

The Minutes Tool: diagnosing student engagement

The Minutes Tool can help you understand more about effective student engagement by focusing on the evidence provided in an ordinary document. The example provided by the tool embeds learning points and acts as a consciousness-raiser. The techniques learned should be applied to your own documents, which may in the past have been looked at but never seen.

How to use this diagnostic

The diagnostic is designed to be used in two ways:

As a group activity. A small group will be lead by the facilitator. The group will reach a set of conclusions in, say 15 minutes. These will then be discussed with the facilitator for a further 5 minutes.

As an individual activity. An individual can read through the background details and the minutes. They should then spend a few minutes writing out their conclusions before comparing these with the notes for the facilitator.

Sunnyfields University Business School

Sunnyfields University is a modern university situated near the centre of a large town. Its Business School is well established with 6 undergraduate (some specialised, some general), 3 postgraduate and several professional programmes. Most programmes are offered to both full-time and part-time students, with a significant number of international students, particularly at postgraduate level. In total there are about 500 students on these programmes amounting to some 400 FTE overall. There are about 45 academic staff supported by 9 general and administrative staff.

You have been recently appointed as the Asst Dean of the Business School with responsibility for Quality. You are new to the university so have no prior conceptions as to what needs to be done to enhance quality. You know that the School did well at Subject Review in 2001-2002 but informal contacts since then indicate that there may have been a drop in standards. As one of your first tasks you are looking through the past minutes of the Staff-Student Business School consultative committee. You are assessing whether anything needs to be done to improve student representation within the School and whether this is a top priority issue for you in your new job. Apparently the Dean has been chairing this Committee for the past few years and said, in passing, that it “seems to be operating pretty well”. He is suggesting that you “concentrate your time on these new more advanced methods of quality management such as EFQM and TQM. We want the School to be seen as setting the pace in the university, don’t we?”

Read the minutes carefully and make a list of those points you think are worthy of attention, either as good practice or needing attention.

Draw some conclusions. Should you satisfy the Dean, concentrate on “advanced methods” and leave this consultative committee alone? Or make some changes?

If so, what changes?

Sunnyfields University: Virgin Business School

Minutes of a Staff-Student Consultative Committee 30 March 2006

Present

Dr Gwyneth Bennet (Chair), Professor Xavier Fikes (Asst Dean Quality), Professor James Archer, Chris Hatch, Susan Marshall, Dr Sarah Lavelle, Dr Paul Thompson, Maureen Herbert (secretary).

Richard Banks, Lawrence Braithwaite, Emily Barfield, Elizabeth Gifford, Chennan Guo, Stewart Harmon, Miyuko Sato, Will Morgan, Lorna Tanner, Simon Tanner, Tracy Yang.

Apologies

Matthew Bonnor, Sandra Edwards, Professor Laura Elsworth, Dr Christine Gorman, Professor Paul Jordan, Robert Harris, Dr Lisa Holton, Dr Piercemuller, Carole Williams, Gary Xhu. Chris Biddle, Richard Higgins, Yvonne Mortimer.

Introduction

Dr Bennet welcomed everybody to the second meeting of the Staff-Student Consultative Committee for the 2005-2006 session. She was pleased that people had made the effort to attend but noted that there were no student representatives present from the part-time programmes or from BA Economics for Business. It was recognised that several part-time programmes did not have classes on the day of the Committee meeting but nevertheless this was still disappointing. Also Economics for Business had not sent any representatives to the previous meeting.

Minutes of the last meeting

(These had recently been emailed to members, and copies for students left in the student pigeon holes.) The minutes of the meeting of 26 October were agreed as a correct record.

Lawrence Braithwaite wanted it recorded that this was his first meeting and the reason he had come was to complain about how long it had taken for his Statistics assignment to be returned. He was asked to raise this at the appropriate point in the agenda.

Matters Arising

At the last meeting complaints had been made about books in the Library, particularly in Economics, that seemed never to be available for loan. The Chair was happy to report that this had been taken up with the Library and a significant number of Economics texts had been transferred to the short loan collection. Students were pleased to hear this although they would have welcomed earlier notification having stopped looking for these books in the Library, not being aware of the changes.

Course Progress

The following items were raised

First Year Undergraduate

1. The issue of the length of time taken to return marked assignments was raised. Students stated that they would expect the return to be within a week. GB pointed out that the university guideline was that return should be within three weeks. The student view was that even this guideline had not been met in Statistics. GB explained that this issue had been raised in the corresponding meeting in 2005. There it had been agreed that all staff would either meet the deadline or would indicate to students what the expected time for return would be if the deadline were not to be met. Subsequently all staff would have been circulated with the minutes of that meeting so students should have been informed if their work was to be returned later than the deadline. The minutes of this meeting would again highlight this as an action for all staff.

Action: All staff

2. There had been problems with the organisation of the computer applications practicals. Students felt that they required a disproportionate amount of work for each element in the portfolio. It was agreed that it might be possible to clump together some elements of the portfolio. This would be discussed with students next week.

