search of the Australian Education Index (with descriptors similar to those used for ERIC) was undertaken and the website of the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association and their journal JANZSSA were browsed and further web links were followed up. However, only three articles were retrieved in this way.

The aim of the literature review was to help identify and adapt tools for the next stages of the project and as such was time-bound. Had there been more time available, perhaps a more thorough trawl of UK HEIs' websites and of resources from other parts of the higher, and indeed general, education sectors and/or other parts of the public sector could have been undertaken. Finally, some US texts were not available from UK libraries and have proved difficult to retrieve via inter-library loan, which has reduced the time available to digest and fully integrate some of the content in the review at this stage.

4. Findings from the literature

Having stated the aim and methods of the review, as well as given a broad overview of the publications identified, we now turn to highlighting the main findings of the literature.

4.1 Why assess student services?

It is appropriate to begin this section with a note on terminology. Bresciani (2004) states that 'assessment means various things to different people' (p. 8), and before embarking on any assessment endeavours it is imperative that the interested parties agree on a common definition and operational language. The definition that will be adopted will be influenced by the reasons for undertaking the assessment in the first place, which could be for enhancement purposes, meeting accreditation standards or defending services from cost-cutting drives. In their 1996 publication, Schuh and Upcraft define assessment as 'any effort to gather, analyze and interpret evidence which describes departmental, institutional, divisional, or agency effectiveness' (p. 18). This is linked but different from evaluation which is 'any effort to use assessment evidence to improve institutional, departmental, divisional or agency effectiveness' (p. 19). This suggests that assessment may stand on its own, whilst evaluation always entails assessment and is driven by the will to improve. The literature, however, is not consistent in the use of these terms, and often the two terms are used interchangeably.

Much of the literature reviewed starts off by discussing the reasons why student services (or student affairs as they are referred to in US literature[1]) should view assessment of their service provision as an essential dimension of their practice. John Schuh and Lee Upcraft, two of the most influential and prolific writers on assessment for student services in the US, have published books and articles for student services practitioners since the mid-1990s (see for instance Upcraft and Schuh, 1996; and Schuh and Upcraft, 1998; 2001; and 2008). Already in 1996, at a time when the assessment of student services in the US was a relatively new phenomenon, they asserted that undertaking assessment projects was an essential element of student services practice because of the need to generate data that would confirm the important contribution of student services programmes and that such services make to student learning and growth. Although there is a substantial body of research that links student out-of-class experiences to their success in college and to retention (for

[1] Although we have used the term 'student services' throughout this report, the term 'student affairs' appears in direct quotes or publication titles of US literature.

instance, Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005; Yorke and Longden, 2004; and Tinto, 1993), Schuh and Upcraft (2001) note that such research is often of limited use in the local context of an institution because, (i) it may not be well known amongst higher education administrators and faculty, and (ii) there will always be the need to provide evidence that what may be true at national level also applies to a particular institution. 'In this sense, all assessment is local' (p. 10).

Since the mid-1990s, the pressures of accountability on the US higher education sector, and student services within it, have increased. Federal and national governments, policy bodies, accreditation agencies, students, parents, employers all have an interest in higher education and its effective and efficient delivery, and student services professionals too are under pressure to demonstrate the importance and worth of their provision. Schuh and Upcraft (2001) list several reasons why assessment of student services is a must in today's context. First and foremost is survival of student services. At a time of increasing competition for limited and decreasing resources, questions are being asked about the quality and efficiency of student services, and ultimately whether they are needed at all, or whether such services could be outsourced. Related reasons are the contribution that systematic assessment can make to developing a quality culture, feeding into strategic planning, policy development and decision making.

Similar concepts are expressed by Clark and Mason (2001); McLaughlin et al. (2005); Oburn (2005); Schwitzer and Duggan (2008); and Green et al. (2008). Clark and Mason in particular state that many student services departments in the US have no option but to embark on a programme of outcome-based assessment if they want to survive and prosper. The increased focus on the accountability and cost-effectiveness of each university department, and the trend to outsource services or cut them altogether means that it is now of paramount importance for student services offices to demonstrate the impact their services have on the academic mission of the university. They quote Schuh and Upcraft (2008), and state that student services departments must 'do what we must in order to do what we want'.

It is not difficult to see how the situation in US higher education presages to some extent the one in the UK. The report by the Financial Sustainability Strategy Group to HEFCE (J M Consulting, 2008) highlights the pressure points that are straining the UK HE sector and argues that 'a modest increase in public investment in teaching and the learning experience would do much to improve the sustainability of the sector' (p. 1). In the last 20 years the number of students enrolled in UK HEIs has nearly tripled, whilst at the same time the sector has striven to improve the quality and enhance the range of provision and student experience. But investment has not kept pace with such changes and public funding per student has declined. This has resulted in considerable pressures on resources which, to a certain extent, have been absorbed through improvements in efficiency and productivity. The area of student support services is one where sustainability is under threat, specifically at a time when new challenges are presented by a more diverse student population, raised employer expectations, as well as new government social and economic agendas.

4.2 The assessment process in general

This literature review identified several books and manuals that focus on the 'nuts and bolts' of undertaking assessment projects in student services departments (Bresciani et al., 2004; Upcraft and Schuh, 1996; Schuh and Upcraft, 2001 and 2008; Keeling, 2004 and 2006; Keeling et al., 2008). These are hands-on books written for practitioners and offer a rich source of examples and templates that will help student services staff select the best methods and tools for their specific projects. Within the timeframe and thus the limitations of this literature review, we consider the main points of these important materials. The examples and templates they provide will be explored and utilised more in-depth in later stages of the project, such as in developing and piloting the toolkit.

