Assessing the Value and Impact of Services that Support Students

Literature review: Summary of findings

The literature review is the first outcome of a research project sponsored by HEFCE 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.

Main 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 the 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 every long journey begins with a first step, and 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 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' (ibid. 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.

References

Bresciani, M. J., C. L. Zelna, et al. (2004). Assessing Student Learning and Development: A Handbook for Practitioners, NASPA.

Keeling, R. P. E. (2004). Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience. Washington DC ACPA and NASPA.

Keeling, R. P. (2006). Learning Reconsidered 2: Implementing a Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience, ACPA – College Student Educators International; Association of College and University Housing Officers–International; Association of College Unions International; National Academic Advising Association; National Association for Campus Activities; National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association.

Keeling, R. P., et al. (2008). Assessment Reconsidered: Institutional Effectiveness for Student Success, International Center for Student Success and Institutional Accountability (ICSSIA).

Oburn, M. (2005). "Building a Culture of Evidence in Student Affairs." New Directions for Community Colleges(131): 19-32.

Schuh, J. H. and M. L. Upcraft (2001). Assessment Practice in Student Affairs: An Application Manual. First Edition. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.

Schuh, J. H. and M. L. Upcraft (2008). Assessment Methods for Student Affairs, John Wiley & Sons.

Upcraft, M. L. and J. H. Schuh (1996). Assessment in Student Affairs: A Guide for Practitioners. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series, Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.

Current or recent developments and initiatives

1.   In the UK

UUK - 'Student services: effective approaches to retaining students in higher education'
http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/services.pdf
- ➔ DfES-sponsored national research project investigating how student services can best support the increasingly diverse student population to complete their HE studies. Finds that 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.

Sheffield University - 'Holistic evaluation toolkit'
http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssd/improvement/holistic.html
- ➔ Project advocating 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'.

Higher Education Academy - 'Evidence-informed quality improvement programme' (EQUIP)
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/equip/equip_guidance_2010
- ➔ Newly launched programme aimed at supporting higher education institutions to 'identify, understand and resolve key issues affecting the quality and effectiveness of the student learning experience' adopting an evidence-informed approach, and working in cross-institutional teams.

QAA Scotland - 'Responding to student needs'
http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/documents/studentneeds/Student_Needs_Full_Outcomes_FINAL29_6_05.pdf
- ➔ The needs of students in the first year of study and student evaluation and feedback have been the focus of research looking at current practices and alternative models. A web-based toolkit of ideas and approaches to student evaluation and feedback for staff in Scottish HEIs has been produced.

QAA Scotland - 'International benchmarking: supporting student success'
http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/SHEECIB/overview.asp
Collection of information on current and developing practice in Scotland, the rest of the UK

and international comparators in fourteen areas of student service provision.

2.   In the US

Assessment in student affairs (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996)
Assessment practice in student affairs (Schuh and Upcraft, 2001)
Assessment methods in student affairs (Schuh and Upcraft, 2008)
Assessing student learning and development. A handbook for practitioners (Bresciani et al., 2004)
- ➔ These are hands-on books written for practitioners and represent a rich source of examples and templates that will help student services staff select the best methods and tools for their specific projects.

Learning Reconsidered. A campus-wide focus on the student experience (Keeling, 2004)
http://www.myacpa.org/pub/documents/LearningReconsidered.pdf
- ➔ Introduces the concept of learning as a holistic process integrating student personal development and academic learning, and discusses the implications for student service professionals.

Learning Reconsidered 2. A practical guide to implementing a campus wide focus on the student experience (Keeling et al., 2006)
http://bookstore.naspa.org/learningreconsidered2.aspx
- ➔ Illustrates ways to implement the concepts expressed by *Learning Reconsidered* in practice.

Assessment Reconsidered. Institutional effectiveness for student success (Keeling et al., 2008)
http://assessmentreconsidered.org/
- ➔ Focuses on the 'shared ownership' of assessment among student services, faculties, administrators and students.

California State University, Sacramento (Sacramento State)
http://saweb.csus.edu/students/download/SA_assessment_Plans2007.pdf
- ➔ Sacramento State undertakes a highly structured, continuous assessment process comprising the following steps: mission statement; planning goals; program objectives or student learning outcomes; measures; results; and conclusions. Examples of assessment projects undertaken can be found via the above link.

Oregon State University
http://oregonstate.edu/studentaffairs/assessment/assessmentresources.html
http://oregonstate.edu/studentaffairs/docs/assess.rep.summary.2007.08.pdf
- ➔ The Office of Student Affairs Research and Evaluation (SARE) leads and coordinates all assessment efforts within the Division of Student Affairs at Oregon State. Useful templates and resources for undertaking assessment can be found on the SARE web pages. In particular the 2007-08 summary report describes the decisions taken as a result of assessment by the various units and departments.

Colorado State University
http://improvement.colostate.edu/index.cfm
- ➔ PRISM – or 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 service professionals and academic staff but also for students, parents, employers, policymakers, community members, alumni, administrators, and accreditation teams.

Texas A&M University - Student Leader Learning Outcomes (SLLO)
http://sllo.tamu.edu/
- ➔ The SLLO website provides methods and tools for staff to use with student leaders to help in the assessment and documentation of enhanced learning stemming from students' leadership experiences.

West Virginia University
http://studentaffairs.wvu.edu/eat/assessment_resources
Structured assessment plans consisting of mission statement; goal statement (linked to overall divisional goals); learning outcomes; learning experiences; assessment methods; implementation information; analysis of assessment data; assessment report and recommendations. Resources available on the website.