

What Works? Student Retention & Success



Case study

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The importance of team work to benefit the student experience: changing the culture of a course team

Rationale

'Team working' is a commonly held aspirational aim held across virtually all organisations – but what does it actually mean? We all recognise that we should collaborate and work partnership with others and often it's something we pay lip service to but in reality, do we achieve it? What does effective team working look like - and what impact does it have? According to Ewart Wooldridge, who at the time of speaking was the chief executive of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, it is something that academics are not always strong at doing:

"Often you find that at the top level a team is actually a talented group of individuals,"
Swain, H (2008)

This case study seeks to explore the impact of a strong ethos of team working on the student experience, drawing on the findings of feedback from staff involved in the What Works? Student Retention & Success (SRS) Change Programme (2012-15). Ulster is one of thirteen UK institutions involved in this Change Programme, which aims to improve approaches to the challenge of student retention and improving the student experience.

Within Ulster seven discipline areas were chosen to participate. The teams developed or refined existing initiatives and interventions in three main areas: extended/improved induction periods; active learning and co-curricular activities.

The benefits of team working emerged from the institutional evaluation of the project as a whole, and this case study aims to draw these out and show evidence of the positive impact it can have.

Description/Discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

The teams involved varied in nature and make up, depending on the size and scope of their course and discipline area. Some had been established course teams for a number of years and had worked collaboratively before, whereas others were part of newly formed course teams, or had recently been amalgamated.

Analysing the effectiveness of team working was not a set objective of any course team participating in the SRS, however this case study reflects on the experiences and reviews the findings of the whole project from the perspective of the discipline teams.

Characteristics of Effective Teams

Before discussing the impact of teamworking on the student experience, it is important to examine the key characteristics of an effective team. The main aspects relating to the quality of teamwork, as identified by Hoegl, M and Gemueden, H.G. (2001), are set out below :-

Table 1	The Teamwork Quality Construct
Communication	Is there sufficiently frequent, informal, direct and open communication?
Coordination	Are individual efforts well-structured and synchronized within the team?
Balance of member contributions	Are all team members able to bring in their expertise to their full potential?
Mutual Support	Do team members help and support each other in carrying out their tasks?
Effort	Do all team members exert all efforts to the team's tasks?
Cohesion	Are team members motivated to maintain the team? Is there team spirit?

Hoegl, M and Gemueden, H.G. (2001) *Teamwork Quality and the Success of Innovative Projects*

Each of the above attributes of effective teamworking were observed by team members (to a lesser or greater degree) as playing a key role in the successful functioning of the project teams, as borne out in the focus groups. There were, of course, variances in how each of the teams operated (in terms of leadership, communication etc), which is to be expected in an institution of this size, but they all displayed these common key components.

In particular, most of the teams noted how the SRS projects and interventions provided a shared goal and galvanized the team, leading to greater cohesion – amongst the project teams, the wider course team and also with colleagues in other faculties and departments.

Evidence of Impact

Focus groups were carried out with each of the discipline teams, on their relevant campus. Eight of these were carried out in total, and involved the staff members from the teams – no student team members were present.

The questions for the teams were themed around four specific areas:

1. Change of attitude and behaviour for staff and students
2. Students confidence, engagement and belonging
3. Student success
4. Sustainability

The focus groups were led, transcribed and themed by a third party independent researcher. What follows is an analysis of the qualitative reports with the specific questions in mind, *'how has effective team working positively impacted on the student experience'?*

Impact of Effective Teamworking

The evidence collected from the focus groups would suggest that when a Hoegl, M and Gemueden, H.G. (2001) team works together towards the shared goal of improving student retention and success, then the wider student experience was enhanced as a result.

A number of broad themes have emerged from the focus groups which outline the positive impact of effective teamworking. Hoegl, M and Gemueden, H.G. (2001) Benefits include greater **engagement** of staff across their course, leading to **'buy in'** by those involved on all levels and across traditional team boundaries. In addition to this, including **students as members of the teams** –as innovators of projects, delivery partners of interventions and generally creating a team atmosphere within their cohorts led to new ways of thinking and relationships for staff and students.

Teamwork also extended beyond the disciplines and **networks** began to form across the institution. This sparked **creativity** and shared learning from one area to another and inspired further projects and improvements on courses. All of this has led to **increased staff morale** for some, as they began to work with new people and receive positive feedback from their peers on their own work through dissemination on a local level, and in some instances, internationally at conferences and events. Increased staff engagement, which is closely aligned to the area of 'buy-in', has also helped to develop a number of further initiatives and enhancements to the student experience

Table 2, below, collates some of the comments and evidence gathered in relation to these themes. To ensure anonymity where possible the team and staff names were given letters; thus the qualitative comments will be referred to as 'Staff member A, Team B' for example.