The assessment framework put forward by Upcraft and Schuh (1996) and then revised in their subsequent publications (such as Schuh and Upcraft, 2001 and 2008) has been largely adopted in assessment theory and increasingly in its practice in the US. Its framing questions probe the purpose, type, scope, setting and methods of an assessment project and define the steps to be followed in planning and implementing assessment as follows:

1. What is the issue at hand?

Why are we doing the assessment? What problem are we trying to solve? What specific circumstances are at the origin of the assessment? What external pressures or internal factors are driving the assessment? Examples could be: cost pressures on university budgets; low enrolments in a particular programme; new equal opportunity policy on sexual discrimination; impending visit from accreditation agency etc.

2. What is the purpose of the assessment?

What information do we need to solve the problem identified in 1? What data are critical to responding to the internal or external pressures identified in 1? The answers to these questions will form the basis for determining the purpose of the study.

3. Where to get the information needed?

Although students or other 'clients' may be the most obvious sources of information, institutional or departmental records, academics and administrative staff or the general public could also be approached. 'Defining the population precisely is important because the conclusions drawn from a particular inquiry apply only to those studied in the first place' (Schuh and Upcraft, 2001, p. 20).

4. Who should be studied?

Usually this involves selecting a sample of the population to study. Samples, for example, can be defined by gender, age, race and ethnicity or, for the student population, mode of study, subject of study, year of enrolment, disability, grades etc.

5. What is the best assessment method?

What is the best way to get the information I need? The purpose of the study will determine whether quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods are best suited. Generally, if we need information on *what* is occurring, quantitative methods (e.g. surveys) are more appropriate. If we need information about *why* something is happening, then qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups, observations) are better.

6. How should we collect the data?

The method chosen – for instance mailed or online questionnaires, telephone surveys, individual interviews, focus groups – should be consistent with the purpose of the study, but each method has its pros and cons in terms of breadth of information collected, cost, time, response rates etc.

7. What instrument should we use?

Obviously this will depend on the methodology to be used, but a decision will be made about whether to use an already constructed instrument with high validity, reliability and other psychometric properties, or to build something that will be more suited to the local project but may lack the above properties.

8. Who should collect the data?

This is particularly an issue when using qualitative methods, where the results might be biased because those who have a stake in the initiative are also the ones who collect and analyse the data. The authors suggest that 'bias can be reduced if the overall design is reviewed by the assessment expert and student affairs staff are selected who have some background education and experience in assessment in general and data collection in particular' (p. 22)

9. How should we analyse the data?

Applying appropriate statistical analysis and interpret statistical results of quantitative data is probably a set of skills that student services professionals will not possess, so it is best to leave these tasks to specialists. Analysis of qualitative data is less specialised but still must be done in a systematic way, and it should be a collaborative task.

10. What are the implications of the study for policy and practice?

The impact of the assessment study will be strengthened if the study findings' implications for policy and practice are clearly spelled out. For example, we should ask: what approaches to solving the problem should be considered in the light of the findings? What policies and practices need to be revised, abandoned, or put in place?

11. How should we report the results effectively?

The authors recommend that in order to effectively communicate results, multiple reports for multiple audiences should be prepared, highlighting the results most applicable to each audience.

Adapted from Schuh and Upcraft (2001), Chapter 2

Consideration of these steps is essential in order to undertake assessment studies that are well conceived, designed, implemented and analysed. Schuh and Upcraft then go on to elaborate various kinds of assessment (for instance, needs assessment, satisfaction assessment, assessing learning outcomes, environmental assessment, cost effectiveness assessment, assessment for accreditation, drop-out assessment, post-graduation assessment and assessing group educational programmes) and assessment of specific student services and programmes (such as retention, first year, campus recreation, financial support, admission, residence life, unions, health services, careers and counselling). Similarly, Bresciani's book (2004) has specific chapters on: assessment tools; criteria and rubrics[2]; best practices, performance indicators, benchmarking, peer reviews, and external reviews; interviews and focus groups; observations and documents; case studies; analysing qualitative data; survey research; portfolios; and documenting assessment findings and decisions.

It is not possible to review all these types of assessment practices and settings here. As we have already mentioned, we will return to these materials at later stages of the project, specifically to develop and pilot the toolkit.

4.3 Focus on learning outcomes

A considerable part of the US literature identified for this review stresses the importance of developing and assessing 'learning outcomes', and therefore it seems appropriate to reflect this emphasis in the report. However, it is important to recognise that different authors may be referring to different things when using the term 'learning outcomes'; in particular, it can have different meanings in the UK and US contexts. It may refer to what a student has learned as the result of an academic programme of study, engagement with a support service or as a result of her or his whole experience while studying in higher education.

In 1996, a statement by ACPA entitled *The student learning imperative: implications for student affairs* acted as a rallying cry for student services professionals to re-examine 'the philosophical tenets that guide the professional practice of student affairs' (ACPA, 1996, p. 1) in light of the fact that 'the concepts of learning, personal development, and student development are inextricably intertwined and inseparable' and 'experiences in various in-class and out-of-class settings, both off and on campus, contribute to personal development' (p.2). Because student affairs practitioners 'are educators who share responsibility with faculty, academic administrators, other staff and students themselves' for student learning and development, it follows that 'student affairs programmes and services must be designed with specific student learning and personal development outcomes in mind' (p. 2). The statement goes on to express five main characteristics of the student-oriented student services division:

i) the student services mission complements the institutional mission – student learning and personal development is the primary goal of student services programmes;
ii) resources are allocated to encourage student learning and personal development;

[2] A rubric is 'a set of criteria and a scoring scale that is used to assess and evaluate students' work' (Bresciani et al, 2004, p. 30)

iii) student services professionals collaborate with faculties and other units in the institutions;

iv) student services staff are knowledgeable about students, their environment and the teaching and learning processes;

v) student services programmes should be informed by research on student learning and institution specific assessment data.

