

Notes of StARs Forum - Tuesday 4th March 2014

16:30 – 18:00 (EE1061)

**Topic: Course Costs and Resources, Academic Societies, Surveys, and
Assessment + Feedback**

Present:

Tom Clarke – **TC** (Vice President Education)

John Ryan – **JR** (Pro Vice Chancellor (Students))

Caryn Thorogood – **CT** (Head of Student Services)

Will Bowen-Jones – **WBJ** (Head of Educational Development Unit)

Lee Collyer – **LC** (Vice President Student Experience)

Ruth Christie – **RC** (Membership Services Manager (taking notes))

StARs present: Sarah Jackson (Early Childhood Professional Practice); Sherry Stokes (Media & Cultural Studies/Sociology); Nicola Terrell (Early Childhood Professional Practice); Jeska Ward (Cricket Coaching and Management); Georgina Mascoll (Midwifery); Sarah Richmond (Midwifery); Mihaela Getzova (Accounting); Martina Manaskova (Marketing, Advertising and PR); Joseph Hayes, (History); Lauren Adams (Geography/Sports Studies); Charlotte Goss (Geography); Hollie Fox (Creative Digital Media/Journalism) Joni Morris (Drama & Performance) Alexina Burton, (Conservation Ecology); Belal Miah, (Biochemistry); Becky Bedford, (Biochemistry); Diane Noble, (Creative Digital Media); Sean Walsh, (Sports Business Management); Lucie Beech, (Physiotherapy); Daniel Preston, (Physiotherapy); Stephanie Johnston, (Business, HR & PR); Amy Stringer, (PE/Sports Coaching Science); Kalin Delev, (Business, Accountancy & Economics); Alexa-Jane Moore, (Accounting); Edwin Tamasan, (Web Development); Ben Norris, (Business Management); Isobel McLaughlin, (PITE); Laura Capp, (PITE); Ellen Joyce, (Human Biology/Human Nutrition); Helen Manners, (Education Studies); Jade Nunn, (Nursing); Tom Charles, (Nursing); Hayley Gibson, (Psychology/Sociology)

Welcome and Introductions: TC welcomes everyone to the forum and individually introduces topics for students to comment on or ask questions about.

Course costs and resources

Comments, questions and suggestions from the Forum

- 3rd year teacher training students find the cost of books high and also find it difficult to source the materials needed at short notice for assignments

(eg cereal boxes, kitchen towel etc).

JC - How much do students find they have to spend on books?

- It costs around £130 to buy set texts. With only two weeks between assignments, accessing e-books is very difficult as all students are trying to read them at the same time and that's not possible.

JC: This problem is a licence issue

- Business management students spend around £300 on books, including set texts.
- Biological sciences students have had a substantial increase in the cost of their key text, from around £30 to £150, as a result of a US legal case.

JC - Has having more e-journals been helpful?

- Yes, but there are many e-journals which students can't access
- 3rd year geography students find there are fewer core text books as the course progresses. Staff are great at putting up e-books. Some e-books can be downloaded for four days which is really useful.
- Institute of Education don't have downloadable versions – you can only download one page at a time which is impracticable.
- Science students had a full explanation of what resources they'd need during the first Worcester Week
- Biology 9th edition costs £140 and is not available from The Hive
- Students on the Global Business Strategy module had a session about a particular book which many then bought for £50, only to find that the lecturer was supplying pdfs of the key articles
- Does the University have a process for buying/selling second-hand books?
- There is a mechanism on SOLE for this
- A book which costs £50 but which is useful for the whole three years of the course may be good value for money, but sometimes students spend this amount on a book for a single module, or even a single assignment
- Sociology lecturers have always told us only to buy key texts that are 100% useful and were used a lot. Very happy with how the subject handles costs.

JC: How do students find the short-term loan scheme?

- There are only two copies of a particular book and a student borrowed one and didn't return it – library staff issue fines but that doesn't get the book back
- For commuting students, 24 hours is not long enough – by the time you get home there is little opportunity to use the book before it has to be returned
- Student's tip: you can get a single 24-hour renewal for a short-term loan, provided no-one else has reserved it
- Is it true that you can drop off University books at other libraries?
- Yes – any public library in Worcestershire

JC: We agree that more information needs to be provided to new students about the cost of books they're likely to need during the course of their

studies

Are StARs aware of the booklet produced by Student Services: *Financial Information & Support*?

