

QSN SYMPOSIUM: “The new Regulatory Framework for Higher Education in England: Challenges for Providers”, Leeds Beckett University, 31st May 2018

Small group discussion: ‘Providing Information to Prospective Undergraduate Students: Exchanging Good Practice’

Summary of table discussions

1. Delegates considered HEFCE's 2017 guidance on Information for Students¹ to be straightforward but felt that it did not adequately reflect the complexities of non-full time single honours programmes, e.g. joint honours programmes and courses with sandwich placement years.
2. The role of quality offices and staff was felt to have changed, with a need to develop new systems that interfaced with marketing and planning functions. Quality teams had a clear role in auditing the accuracy of information, however they was a risk that they could end up becoming ‘referees’ in managing competing stakeholder interests.
3. Delegates considered the risks associated with information conveyed verbally to prospective students and the need for increased staff awareness and support, e.g. through pre-open day staff briefings which were regarded as good practice. With the increased focus on CMA, the emphasis had shifted towards providing information in a ‘durable medium’ and it was challenging for quality teams to keep control of and manage the accuracy of such information, particularly in large institutions. One provider (Imperial College) cited good practice in how its quality and marketing operations worked closely together in constructing course webpages around programme specifications (sample <http://www.imperial.ac.uk/study/ug/courses/aeronautics-department/aeronautical-engineering/>). The availability of option modules was considered to be one of the most important pieces of information demanded by students and yet it was the least likely to be available in advance.
4. Providers were wary of publishing details of individual staff, particularly if they had high profiles and might attract students to apply to the institution; it could potentially be misleading, or even constitute false advertising were these individuals not subsequently involved substantially in teaching. It was suggested that information on the type and background of teachers and the constitution of teaching teams, for example whether they contained experienced academic and professional practitioners, was more helpful than individual staff profiles although these could be useful for promoting specialist option modules or topics for supervised research projects. Delegates noted the difficulty of keeping staffing information accurate and up-to-date in the context of individuals’ sickness, extended leave or exit from an institution. The majority of staff profiles were available at institution and/ or department level, rather than by programme which was where students would wish to see them, and filtering out what was of specific interest to

¹ *Information for students: A guide to providing information to prospective undergraduate students*, DfENI/ HEFCE/ HEFCW/ SFC, 2017
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Learning.and.teaching/Guide.to.providing.info.to.students/Guide_to_providing_info_to_students.pdf.

them could be difficult ('too many clicks'). One provider chose to reference 'current' team profiles in their online materials, acknowledging that this information was likely to change over time as staff departed the organisation.

5. CMA was felt to have had a potentially negative impact on curriculum change, slowing it down to ensure that it was communicated effectively and accurately to prospective and current students. Delegates supported the need for clear deadlines and responsibilities for updating programme specifications as long as they did not prevent the making of necessary changes in the student interest.
6. Delegates welcomed the recent HEFCE clarifications² on contact hours, however they remained wary of making definitive statements about them and there remained some confusion about what was allowed – for example, one provider cited tutor-student discussions that took place on a bus during field trips and queried the extent to which these may be relevant and countable. Delegates also considered the challenge of identifying and accounting for tutor-student interactions that may currently be 'hidden' within guided independent study hours. Where making data comparisons, this was felt to be most meaningful between programmes of the same discipline in different providers (provided these were similarly defined), rather than between different programmes of the same provider.
7. Delegates noted a range of practice in relation to where information on class sizes and contact hours was held and how it was checked (audited). In particular, they expressed scepticism that providers had the necessary processes to confirm that what was being delivered conformed to programme publicity and Key Information Sets (KIS). Delegates considered the various stages of programme development where contact hours may be set, e.g. at initial planning approval or final validation, and the locus of their approval which ranged from validation chairs to marketing departments or, in one case, a DVC. Delegates identified a need for staff development to promote general understanding of the risks associated with inaccurate reporting in respect of CMA compliance and OfS registration. That said, they also felt strongly that students benefited more from information on learning and teaching activities than class sizes and contact hours which did not necessarily equate with better teaching quality.
8. Delegates were unclear about the responsibilities of institutions in terms of information published by collaborative partners. Processes were not always in place to check information published by validated or collaborative partners and even if they were, it was not always possible to get the information changed or taken down quickly. In this regard, delegates felt that more clarity on the legal liability of validating bodies would be welcome.
9. Delegates considered how easily KIS and other programme data could be accessed by students and where and when it was most useful, i.e. at application stage or post-enrolment. Delegates considered the need for, and value of, closer working with schools to learn more about current level 3 qualifications, including new A-Level curricula, as well as prospective students' expectations of university life. A more targeted approach to providing information for students from families with no previous HE participation was also considered desirable.
10. Delegates considered the challenges associated with gathering accurate information on additional course costs which may be unduly inflated due to concerns about the risk of under-estimating them in the context of CMA. Some delegates favoured a description of

² 'TEF Measuring Teaching Intensity: Guidance for Providers' (HEFCE) 2018
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE_2014/Content/Learning_and_teaching/TEF/Guidance/Measuring%20teaching%20intensity%20-%20Guidance%20for%20providers.pdf.

estimated costs accompanied by a caveat statement that 'costs are subject to price inflation but will be no more than xxxxxx'. Delegates were clear about the importance of distinguishing what were mandatory costs, e.g. the purchase of materials for an art exhibition that formed an assessed element of a course, from optional expenditure such as on books that were also available from a library. In respect of where course costs were considered in the programme approval process, this appeared generally to be during validation.

11. Delegates considered the benefits of utilising current students as a vehicle for communicating changes to new students, for example in relation to new build such as libraries and gyms, as a means of helping them understand the rationale for change and its likely benefits which may mitigate any potential negative impact on NSS, etc.
 12. Finally, delegates considered whether the information that was being prioritised by OfS was of most value to students. Providers had found that students desired information on what was expected of them and other students in terms of their behaviour and attendance, and how strictly these were enforced. They also requested realistic information on student life and student representation and the availability of welfare support and counselling. Timed release of information, and more structured systems for navigating it were felt to be useful in helping students cope with the huge amount of information provided to them.
-