These principles were further expressed and expanded in 2004 by Keeling in *Learning Reconsidered. A campus-wide focus on the student experience*, which in recent years has been used widely in professional development activities. For Keeling, learning is a 'comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development - processes that have often been considered separate, and even independent of each other' (p. 4). This concept recognises that student personal development is integrated with learning, and that it is pointless to distinguish between educational and developmental learning outcomes. These have to be seen as interactive and shaping each other as they evolve. The word 'transformative' is crucial here: the learning process must move away from information transfer to identity development (transformation) and a student service can play a key role in this 'because of the opportunities it provides students to learn through actions, contemplation, reflection and emotional engagement as well as informative acquisition' (p 12). *Learning Reconsidered* stressed the importance of partnership working across the institution with a focus on student learning and development.

Learning Reconsidered was followed in 2006 by *Learning Reconsidered 2. A practical guide to implementing a campus wide focus on the student experience*. Often referred to in the literature as a 'blueprint for action', this publication illustrates ways to implement the concepts expressed by *Learning Reconsidered* in practice, by reporting the real life experiences of student services professionals who have developed and assessed learning outcomes, developed partnerships across the institution and come up with innovative ways of linking their work to student learning. This is a practical book aimed at student services staff who 'need to learn how to write learning goals and assess learning outcomes in many different settings and then develop templates by which assessment can be framed in a common language of learning' (p. 6). The authors recognise that although student services professionals have always helped students learn in real life settings, they have often failed to reflect on their role as facilitators and have not developed the language to describe what they do in pedagogical terms.

4.4 Assessing learning outcomes

Assessing learning outcomes is a specific type of assessment aimed at gauging the impact of student services, programmes and facilities on student learning, development and academic success. Student services practitioners will need to ask themselves: 'Can institutional interventions (for example programs, services and policies) be isolated from other variables which may influence outcomes, such as background and entering characteristics, and other collegiate and non-collegiate experiences?' (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996). Recognising that this is the most important and most difficult type of assessment, and that there are a number of other taxonomies of learning outcomes that can be used, Schuh and Upcraft (2001) put forward eight broad categories of learning outcomes that can act as a framework for developing more specific learning objectives depending on the programme, service or facilities being assessed:

Complex knowledge skills	Critical, flexible, quantitative thinking/reasoning
Knowledge acquisition	Mastery and application of subject knowledge
Intrapersonal development	Autonomy, values, identity, aesthetics, self-esteem, maturity
Interpersonal development	Understanding/appreciating human differences, ability to relate to others, establishing intimate relationships
Practical competence	Career preparation, managing one's personal affairs, and economic self-sufficiency
Civic responsibility	Responsibilities as a citizen in a democratic society and commitment to democratic ideals
Academic achievement	Ability to reach expected levels
Persistence	Ability to complete a degree or achieve personal educational objectives

Source: Schuh and Upcraft 2001, p. 155

Schuh and Upcraft also point out that not all outcomes important to student services are learning outcomes and, for instance, the outcomes sought by student health services will be to provide healthcare in a timely and efficient way; and the student finance division might be looking to develop financial advice that impacts on student retention. Keeling (2006), however, counters this by arguing that the 'rationale for most services in student affairs is to advance learning' (p. 13). He cites the example of students who successfully navigate the financial aid system and in doing so develop practical competences.

Although the development of learning outcomes must be driven by the specific context of the programme/services we want to assess, Keeling (2006) presents two approaches that can be used in practice to develop outcomes:

- Outcome to practice: decide on a learning outcome you want students to achieve and identify an existing, or develop a new, programme for it. For instance, in order to develop the students' understanding of cultural differences, a student life department[3] might design programmes that promote multiculturalism through activities such as team-building events at the start of the year, music from different cultures played at various events, inter-group dialogues etc.
- Practice to outcome: take an existing programme and identify its learning outcomes. For instance, a CV writing workshop run by the Careers Services might contribute to develop learning outcomes such as 'knowledge application', 'intrapersonal competence' and 'practical competence' (see previous table of categories of learning outcomes). If all programmes of a specific student service department were to be mapped in this way, gaps in offering could be highlighted.

Outcomes usually demonstrate growth or development in areas of 'knowing, being or doing'. Most of the theories and taxonomies used in the past, such as Bloom's taxonomy (1956) (http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/bloom.html) have focussed on cognitive developments. Other theories, such as Kegan's theory of lifespan development (1982 and 1994) or Baxter Magolda's principles of learning (2003) and Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1982) (http://nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/styles/kolb.html) are helpful in creating learning outcomes, experiences and assessment tools (Keeling, 2006, p. 27-28).

In order to demonstrate the impact of programmes or services, outcomes must be measurable and meaningful. Bresciani (2004) puts forward the following points to consider when drafting outcomes:

[3] Student life departments in US universities and colleges are departments that encourage student involvement in student-run extra curricular activities. They would typically play a supporting and co-ordinating role, for example providing leadership development courses for students, or involving faculty, alumni and parents in programmes run by the department to enhance the student experience.

