

The aim of this short case is to evaluate the way in which university can enhance the response rate for the NSS.

To overview the response rate in the past few years at BU;

To present my personal approach to enhance the response rate

Background

The Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice may, for most academics, represent all of the things they believe they know and/or all the things they don't wish to do (Splitinc, 2012). However, for me it became a turning point in my attitude towards education and provided a platform for future leadership. When I was required to attend the programme in my previous University I did so reluctantly. However, I came out of the programme a quite different academic to the one that started it and it taught me to recognise the importance of student engagement and how it affects their performances, but of equal importance, how they evaluate our performance. During the course one thing became so evidently clear to me and that was that communication between staff and students is extremely important. It can result in a whole range of good outcomes, if as an academic we send out the message clearly and positively to encourage engagement, learning etc (The Guardian, 2012). Having previously worked in the private sector service industry I also have learned the skill and importance of communication, especially those that are of face to face nature as they can be daunting at times.

So how does all of this link to the NSS? Three weeks before the deadline for NSS completion, I was approached by UET and asked if I could help in increasing the response rate. At that time some staff had argued that there had been too many surveys, making students survey weary and just accepted this as a fact. This could not be accepted as the NSS is one of the most important surveys of the year and with a three week windows still available there was every chance that the University could grasp this time as an opportunity to increase the response rate. When I was enlisted to help the University response rate stood at 54% which was 5% worse than at same time the previous year and way behind the average response rate for the HEI sector at that time. An additional challenge was that the remaining three weeks included the Easter holidays which meant that a large number of students were going to be away from the campus. Therefore, the best ways of contacting them seemed to be based around strategies of on-line communication and letters to their homes. This was based on the assumption that students are frequently on line and on social media, but if this approach could work, then why were we so behind the sector and even our previous, but not

brilliant performance? I decided that the reactive approach was not the best way of approaching generation Y, posting messages where students were online was not appealing to our students, well at least not enough of them.

What did I do? I recognised that this was a period when location and need could be identified and that by responding to this knowledge could capture a large number of students:

- March is the last month when students have to submit their dissertation;
- I was aware that they need methodological support at this point in time across most schools and the faculty, and as a methodology tutor, I knew that students always welcome such support;
- I also assumed, given the timing, a large number of level H students will be in the library and other open access spaces where there are printers
- I also knew that we had a very small budget that could be used to capture the student's attention, using enticements such as cookies, chocolate or apples etc.

Therefore I built a team of colleagues around me and approached the final year students using a variety of enticements including the availability of SPSS and research methodology support. Knowing that many would be in the Library I gathered colleagues together and set up a cookie desk in the library foyer (instead of in the atrium of Poole House) and we distributed a large number of posters etc which asked students to fill in the survey.

This approach went down really well, although there was a fairly long and consistent queue outside my office waiting for SPSS and research methodology advice, which meant a significant amount of additional work for me. This approach gave us access to students who had not already completed the survey and provided us with the opportunity to ask them to fill in the survey. Generation Y are relatively pragmatic, they are happy to return what has been given if they are asked to, and those that I saw I asked if they would become ambassadors for the survey, which the majority readily agreed to be, and they started actively promoting the NSS through their social media and amongst their friends. It did not take long for this snowballing effect to take place and the response rate started to increase rapidly from day to day.

I led a team that strategically targeted Schools and the Faculty spaces where we knew students would be. We put up posters by every single printer in the library and in schools, aware that students would need to print their dissertation or journal article etc at some point. I made sure that the posters were in place checking them on a daily basis. I called together my team of colleagues to ensure that we acted as a team, effectively and efficiently by not duplicating effort, risking upsetting

students if they were approached multiple times, and ensuring the snowballing effect of enlisting students who had completed the survey to recruit their peers to do so. The library staff were extremely cooperative and their support made the task much easier and more fun.

Soon I started receiving feedback from a large number of my students that they not only had completed the survey but that they also managed to get their peers to do so. The information was relatively clear and the pro-active marketing and communication channels had really started to make a significant difference. For those who had felt defeated by the poor response rate with three weeks to go, the University not only exceeded the participation rate it reached in 2013 it ended up with a significantly higher participation rate than the sector average. A first and a record for BU – up to now. My own School (ST) went from a trailing position with the three weeks to go to being just less than 1% behind the School that had the highest response rate (DEC) and overall an increase of 30% in response rates was achieved in just three weeks. . From a personal level, my interest in student engagement gave me the desire and knowledge to seize this challenge and lead a team and as a result I have taken on the role of student champion in order to. Make sure I can continue to be actively engaged with the student experience and helping with future NSS events.

Lesson learned:

A proactive approach as well as reactive approach is needed to fully engage students

Better students support at the time where they need such a support is important and from that observation there is now a discussion about a centre for research methodology across the University.

Identifying staff across the campus that share the same passion as me so we can work as a team for the coming years

Understanding the market better knowing this is a generation that is different from those before and therefore the communication with them needs to take account of that difference

Empowering staff to clarify the importance of students representing their views on NSS in good time is important

Making sure we not only have higher response rate than the sector average but that we also have better feedback from our students than our competitors is vital to future staff and student experience.

References

University lecturers need teaching qualifications, says NUS president. Is he making a mistake? Available from: <http://spiltinc.co.uk/2012/04/25/university-lecturers-need-teaching-qualifications-says-nus-president-is-he-making-a-mistake/>