- The majority had not seen this booklet, which is available from Firstpoint in the Peirson building

Caryn: *Financial Information & Support* is also available online

[http://www.worc.ac.uk/wfa/documents/Finance Book 2013 PDF.pdf](http://www.worc.ac.uk/wfa/documents/Finance_Book_2013_PDF.pdf)

The Student Welfare and Financial Advice pages are here

<http://www.worc.ac.uk/wfa/>

- Nursing StARs said that travel expenses are a major concern for students, but they are now able to claim reimbursement monthly, which helps
- Teaching StARs commented that it is not clear how students can claim back travel costs and many don't claim. Some students actually pretend they don't have a car, so that they're allocated a more local placement.
- Education Studies: what is the situation? Can students claim back the cost of travel to and from placements?

CT: The Institute of Education has a Transport Policy. Essentially, it is only Initial Teacher Education students not in receipt of a bursary who are entitled to claim. A limited mileage claim is allowed for students using their own vehicle and who have the appropriate business use insurance. Limited payment may be made towards the cost of public transport. Education Studies students are not entitled to any help

- Why is it that travel costs are payable for some courses within the Institute of Education but not others?

JC: Students on some "professional" courses can get financial assistance because of the amount of time they are required to be on placement.

- Early Childhood Studies StARs said that students at all levels of study are out on placement during the same periods of time. This puts pressure on placement providers and means that many students have to travel considerable distances to and from placements.
- Midwifery students have always been well-informed about the costs
- Printing costs are another issue. Students on some science courses are required to produce A0 posters, which cost £32 locally, even with a 15% student discount. Although some students comply by sticking together A4 pages, there is an implication from lecturers that these are of an inferior quality and therefore will result in a lower grade than "proper" A0 posters

TC: It was recently brought to the attention of the SU that there is no colour printer available at City campus. A colour printer is now to be installed next to the black and white one in the near future.

JR: It should be clear to students how scores for "presentation"-type assessments are weighted

WBJ: It is right that quality is valued in relation to assessments requiring some

kind of presentation, but no student should be disadvantaged because of cost. Module specifications should be specific about what's needed to achieve a good grade.

- Geography students found that assessment methods were changed, meaning that they unexpectedly had to produce A2 posters, which cost £10 each as they can't be produced on campus. As this was not the type of assessment originally specified, this was a hidden cost
- IHCA 2nd and 3rd year students had an additional problem when they had to produce posters as not only did these cost £11 each, but paper stocks ran out too
- Students in IHS really enjoy and appreciate the excellent new facilities in the Sheila Scot building

CT: It would be good to meet with a number of StARs/Institute Reps to get their input on reviewing the *Financial Information & Support* booklet and their views about when and in what format it should be made available to students.

Students are then asked to type up any more comments, questions and suggestions in this box.

- The *Financial Information & Support* booklet needs to be made available in a format which is easily accessible to students living "at home", rather than just provided in hard copy format to students living in halls.
- Can the DAC printers be added onto the web printing options?
- Why do teacher training courses get travel expenses when Early Childhood Studies students do not? It adds up to a lot and we think it's unfair. Many students on our course are unable to find placements in Worcester and therefore have to travel or go home for 2 weeks. This frustrates many students as travel is expensive and they are also losing out on paid rents.
- Drama and Performance: have had some complaints regarding the cost of trips and DBS checks. Lecturers often book tickets assuming students can afford the cost. Theatre and Education requires a DBS check which we have been told doesn't get checked by the school, as we are accompanied by a lecturer the entire time and many students have complained about this.
- Students would like to know where the tuition fee that is paid by students goes. This makes course costs even more difficult to cope with.
- PE and Sports Coaching students complain about the cost of kit and the wait for this kit to arrive. The cost of kit is on top of book prices, coaching courses, kit for sports etc.

- Sports Development students are unhappy about the unknown costs of their sports uniform. Students were not aware of these additional costs before starting their studies at the University of Worcester.
- Does the DAC have printing facilities? If so, can they be made available to other courses?
- Students have raised the issue of the costs associated with printing off assignments and posting them. We are all in agreement on the course that assignments should be uploaded electronically in line with the university's green policy and environmental responsibilities. At present only Mike Webb uses electronic submission (sociology)

Academic societies

Comments, questions and suggestions from the Forum:

LC: The University of Worcester has a relatively small number of academic societies and the SU is keen to encourage more students to come together to form societies. What do StARs think?