Action: Computer Applications team

Second Year Undergraduate

Students reported that they had several assignments all due in at the same time. This led to difficulties as they were put under pressure to complete a lot of work in a short time. This matter had been raised at past meetings and the answer given then was that if students had problems with the scheduling of their assignments they should take these up with their module tutors.

Third Year Undergraduate

Concerns were expressed by students about the dissertation module. There had been changes of supervisor at short notice for some students and they wanted to know about the implications of this for their final mark. In the absence of Dr Jones, tutor with overall responsibility for dissertations, it was not possible to discuss this matter further. The Chair would contact Dr Jones to raise these issues with him.

Action GB

Postgraduate

It was confirmed that Annual Dissertation Progress Reports must be completed by 1 September. The forms would be sent out in July and should be used for recording dissertation supervisions, progress and likely date of final submission.

Due to last year's revalidation students on the MSc in Banking who had not completed their dissertation would be subject to the previous regulations and therefore would not have to complete the additional Methods assignment that had been introduced.

Students reported that access to some specialist financial journals needed for the Financial Accounting module of the MSc in Finance and Economics had been difficult. They questioned why these journals were not available electronically, thus making them readily available. XF explained that electronic access to some journals was disproportionately expensive.

Any other Business

None

Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Staff-Student Consultative Committee would be in October in Semester 1 next academic year.

Comments on the minutes for Tool Facilitator

Operation. For a Business School of this size it's questionable that there should be only one Staff-Student consultative committee. The concerns of particular groups of students are likely to be lost and or given disproportionate attention, to the detriment of other groups. An alternative would be to have such committees for (say) undergraduate and postgraduates, for full-timers and part-timers, or even, depending on the number of programmes and the overlap between them, a separate committee for each programme.

Present and Apologies For a business school of this size the numbers present are quite small. This indicates that this committee is not seen as very important by either the staff or students. Does something need to be done to raise its profile?

These minutes are awkward to follow because they don't differentiate between staff and students. Presumably the first line is staff and the second students but it doesn't say so and if these are students their course or level is not given so it's not possible to relate their concerns to what they say.

Introduction This indicates a fundamental problem which is nowhere addressed within the minutes – the representation of part-timers. We don't know the time of the meeting but obviously no thought has been given to scheduling for the convenience of part-timers. This needs to be addressed. Similarly the complete absence over two meetings of representation from a programme indicates a problem in either selecting representatives or in choosing them.

Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes have only been distributed recently in an erratic way. Prompt production is not seen as a priority and so feedback to students probably doesn't happen very quickly either.

More importantly, the date of the last meeting indicates that there is a long gap, of some 5-6 months, between meetings. This gap probably means that there is not a lot of continuity between meetings, and they are not seen as important.

The interruption by Lawrence Braithwaite indicates that he doesn't have an understanding of the practice of this type of committee meeting. It raise the issue as to whether there are training schemes for student representatives in the university and whether the business school is helping students to attend them.

Matters Arising

Feedback from the committee meetings seems to be very slow or almost non-existent. There seems no concept of a feedback loop; the idea that action should be taken and the results communicated back to members. There is little point in waiting to report until the next meeting. Students need to know what the response is especially in cases like this where the outcome is of direct benefit to them. Several feedback mechanisms could be considered; a website, email or even an efficient internal post.

Course Progress

First Year Undergraduate

- 1 The section on return of work illustrates several issues. There seems to be a failure to communicate agreed actions to staff and to monitor that staff take those actions. Also failure to circulate the minutes leads to students not being aware of the decision taken.
- 2 This seems to be something that should have been picked up through informal direct contact and resolved then and there and resolved immediately, either by making the indicated change or not. In either case the students should have been given a quick answer. What could be reported to the Committee would be the resolution of the problem.

Second Year Undergraduate

Scheduling of assignments: No effective action seems to be being taken about issues raised by students. This one could have been dealt with in two ways. Firstly, in response to its being raised earlier, a School procedure could have been worked out so that there was a clear assignment scheduling process which would aim to minimise clashes. In the absence of such a procedure this is still a matter that should have been dealt with directly when the assignment schedule was made known to students and they started to complain about it. It is a matter that should have been resolved early in the semester and the action taken to resolve it reported to the Committee, rather than having it raised at the Committee.

This indicates that informal communication is not strong and formal means of communication are being used totemically to give the appearance of action.

Postgraduate Students

This is a series of very specialised issues showing once again the need for a separate committee meeting. The response to the problem with electronic journals is not very forthcoming. Wouldn't it be possible to make available copies of critical papers?

Third Year Undergraduate

Dissertation: Again this item illustrates that staff are not concerned to attend these meetings (or even send apologies), even one such as Dr Jones who seems to have a significant role in programme operation. The issue should have been brought directly to Dr Jones' attention by the students and he (or she) should have responded directly to them. The staff-student consultative committee is being used by staff as a substitute for taking action.

Conclusions

It might well be said that a lot of changes need to be made to the committee, as indicated above.

So one possibility is to make some of the alterations indicated in the notes above. But it may be that a complete overhaul of the student representation processes in the School is needed.

David Rush and Mike Hart

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