Is it measurable?	i.e. identifiable rather than countable Can you identify or observe when you know the outcome has been met?
Is it meaningful?	Does it mean something to students and providers?
Is it manageable?	Outcomes have to be incorporated into the day to day life of a programme, but not all outcomes have to be assessed/measured every year.
Who will I be gathering evidence from to know that my outcome has been met?	Students might not be the only source of evidence. Other parties, such as administrators or faculty leaders, might need to be involved in the process.
Who would know if my outcome has been met?	As above
How will I know if it has been met?	What does meeting the outcome look like? How do you know the intended outcome/development has occurred?
Will it provide me with evidence that will lead me to make a decision for continuous improvement?	Outcomes need to be articulated in such a way as to lead to improvement.

Source: Bresciani 2004, p. 12-13

4.5 Barriers and enablers

The literature reviewed points broadly to a common set of factors that tend to inhibit the successful implementation of assessment projects and to others that conversely facilitate or enable them.

The *inhibiting factors or barriers* most often mentioned are the following:

- Lack of resources: The extra resources needed for the assessment process may be in the form of staff time needed to devote to assessment projects or some new software or hardware that needs to be purchased to collect and analyse data (Clark and Mason, 2001). Green et al. (2008) also found resources were needed to hire professional assessment staff (such as a statistician or an assessment co-ordinator) or undertake assessment-related training and support for existing staff.

- Staff resistance: Student services staff tend to be people- and service-orientated and might be reluctant to sacrifice time they would normally spend on service provision to assessment practices (Clark and Mason, 2001). In one of the few quantitative studies of student services practices in the US, Doyle (2004) concludes that 'student affairs divisions may be excellent at building good relationships with students that improve learning but less adept at creating a management structure that enhances learning' (p. 388). Oburn (2005) points out that 'not everyone in student affairs divisions will support or even understand the importance of becoming involved in institutional effectiveness processes. Some will continue to assume that the intrinsic value of what they do will be recognised and appreciated' (p. 23). Professional development should be offered to members of staff involved in assessment to expand their knowledge base and skills sets. Taylor and Matney (2007) also stress that staff resistance and fatigue might need to be taken into account if leaders want to transform strategic planning into action and tangible results.

- Functional silos: Collaboration with other parts of the institutions, for instance other branches of student services, or faculties or central administrative offices, is an essential dimension of outcomes-based assessment. Yet, the research undertaken by Doyle (2004) found that student services divisions in the US were failing to forge such educational partnerships and that 'fragmented organizational structures, reward structures, and an insistence on faculty autonomy erect barriers between greater collaboration between student and academic affairs' (p. 390). Kuh and Banta (2000) offer a useful categorisation of the obstacles and barriers to collaboration in assessment between student services professionals and faculties: (i) cultural-historical: a belief that the 'logic, values and functions of academics and student affairs professionals differ sharply' (p. 2), and so does their language and the views of what should be assessed and how; (ii) bureaucratic-structural: the two groups have different governance structures and rewards arrangements; (iii) institutional leadership: both faculty and student services leaders must send strong signals on the importance of learning outcomes-based assessment.

The literature also shows, however, that, serious as they might appear, such barriers can be overcome. The main *enabling or facilitating factors* are as follows:

- Commitment: Clark and Mason (2001) in their description of the implementation of a comprehensive system of programme evaluation at the Student Counselling Centre at Iowa

State University stress the fact that commitment of the service director(s) and senior administrative staff to the assessment process are essential for the process to get off the ground and eventually succeed. Green et al. (2008) also note that the high quality assessment practices of student services in the three research institutions that are the focus of their research were also characterised by a shared commitment at four levels of the professional hierarchy: vice presidents of student services; directors/coordinators of assessment; assessment committees; and unit-level professional staff.

- Partnership/collaborative working: Scholars agree that, when student learning and development is at the centre of the assessment process, student services professionals must collaborate with other educators within the HEI during the whole process (Green et al., 2008; Kuh and Banta, 2000; ACPA, 1996; Bresciani et al., 2004; Upcraft and Schuh, 1996; Schuh and Upcraft, 2001 and 2008; Keeling, 2004 and 2006). Kuh and Banta (2000) usefully list six conditions that characterise successful collaborative assessment efforts:

  'i) a strong administrative commitment to assessment;
  ii) participation by academic and student affairs professionals in the design and assessment of curricular programs;
  iii) intentional efforts to develop a shared understanding of student learning and personal development among faculty, student affairs professionals and others;
  iv) consideration of students' in-class and out-of-class experiences in the design of programs, services and assessment measures;
  v) use of both process indicators (how students spend their time) and outcomes measures; vi) use of assessment data to guide institutional activities' (p.2).

  Tools and strategies that Kuh and Banta suggest might be employed to break down barriers to collaboration are: steering or assessment committees made up of both student services staff and academics; joint seminars, workshops and focus groups; pervasive cross-campus dissemination of assessment processes and results; joint team teaching; involvement of student services professionals in institutional governance processes (p. 6-7).

- Articulating and embedding the institutional and departmental missions: The overall purpose of student services departments must be in line with the institution's mission, with student learning and personal development being the primary goal (ACPA, 1996; Keeling, 2004 and 2006). One of the conclusions of Clark and Mason (2001) is that 'for departments within student affairs to survive and prosper, they must identify how they contribute to the mission of the university, determine what outcome measures can demonstrate this contribution, and set up a system of collecting the data needed to conduct an outcomes assessment' (p.34). Green et al. (2008) also state that a shared understanding of one's institutional mission, values and goals must be reached by student services professionals prior to their articulation of the learning outcomes specific to their programme and services.