- Biochemistry StARs said there is no biochemistry society to join. One joined the biology society but the only event organised was a zoo trip which nobody went on. In contrast, the Animé society only cost £5 to join and at least once a week they go out and do things together.

LC: The SU is aware that there are a few societies which are not very active

- A StAR from WBS said he has no idea what societies are available

LC: Existing societies are all listed on the SU website

- Societies such as Bright Futures struggle because they can't access the grant pot which is available to sports clubs

LC - The SU sets aside an amount of money every year and all clubs and societies can apply for a grant from this pot. Often, though, applications cannot be supported because there is insufficient information in the bid or because the funding sought does not match the group's aims and objectives

- Sports are prioritised when it comes to use of a minibus

LC: Societies may apply for funding to help with the cost of transport to events/activities

JR: The University minibuses are heavily used, but hirers usually need to provide their own qualified driver. Societies should have the same opportunities to hire minibuses as do sports clubs. Where academic societies have been set up, has there been any dialogue between students and lecturers with regard to setting them up?

- WBS are very involved in Bright Futures. You need the Institute on board to make a society successful.
 - The setting up of a Life Drawing Society seemed to take a very long time.
LC: This was difficult and failed in the end because the costs involved, particularly hiring models, were considerable and as a result the membership fees would have been prohibitively high
 - It's difficult for business students to establish academic societies due to the triple pathways.
 - The History society is very popular, with over 100 members. Most of the committee members are third-year students, but it's supported by the Institute so members are confident that it will continue to thrive.
 - Third year geography StAR joined the Geography society in her first year, but the following year it dwindled and ceased to function. It has been revived this year, but seems to be exclusively for 2nd-years. It would be good to see societies encouraged to extend their membership.
 - Would it be possible to have a mini Sports and Activities Fair at City campus? There's currently no promotion of sports and activities there.
 - In ISES, most students play sports and they seem to bond through their particular sport, rather than feeling the need to set up course-based societies.
 - Could the SU hold another fair at the beginning of Semester 2?
- LC: There was a Refreshers' Fair, but the promotion could have been better and it could be built into a bigger event**

Written comments, questions and suggestions

- Students who have lectures on Wednesday afternoons are effectively excluded from getting involved with sports clubs and societies who compete and/or meet then
- Not being able to join any societies due to most of them being on at a time when a lecture is taking place. Have heard that other universities have Wednesday afternoons off – would it be possible for something like this to be set up? More advertising about societies would be good, as many are unsure of what societies are available.
- There is no sociology society. We are good at bonding in seminars. Sociology is not a bit cohort so not sure if it would be big enough to form a society.

NSS and University of Worcester student survey

Comments, questions and suggestions from the Forum:

JC: It's important that as many final year students as possible complete the National Student Survey

- WBS student commented that, despite having completed the NSS, she has received five emails in the past three days from the Institute, asking her to complete it (these emails have come from Katie Collins)
- WBS students receive a £3 voucher to use in the café at City campus if they complete the NSS within certain time bands

TC: The University's internal survey for first- and second-year students launches on Monday. There is an extra incentive for StARs to promote this survey, as any Institute achieving a response rate of at least 65% will be awarded £1,000, to be spent on something which enhances the learning environment. It will be for StARs to suggest how this money should be spent. What ideas do you have?

- In WBS, it would be good to put the money towards trips and events during Worcester Weeks
- It could help pay for trips for drama students in IHCA
- Science students would appreciate printing credit

JC: Are the theatre trips for drama students compulsory or optional?

- They're optional, but students are expected to draw on them for their assessments. Students have to pay for these.

JC: If they are a necessary element of a module, they should be included in the price.

- As part of the personal growth and team-building module, Cricket Coaching and Management students have to attend a three-day course at Malvern Hills Outdoor Adventure which costs them £146. They have to pass that course to pass the module. It was known before choosing the module that there would be a cost; however, we were not expecting it to be that expensive. The module has 12 weeks of lecture time in the timetable, but there are actually only 6 weeks of contact time. Students see all this as poor value for money.

JC: Do students have access to previous evaluations of the modules they are studying.

- Module guides in bio-sciences include details of module evaluations

WBJ: This should be common practice. In ISES, every module evaluation is available for anyone to see.

Written comments, questions and suggestions

- Students do not seem to care about the NSS. There was a talk during the final Worcester Week but only 5 students out of around 60 attended.