<p>Staff Engagement and Wider 'Buy in'</p>	<p>Inclusion in the SRS focussed the minds of the teams on a particular project and goal: even where some of this activity was already taking place, reporting on the project seemed to provide a spotlight on improving practices.</p> <p>This led to wider staff engagement (sometimes beyond just the course teams) in student engagement/retention initiatives. This took longer in some instances than others, but it has resulted in an improved experience for students.</p> <p>A staff member reflected that the wider buy in has led to the initiatives being embedded into the course team:</p> <p><i>“So when you ask if it’s embedded its maybe not embedded but best practice is being embedded and it is a process ” (Team B Staff member D, page 25)</i></p> <p>Even though it was a long process for others as well, the benefits are now being felt and the team are working together:</p> <p><i>“I think the buy in was always there but it was just I suppose even understanding that the project can make a difference and it ’ s a lot of learning as you go and just sort of trying things and see if they work.... We’re having a [Team C] planning day today and a lot of the stuff will be discussed. We have a whole number of ideas built into what we are going to do next year in terms of our intervention which are coming out jointly from the [Team C] planning day and out of this project as well ” (Team C, Staff member A)</i></p>
<p>Students as Part of the Team</p>	<p>For many of the teams this project transformed how they interacted with their students, they moved beyond consulting students, and began to work with them as team members and began to think about how to create camaraderie amongst staff/students and between students themselves.</p> <p>As one team noted:</p> <p><i>“One of the things was that it was collaborative with the students. In other words we discussed the issues that students have and ideas that students have towards developing maybe a more inclusive kind of environment and so on and it meant that our interventions were in many cases largely steered from feedback we got from the students so they were certainly involved in the process ” (Team B, Staff member C, page 1)</i></p> <p>Another picked up on the importance of creating the informal spaces to build the relationships between staff and student:</p>

	<p><i>“...One of the things as well was the student trip. It was something I must say worked really well...it was a great opportunity again to break those barriers down and be able to get that information back from the students about how they are getting on instead of in a class environment and I suppose the more information we can get informally sometimes the better and more of an understanding we can get of individuals and the course of a whole. Then that can feed back into what interventions we can plan” (Team C, Staff member A)</i></p> <p>All of the teams noted how this focus on including students in the teams created a sense of partnership between staff and students, Team G explained:</p> <p><i>“It really became good, not just with second year partners and 1st years but third years and you know artists in residence and actually some of our placement students had come in and they were looking at it” (Team G, Staff member A)</i></p> <p><i>“This is a partnership. This course is about them as much as it is about us facilitating. They are the course and I think once that realisation sets in then they do rise to that and it ’ s this is our course for 3 years and if I ’ m a year ahead and then the 3rd years would then come in and that should build relationships and the relationships have really blossomed” (Team G, Staff member B)</i></p>
Networking and Creativity	<p>Due to the dissemination of good practice, and the inter-disciplinary nature of the SRS project – all teams began to see the benefits of learning from their colleagues across the institution and creating new networks.</p> <p>Further, the camaraderie of students and staff is beginning to grow following some of the interventions and creating better linkages within departments.</p> <p>One team noted:</p> <p><i>“[...]we are going to be working with sports and computing. Whoever saw that as a marriage made in heaven but hopefully that will work. I think there is lots of things going on out there that we could and I think there is a lot out there and we could be helping each other and benefiting and when you start working with people in those areas it is amazing how you can work together. We need to get better at that” (Team B, Staff member B)</i></p> <p>Another team noted how connections were being made across disciplines in their department:</p> <p><i>“I think the other thing is it ’ s not only stuff between staff and students</i></p>

	<i>but it ' s also between the students across the disciplines. We would never have done that before hand whereas they all seem to be doing that"</i> (Team, H Staff member A)
Improved Staff Morale and Engagement	<p>Several of the courses noted a sense of increased staff engagement and morale due to teamwork.</p> <p>Working as a team towards this shared goal provided the natural benefits of a shared workload, but in some instances also inspired staff to continue with the projects and helped to spread the enthusiasm for them.</p> <p><i>"I think it's had an impact on all of us hasn't it in how we work together and how we understand our own practice and we understand our own enthusiasms and approaches to work. From a staff point of view it has been very interesting"</i> (Team G, Staff member A)</p> <p>Another member from the same team noted:</p> <p><i>"I think it was good for staff development and bonding for them which is fantastic and then that goes into their practice"</i> (Team G, Staff member C)</p>

Table 2: Themes of Positive Impacts of Teamworking

Effective Teamworking leading to improved Student Experience.

The evidence collected from the focus groups leads to the conclusion that effective team working leads to improvements in the student experience, through increasing the focus of working together, enhancing engagement of staff and students and inspiring creativity.

The culture of team working has assisted staff in the creation, delivery and dissemination of their initiatives – of which most have led to improvements in student retention and success within each area.

Challenges

The single greatest challenge to instilling a culture of teamwork for the teams, was securing 'buy – in' from all the relevant stakeholders on their course. This appeared to be overcome by many of the teams by the end of the project, through proving the positive outcomes of their initiatives and ideas.

A further, broader, challenge was that of time constraints. Finding the time for team meetings (including with the institutions core team) and communication, on top of an already busy teaching schedule and implementing the chosen initiatives was flagged by all teams.

Lessons Learnt

The results from this study would indicate that instilling a team approach to identified problems, and course delivery, benefits both staff morale and the student experience.

References

Hoegl, M and Gemueden, H.G. (2001) 'Teamwork Quality and the Success of Innovative Projects: A Theoretical Concept and Empirical Evidence', *Organization Science*, 12(4), pp. 437.

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For full What Works? Student Retention and Success report (2017) see

<https://www.phf.org.uk/publications/works-student-retention-success-full/>