

Learner Report on HMI Review of Stow College September 2010

In summary the Student Executive acknowledges the following points noted by the HMIe: that they are generally pleased with learner progression and achievement, that the college provides a high quality level of learning and teaching in most areas, that students are actively involved in improving their own learning, and that the leadership from Senior Management is good.

As members of the Student Executive last year, we volunteered to help HMIe in assessing the way learners affect the way they engage with their course and its various modules. Employing the HMIe suggestion of a questionnaire was very useful and, after slight alterations to the HMIe model survey, these were handed out to classes.

Over the Easter period these were collected and summarized by their content. There was a low return, but what was returned was very interesting.

These were combined with the many observations and anecdotal evidence we as students had experienced over the year. A participating member of the Executive is Dyslexic, and there were several others in his class who had what are generally termed "unseen disabilities". All of these students had something positive to say about the way the tutors accommodated their individual needs for learning.

A recurrent theme throughout the survey results was that students found their lecturers approachable and engaging. This applied across almost all classes and all departments. From students having an open dialogue with their lecturers can come real advances in Learner Engagement, we feel. There were several examples of tutors receiving exemplary praise from students, and the college should recognise this in supporting tutors to continue to deliver excellent teaching.

Throughout the year there were opportunities to feedback to Course Leaders and Department Heads as to how the course is felt to be going at Course Committee meetings. It can be seen that on several occasions the content of the course was changed and /or the "instrument of assessment" was adapted to suit the individual student - some of whom are very knowledgeable about the subject but who find it difficult to prove their competence in written work.

Although it must be said that this benefits the year below the one feeding back more than the present one due to the integrated nature of some of the course modules, it would be difficult to see how things could be done any differently without jeopardising the coherence of the course itself for the majority of the learners.

The example of the Dyslexic student (above) and another case of a student struggling with his course are two examples of students who were retained through the positive input from teaching staff and an anecdotal example of how a stronger Student Executive could help bridge the communication gap. There are moves at Stow College to more positively and actively obtain views from students on how things are run; the new appointment of a Learner Engagement Assistant being one.

As active members of the Student Executive we can say that we have been encouraged to take part in discussions at all levels: student/ tutor, course and

department, all the way up to and including the Depute Principal, and our views have been well received, and for the most part actions taken.

While we recognise the excellent practice noted by HMIe in their report, we feel initiatives such as *Art Box* could be a model for student-led projects, if supported properly by the college. It is mostly thanks to the commitment of a core of students from last year that the Students Association has begun to be recognized for what it should be – an autonomous group working for the benefit of students.

There is no doubt that the SFC proposals on curriculum are affecting staff morale and consequently having an effect on learning and teaching. This is a real problem for Stow and a motivated Student Executive could go a long way to intercede and help in student retention. We as the Student Executive have recently been given a large new office space in which to meet and get training etc, and there has already been requests from tutors to use the space for confidential “Welfare” type interviews with students - something that indicates an improvement both in facilities and two way co-operation between students and tutors.

We feel some improvement could be made regarding the initial Induction process, which we feel is all about the 1st week and leans too heavily on discipline and *what not to do* at a time when students could use encouragement in speaking up (perhaps more enthusiasm for the nomination and choosing of Class Representatives) as (for many) this period paints a picture which lasts a long time. We think this is an opportunity missed for inclusion of students whose 1st language is not English. This could certainly be improved.

A member of the Executive has suggested a move to something like “Extended Induction” and this has been enthusiastically received by, amongst others, the Student Liaison Officer and Depute Principal.

We feel that there is a role here for the Class Reps and Student Executive as Tutors are busy teaching and may not be as sensitive to non-English speaking students’ interests or feelings of inclusion. As the Student Executive we would like to see the College Management support the Student Executive in providing a smooth continuity for induction from year to year.

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