4.6 Lessons learnt from US case studies

From this literature review it has been difficult to gauge the extent to which systematic outcomes-based assessment is taking place in student services departments in the US, UK or other countries. Writing in 2001, Clark and Mason noted that although much has been written about why it is important to assess the impact and value of student services programmes, evidence that this is taking place remains ad hoc and anecdotal. Seven years later, Green et al. (2008) still point out that limited research has occurred in the area of co-curricular student learning outcomes-based assessment and that assessment in student services is not widely practiced. Doyle (2004) also states that 'there have been no studies to document the successful implementation of practices associated with student learning' (p. 377), and Oburn (2005) stresses the need to move from surveys of users and anecdotal evidence to a culture of evidence based on continuous and meaningful assessment. Indeed, these views have been succinctly highlighted by the US Task Force on the Future of Student Affairs, appointed jointly by ACPA and NASPA, as follows:

> 'Examples of a culture of evidence in student affairs – such as outcomes-based planning and assessment or the systematic use of assessment data to support decision-making – are few and far between. This must change. All student affairs practitioners, regardless of functional area, must approach their work with the assumption that all aspects of it must be supported by evidence gathered through accepted modes of assessment and consistent with the research about college student success' (2010, p. 10).

Accepting that there seems to be little empirical research on the extent to which learning-centred assessment is undertaken, in this section we look at the outcome measures that have been applied in some institutional case studies and, where possible, we provide links to online resources for the reader to explore the issues further. The autumn 2009 edition of *New Directions for Student Services* published case studies of student services assessment practices in five US universities:

- California State University (Varlotta, 2009)
- Oregon State University (Sanderson and Ketcham, 2009)

AMOSSHE The Student Services Organisation
CHERI Centre for Higher Education Research and Information
HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND hefce

- Colorado State University (McKelfresh and Bender, 2009)
- Pennsylvania State University (Burlingame and Dowhower, 2009)
- Texas A&M University (Oster, 2009)

In addition, other similar case studies have been identified by this review: West Virginia University (McCullough et al., 2007) and Iowa State University (Clark and Mason, 2001). All these articles provide a glimpse of the student services assessment practices at various US universities, present specific examples and highlight enabling factors and barriers encountered in the assessment process. What these case studies have in common is that they document a shift in the emphasis of student services assessment from measuring opinions, satisfaction and expectations to measuring outcomes that seem to have taken place in US universities since 2005. All but one focus on learning outcomes-based assessment; Clark and Mason (2001) focus on the assessment of clinical outcomes and how these relate to student success.

Varlotta (2009) describes student services assessment at *California State University*, Sacramento (Sacramento State) as being a highly structured, continuous process, which gained new momentum in 2005 with the appointment of a new vice-president for student services who engaged with divisional directors in the task of revising the division mission statement. This marked a move away from student satisfaction/programme improvement surveys to a student learning outcomes-based programme. The division mission, vision and values are now focussed on learning and emphasise student success. The assessment process at Sacramento State is comprised of the following steps:

- 'writing or revising a departmental mission statement that is directly aligned with the mission of the university and the division;
- formulating broad planning goals;
- identifying measurable program objectives and student learning outcomes;
- developing a methodology to measure those outcomes;
- collecting and analysing the data generated;
- using the emergent information to make data-driven decisions that become part of an established culture of evidence'. (p. 89)

In particular, the directors designed or adapted instrument(s) that could measure the student learning outcomes associated with their respective programmes or services. At the data collection stage, some instruments and assessment approaches proved to be more reliable than others. Despite the necessary revisions that needed to be made on several pre- and post-tests, observed competency exercises, and emerging rubrics, within a two-year timeframe each department had laid the foundation for evidence-based decision making and outcomes-based assessment. In the whole process, collaboration with the Office for Institutional Research had been key. Divisional directors now follow a common assessment template. This, and several examples of assessment projects undertaken so far, including their measurable outcomes, can be found at the website: http://saweb.csus.edu/students/download/SA_assessment_Plans2007.pdf

A similar centralised and structured approach has been adopted at *Oregon State University* (Sanderson and Ketcham, 2009) where an assessment council formed of volunteers from many student services and academic departments has been set up. In addition to providing professional development in the area of assessment for student services practitioners and undertaking consultancy across the university, in this highly structured model, the council sets the standard, format, deadlines and review process for assessment plans and reports for every department and unit within the division. Responsibility for the assessment is shared by the council, the director of Student Affairs Research and Evaluation (SARE) and the various departments, but the learning outcomes that are assessed are based on the specific needs and programmes of the units or departments. Student services professionals have to develop learning outcomes for each programme they want to evaluate – and the authors note that many need help and training in this as they have no background in pedagogy.

The SARE web pages represent a rich source of templates and resources for undertaking assessment:
http://oregonstate.edu/studentaffairs/assessment/assessmentresources.html
In particular the 2007-08 summary report describes the decision taken as a result of assessment by the various units and departments and presents examples of impact:
http://oregonstate.edu/studentaffairs/docs/assess.rep.summary.2007.08.pdf

The following lessons can be learned from the experiences at Oregon State University:

- align the assessment processes with the leadership culture of the organisation;
- educate and train staff about assessment;
- leadership support is essential, as is financial support for assessment projects;
- focus efforts on the willing: it is more effective and enthusiasm is contagious;
- develop a support structure: a group of people will develop the process better than a single individual;
- ask important questions – those that relate to the core values of the division;

- find joy and celebrate success.

