A Tale of Two Cities: the sequel An international comparison of the contributions of professional services staff to student outcomes. (0142)

Carroll Graham[1], Julie Regan[2]
[1]University of Technology Sydney, Australia, [2]University of Chester, UK

Introduction

This paper reports on a comparative study examining the contribution of professional services staff (PSS) to the student experience: in particular, their contribution to retention and successful student outcomes. This second phase, used in-depth interviews to compare data from an Australian institution (Case study A) and a UK institution (Case study B).

Despite an increasing interest in role identity and role development of PSS, there is still very little research into their contribution to student retention and success. With PSS making up over 60% of the workforce in the institutions being studied, such a lack of information could be having a negative effect on attempts by institutions to promote retention, and improve student outcomes.

Background

This paper builds on earlier work, based on common issues and concerns, and illustrates the possibilities that may be gained by sharing knowledge and experience to examine higher education work, careers and cultures that impact on student outcomes. Our story began when Graham presented preliminary results, from case study A, at the 2011 SRHE Newer Researchers Conference. Recognising the importance of this work in UK higher education, Regan and Graham collaborated to undertake a comparative study. Results from the first phase of the comparative study, which replicated the use of the Delphi Survey method used by Graham (2010), were reported in the 2013 SRHE conference (Graham & Regan 2013). Because of the wide-ranging roles of professional services staff, Graham had found more in-depth exploration was needed to gain a better understanding, using in-depth interviews to achieve this (2012, 2013a, 2013c). This was then replicated in the comparative study, with Graham also undertaking the interviews in the UK to minimize the risk of interviewer impact on the results.

Methodology

Fourteen interviews were carried out in both institutions. Matching the roles precisely was not possible, primarily due to some role holders declining or not responding to the invitation to participate. Recruitment was generally more difficult at the UK institution and this was particularly notable in the 'Facilities' department. Nevertheless, the demographics of the two case study samples, as shown in Table 1, were remarkably similar.

Table 1: Participant demographics

	Case Study A	Case Study B
Total number of participants	14	14
Female participants (%)	64	71
Minimum experience in HE (years)	3.0	3.8
Maximum experience in HE (years)	24	19
Average experience in HE (years)	9.9	12.4
Average experience at case study University (years)	8.1	11.0
Participants with other HE experience (%)	50	43
Number of different work units	12	10
Minimum HEW/OS level[1]	5	5
Maximum HEW/OS level	>10	11
Median HEW/OS level	7	8
Number participants with Bachelor degree	9	14
Number participants with postgraduate qualifications	6	7
Number participants with at least a Master degree	4	6

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 60-90 minutes. All were conducted in neutral spaces and audio recorded. The audio-recordings were then transcribed and analysed with the help of computer-assisted, qualitative, data analysis software (CAQDAS), specifically Dedoose. This enabled more efficient generation of initial codes and testing of emergent themes and patterns. Codes and themes derived from case study A were used to perform an initial analysis of the data from case study B (as data was collected a few years apart). Any new themes emerging from case study B data, were then cross-checked with the data from case study A.

Results

At the time of writing this paper, analysis of the data from case study B is not yet complete; however, by the time of the conference this analysis will be complete, and comprehensive results will be presented. Although the comparative analysis is currently at an early stage, already it is clear that there is a strong consensus amongst participants, from both institutions, that PSS have a large contribution to

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1 Higher Education Worker (HEW) levels refer to the classification structure for PSS that is typically used in Australian universities. The classification ranges from HEW 1, which is the lowest level and is rarely used in most institutions, to HEW10+, which includes directors and managers. Similarly, Operational Support (OS) levels are used in the UK for the classification of PSS roles, and typically range from 1 (lowest) to 12 (highest).

make to institutional processes and behaviours which respond to students' queries promptly, efficiently and in a friendly manner. This relates strongly to the first of Prebble's propositions (Prebble et al. 2004) for institutional behaviours which promote positive student outcomes. A second theme, strongly identified by participants from both institutions, was that PSS contribute significantly to the provision of a wide range of services and facilities. This relates to another of the Prebble Propositions (Prebble et al. 2004). Differences noted in the first phase regarding PSS contribution to a non-discriminatory environment where not evident in the second phase. Previous results had indicated UK staff felt they contributed more to the creation of such an environment. However, without the prompts of the Delphi study, participants did not appear to prioritise their contribution in this area.

A common theme that emerged in both case studies was that PSS do not report a planned entry into this area of work. Indeed it often appears accidental or by happenchance. This has implications for recruitment as applicants may not have a realistic view of what the role involves. Another common theme to emerge is the importance of establishing and maintaining relationships with key people needed for interviewees to fulfill their own roles effectively. This seems to point to somewhat ineffective systems and processes, which are mitigated against by 'good will' from colleagues. In case study B, this key strategy to effective working is being challenged by rapid expansion to multiple campuses, which was not a feature of case study A.

Implications for the sector

Institutions who fail to acknowledge and value the contribution of PSS to student retention and success could be missing a crucial part of this important agenda. Even the work of Thomas (2012) in the UK, viewed as leading in this area of research, barely mentions the contribution of PSS. This research suggests that institutions need to employ recruitment methods that help to ensure a good fit between the values and attributes of the new PSS, and the values and mission of the institution. Furthermore, there need to be strategies to ensure retention and development of these staff. Such development activities need to be student focused, rather than process or skill focused, to ensure the institutional culture supports positive student outcomes.

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