At *Colorado State University* (McKelfresh and Bender, 2009), the emphasis that the university places on the collaboration between student services and academic programmes for the common goal of student learning and development is symbolised by the common platform for continuous improvement that has been jointly developed for planning and evaluating student development. PRISM – Plan for Researching Improvement and Supporting Mission – is a one-stop shop for information, resources, templates, previous reports on assessment and evaluation not only for student services professionals and academic staff but also for students, parents, employers, policymakers, community members, alumni, administrators, and accreditation teams. The website - http://improvement.colostate.edu/index.cfm - is organised alongside different paths for these different audiences. Nearly all academic and student services units have developed assessment plans and lodged them in the same PRISM database. The advantages of such an approach are:

> 'The PRISM process records planning and evaluation activity over time. This avoids reliance on one or two influential administrators who might leave the institution. The database timelines require a regular reporting sequence that tends to establish assessment activity as a ritual over time. Integration of annual assessment, five-year programme review, and strategic planning connects the multiple levels of planning and reveals aggregations of effort for more effective resource allocation. The structural collaborative assessment planning among academic and student affairs units also mitigates the intensity of a fragmented organisation. The information transparency that the system provides for university constituents reduces the insular state of some student affairs units, giving their assessment information more impact with a wider audience' (p. 19).

Again, some lessons and suggestions can be learned from the experience of Colorado State University:

- have someone in the student services department dedicated to coordinating and advising on assessment projects in the division;
- have a Steering Group, whose membership is drawn from a wide range of branches of the department;
- clear direction and support from both institutional and departmental leadership is essential;
- partnerships with other parts of the university is essential (the institutional research unit and individual faculties, for example);
- make assessment part of the department's strategic plan;

- training and coaching of staff, ongoing communication about assessment and online resources are also important;
- and patience: 'it takes approximately four or five years to develop your assessment program'.

The Division of Student Affairs at *Pennsylvania State University* has a dedicated office called 'Student Affairs Research and Assessment' (SARA) and the university has a tradition of undertaking assessment in student affairs (Burlingame and Dowhower, 2009). Their flagship Pulse programme is a phone and web survey aimed at obtaining rapid responses from students on a variety of issues – so popular that external units now commission SARA to undertake their own Pulse surveys. Over time SARA's mission has shifted from 'understanding the experiences of students through measuring opinions and expectations, tracking use of services and programs, assessing needs, and assessing satisfaction' (p. 80) to assessing learning outcomes. The article reports an example of assessment of the effectiveness of a newspaper readership programme, which aims to encourage students to read newspapers to increase their sense of community and citizenship, and awareness of world events.

The original measures used to assess the effectiveness of the programme had focused on user satisfaction with the programme, use of newspapers in class, and other measures. It did not measure the impact of newspaper readership on learning. Thus, the university embarked on a re-examination of the programme goals in 2004, which included the need to understand how the programme impacted on learning outcomes. The existing survey was revised to include detailed information on readership behaviour, student engagement on campus and in the community, and self-reported learning outcomes. Data gathered, for example, compared outcomes by students who read/did not read the paper (and those who had the paper required in class and those who did not), and explored the relationship between factors. The evidence showed a very strong relationship between newspaper readership and learning outcomes, such as 'developing civic mindedness and cognitive skills, civic engagement, and being informed and able to articulate views on current issues' (p. 82). The data have been used to support and improve the programme.

The authors identify a number of 'tips' to emerge from the implementation process, including:

- read up on literature/theory in the field of student learning and learning outcomes;
- use indirect measures of learning to assess educational impact of a programme;
- be realistic when setting out the expected learning outcomes;

- assess the things that matter most (e.g. mission and the strategic plan of the institution and division);
- measuring outcomes is challenging and complex.

They also identify a number of barriers and challenges, including:

- getting staff to understand the importance of the learning environment, developing learning outcomes and commitment to assessing student learning;
- motivating staff to learn the skills to develop learning outcomes, understand student learning and apply assessment strategies.

To help overcome these barriers and challenges, an online learning module on the concepts of Bloom's taxonomy, and the skills required to develop and assess learning outcomes has been developed for practitioners.) The SARA website can be found at: http://www.sa.psu.edu/sara/.

At *Texas A&M University* (Osters, 2009), the move to assess student learning outcomes can be exemplified by the Student Leader Learning Outcomes project, for which a large team of student services professionals from across the division got together to draft learning outcomes for students who serve in leadership positions across the university and define methods in which to evaluate their progress and learning. The scope of the project was to 'promote consistent methods and tools for staff to use with student leaders across the programs to help with assessment and documentation of enhanced learning in relation to their leadership experiences' (p. 96). The main stages of the process were:

- initial brainstorming to identify many outcomes areas;
- five of these were selected;
- subcommittees were created to develop goals and outcomes for the various areas;
- each area grounded its goals and outcomes in related literature and research;
- assessment rubrics were designed to be used as self assessment tools and tools for peer or staff evaluation – these were flexible enough to fit into the different co-existing leadership models.

On the basis of this experience, the authors suggest the following tips for assessing leadership programmes:

- include representatives of a broad range of student services in the teams;
- outcomes need to fit into and support multiple contexts;

- it is important to 'ground the definition of each outcome and associated assessment measure in theory or a relevant model' (p.100).

At *West Virginia University* (WVU), student services units were requested to collect assessment data based on learning outcomes in 2006 (McCullough et al., 2007). An assessment council was set up to assist in this process as well as evaluate plans once they were implemented. Assessment plans had to consist of:

- a mission statement;
- a goal statement (linked to overall divisional goals);
- learning outcomes;
- learning experiences;
- assessment methods;
- implementation information;
- analysis of assessment data;
- an assessment report (on major findings) and discussions and recommendations based on the results.

In discussing an example of assessing a programme for first year students, the authors recommend that multiple assessment measures are used to capture the complexity of student learning. For instance, direct assessment measures (such as oral presentations scored with a rubric, a quiz or a final exam) can be used alongside indirect assessment measures that portray students' perceptions of their own learning (pre- and post course surveys, for instance). Multiple measures of assessment are necessary to 'capture the complexity of our students' learning' (Maki, 2004, p. 86), to better assess strengths and weaknesses and to alleviate the fact that no measure is perfectly reliable or valid. WVU also has a section of its student services website dedicated to assessment and evaluation: http://studentaffairs.wvu.edu/eat

Clarke and Mason (2001) describe the implementation of a comprehensive evaluation system at the Student Counseling Service at *Iowa State University*. The initial implementation required commitment on the part of the director, the financial support of the vice president of student affairs, a shifting of staff time from clinical to evaluation work and the resolution of staff conflicts. The process brought immediate as well as long term benefits. Immediate benefits were an increased ability to monitor the efficacy and efficiency of the services, and amendment of staff times to better suit the peaks in service use; and reallocation of appointment time. Longer term benefits included the documentation of positive outcomes for students who had used the services. In partnership with other university departments, data on students' retention was cross-checked and the assessment showed that 'students who received counselling were retained at a 14% higher rate than students who requested counselling but were not provided with services because the center did not have enough staff to accommodate all requests for services' (p. 32). This became a powerful argument for increasing funding. In addition, as a result of the evaluation programme, the Student Counseling Service has:

- developed better relations with other areas of student services and university leaderships;
- enhanced its reputation;
- increased its core staff by three new positions;
- exported its assessment model to other departments within the university.

4.7 Related developments and initiatives in the UK

From the literature, it would appear that the shift towards outcome-based assessment in the UK is lagging behind the US and, probably for this reason, we have not been able to identify, or been informed of, many similar case studies in the UK. Several recent developments, however, deserve mentioning.

In 2002, the then Department for Education and Skills commissioned a national research project to investigate how student services can best support the increasingly diverse student population to complete their HE studies. The two publications that stemmed from this project (Thomas et al., 2002; Universities UK, 2002) concluded that student services have a central role to play in increasing and widening participation in higher education and improving student retention, but student services professionals no longer see themselves as a 'safety net for students with problems' but rather as a pro-active service for all students (and increasingly for other staff) who need support in managing student retention and diversity issues throughout the student lifecycle. Collaboration between various student support departments is a key aspect of this transition. Links between student services and academic support are increasing through, for example, the creation of study skills programmes, learning support centres, peer support and mentoring, staff development and secondment. The research also found that the 'one-stop shop' approach of organising services for students can be effective in helping students to access services in a way that minimises their fears of stigmatisation. Similarly, targeting different groups of students or students in the first year/semester of study has been very effective for the groups concerned.

In 2008/09 Sheffield University undertook a pilot project designed to apply the concepts expressed by Keeling et al. (2008) in *Assessment Reconsidered: Institutional Effectiveness for Student Success*, which advocate that student services should move beyond the user satisfaction model to embrace 'a broader and more holistic approach to evaluation which considers the impact of our provision' (University of Sheffield, 2009). This broader approach was piloted in four divisions of the student support services at Sheffield (English Language Teaching Centre, the Disabled Student Support Service, the Counselling Service, and Student Support and Guidance) and a toolkit was developed for how to: (i) plan for holistic evaluation; (ii) conduct a holistic evaluation; and (iii) follow it up. For the various steps in the process see: http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssd/improvement/holistic.html

In addition, the Higher Education Academy has very recently launched the 'Evidence-Informed Quality Improvement Programme' (EQUIP). This programme aims to support higher education institutions to 'identify, understand and resolve key issues affecting the quality and effectiveness of the student learning experience' (Higher Education Academy, 2010). The Academy intends to work alongside institutional teams that have identified areas for quality enhancement and that, adopting an evidence-informed approach, will develop institutional policies and practices to address that specific aspect of the learning experience. It is anticipated that teams will be cross-institutional, committed to planning and implementing changes, which are in line with their institution's overall mission, and to sharing institutional practices and experiences across the sector. Although not specifically aimed at student services practitioners, this programme will take a holistic approach to the analysis of evidence on the student learning experience, and therefore could potentially include student services representatives in the teams or at least provide a useful template for similar student services-led projects. Case studies of the various institutional evaluations should be available in mid-2011.
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/equip/equip_guidance_2010

Some initiatives related to assessing and enhancing the student experience of HE have taken place in Scotland. In 2003, QAA Scotland identified 'responding to student needs' as a key area of investigation and in particular the needs of students in the first year of study and student evaluation and feedback became the focus of analysis. The 'student needs in the first year of study' project particularly looked at current practices as well as alternative models in: induction; personal tutor systems and their effectiveness; approaches to integrating student support; and the first-year learning experience. The 'student evaluation and feedback' project involved a survey of current approaches to student evaluation and feedback for staff in the Scottish HEIs and a search of Scottish,

UK and international sources of good practice on student evaluation and feedback. One of the outcomes of the project was the development of a web-based toolkit of ideas and approaches to student evaluation and feedback for staff in Scottish HEIs.
http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/documents/studentneeds/Student_Needs_Full_Outcomes_FINAL29_6_05.pdf

A related but more recent development in Scotland has been the *International Benchmarking: Supporting Student Success* project. A Working Group including staff in student support services was set up in 2008 'to consider and benchmark ways in which institutions in Scotland and beyond are supporting student success' (Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee, 2009, p. 3). The Working Group used the 'learner journey' from pre-entry to post-graduation as a benchmarking framework and this has resulted in the collection of information on current and developing practice in Scotland, the rest of the UK and international comparators in the following 14 areas:

- strategies and policies for student support;
- support for students prior to entry;
- academic/campus orientation;
- library and information resource services;
- range and balance of services;
- engaging students;
- building student communities;
- academic peer support and mentoring;
- students' associations/unions;
- use of technology;
- life and study skills;
- careers and employability support;
- service learning - volunteering and the co-curriculum; support for alumni;
- staff training and development.

Some of the conclusions of the Working Group final report echo concepts and ideas expressed in the US literature, for instance that globally there is a move away from compartmentalising student support and toward a more holistic approach; that student services staff do not regularly communicate/collaborate with colleagues in other professions across campus but welcome the opportunity to do so; and that 'there is already a developing role (and potentially room for growth) for student services centrally to work with academic staff in helping them to help students' (p. 5).

The section of the *Enhancement themes* website on the International Benchmarking project provides many national international examples of practices for student support services:
http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/SHEECIB/overview.asp

In 2009 the Higher Education Careers Services Unit published the outcomes of research it sponsored into the ways in which UK university careers services measure their effectiveness and success (Nijjar, 2009). It found that performance measurement and management was a topic of high importance. Results from the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education survey are the most prominent measure used, although there is debate about its suitability as a 'central measure' of careers service effectiveness. Other measures used are activity volumes and evaluations of these activities, although they tend to lack the ability to demonstrate the impact of interventions. The research also identified issues and challenges professionals face in applying measures. These include:

- Difficulties in measuring and articulating effectiveness
- Impact of resource limitations and competing expectations
- Ownership
- Role of senior management
- Nature of students
- Perception of careers service

The report is available at:
http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/hecsu.rd/documents/Reports/Measure_the_roses.pdf

5. Conclusions

Many of the publications reviewed point to the fact that although much has been written about assessment theory, and why it is important to assess the value and impact of student services programmes, there is a lack of research into the extent to which evidence-based assessment in student services is indeed taking place. The evidence that does exist remains ad hoc and anecdotal and stems primarily from single institutional case studies.

The majority of literature found originates in the US, so the utilisation of any ideas, methodologies and practices will need to be carefully modified and adapted to the UK context and the very different institutional circumstances found in this country. Despite historical and structural differences, however, the UK and the US higher education sectors, and the provision for student services within them, are facing similar pressures. Developing the means to assess and quantify the impact that student services make to further the institutional mission and ultimately enhance the student experience has become essential in today's context. How this is done will depend ultimately on the circumstances and strategic goals of student services departments and, indeed, of each institution.

The literature identified in this review is stronger on conceptual frameworks and approaches than on practical solutions for real life settings; and at times assumes that the services or provision to be assessed must first be re-engineered to fit the assessment methods. Such a task may initially appear daunting, but Schuh and Upcraft (2008) remind us that every long journey begins with a first step, and that it is better to begin with a few small and manageable assessment projects than attempt a large one that is more likely to encounter resistance.

There seems to be more literature on student learning outcomes-based assessment than on other impacts on the student experience that may have only an indirect relation to academic success (e.g. health and well-being, finance, housing, careers, part-time employment). This is probably due to the fact that, as the literature reviewed shows, in the US there has been a shift towards learning outcomes-based assessment since the publication of *Learning Reconsidered* in the mid-2000s. However, it is important to remember that assessment of learning outcomes is only one type of assessment - although as Schuh (2005) states, it is probably the most important and perhaps the most difficult form of assessment, and one which usually requires sophisticated research skills.

This seems to suggest that the 'basket of tools' approach that we intend to develop in the next stage of the project may be most productive, allowing individual institutions and specific services to select and customise the approaches that fit their purposes, circumstances and desired outcomes. The framing questions devised by Schuh and Upcraft and reported above, however, could be used as a guiding framework in all types of assessment projects, whatever their scope or intended outcomes.

The shift from user satisfaction surveys to objective assessment is, itself, a learning cycle that may over time evolve into 'a culture of evidence based enhancement of provision' that is part of the ethos of student services and, perhaps, all institutional provision. To quote Oburn (2005) 'building a culture of evidence requires that practitioners develop shared definitions, ask the right questions to determine what really matters, select the tools that will allow them to find answers, and use these tools and the resulting data effectively' (p. 23). Introducing new assessment methods will have significant implications for staff development, recruitment and promotion, leadership, resource allocation, communications and so on. The process may appear very challenging, and, as for any learning process, there no doubt will be mistakes and disappointment along the way. But 'there will also be many rewards as practitioners succeed in replacing anecdotal cultures with cultures of evidence' (p 23).

Finally, we should remind ourselves that assessment on its own is not a substitute for either evaluation or improvement. Assessment efforts will be fruitless unless they are iterative and the results of assessments are linked to a programme of evaluation, the ultimate aim of which is to improve the effectiveness of programmes or services.

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