Assessment and feedback

Comments, questions and suggestions from the Forum:

- Final year geography student – every grade counts now, but in the third

year there have been lots of assessment styles and methods students haven't encountered previously. They have only had to write one essay in 3 years

- StAR for HR & PR – there have been no presentations at all, although these would have suited the subject and helped prepare students better for the world of work
- WBS – students do not like working together and don't like being awarded a single overall grade for group presentations. Following a SAP project meeting with Marilyn Hunt, it may be that a system of peer review may be introduced
- In Journalism, students are awarded individual grades for group assignments – they have to submit written work as well as taking part in presentations
- In biochemistry, there have been two alternative approaches taken to the two presentations
- Midwifery students deliver group presentations but also submit individual supporting papers
- WBS – there have been problems relating to Turnitin for marketing and management students

JC: A new University-wide policy on Turnitin is due by the start of the new academic year

- Education Studies – students have had disappointing grades for presentations they've done with others, despite being awarded good grades on their supporting work. Feedback doesn't always seem to match the grade eg lots of positive comments but a disappointing grade
- Where one-to-one conversations with lecturers are provided, these are very helpful
- Some assignments have been lost by tutors
- Biochemistry have been waiting more than 3 months for feedback on assignments – is this acceptable?

JC: The Student Feedback charter is a framework for monitoring expectations

- WBS students are very happy with e-submissions and find the cross-references really helpful.
- Bio-sciences students find a huge amount of annotations on e-submissions which are really good and particularly helpful for commuting students. It can be very difficult for commuting students to collect feedback when the time is restricted to a one-hour slot.
- Geography students get feedback online but it's very inconsistent, ranging from a sentence or two to detailed charts. In all three modules, the assessments have changed since module selection.
- Education Studies – semester 1 assignments were handed back just a few days before semester 2 assignments were due, so there was very little time to take account of the feedback

- Bio-sciences students – the lecturers let the students pick assessment dates through a democratic vote
- Sports students were confused and frustrated when Turnitin crashed at the end of the first semester

WBJ: It's very disappointing to hear that there are courses which are still awarding a group grade for presentation work. The Educational Development Unit will work with institutes to stop this practice. They must build in a mechanism to recognise individual contribution. In relation to the introduction of new assessment types, it's good to have variety but only having one attempt at a particular type is not enough. Assessment and feedback arouses more debate amongst students than any other topic relating to their educational experience. The University is moving towards a system of online submission and feedback that relates to specific areas of script

Written comments, questions and suggestions

- It's hard to seek full feedback
- One of our deadlines is the day before dissertations are due
- More verbal feedback on assignments
- There have been complaints about lecturers giving grades and feedback later than the deadline (Drama and Performance)
- A possible suggestion is to work as a team throughout the module but get assessed individually, to keep the teamwork element but also be fair in regards to the individuals' efforts (Business, Accountancy and Economics)
- 2nd year assessments are really good as they are geared towards aspects of careers once we graduate and are also geared towards 3 year dissertations (PE and Sports Coaching Science)
- Work placement module has been amazing so far. Everyone is very happy with the support (sociology)
- Feedback takes four week. Many students feel that this is still a little too long.
- Confusion on how Turnitin works – not enough advice given on this issue (Sports Business Management)
- Sports Business Management lacks a variation in assessment methods (i.e. very assignment-heavy and a lack of presentations)

- Accounting: Feedback for Finance and Economics: overall, first-year students found the feedback for submission one quite detailed. It gave them a clear idea about the good and bad points of their work and also points on which to improve for submission 2. Feedback for Marketing and Management: Most students find the feedback given very scarce. There were notes on what is wrong with the work, but no suggestions for improvement. The second assignment is a presentation and it is about half of the grade. The possible dates given are in the first or second week after Easter break. All students, and especially international students, would like to have the presentations in the second week after the break, as almost all of them will be going home and travels cannot always be coordinated.
- I was due to receive feedback and module results no later than 14th February 2014. Feedback from NONE of my 4 module assessments was provided by this date and only one of the module results was provided, this being provided on 14th February itself. The latest result was not provided until Monday 24th February and feedback has not yet been provided from two of the module assessments. Naturally, the dates when the feedback and results were provided will vary depending upon the modules being taken, but the late, and non-existent, provision applies to other students as well as me (sociology)

Comments, questions and suggestions about other topics

- Car park closures – email-giving notice is not early enough. Also, alternative parking suggestions (ie Coppertops) is not adequate (Midwifery)
- I think it may be worth having a StAR meeting just for Year 1 students who may not know where to locate information or do not understand what University life entails
- Feedback from a large proportion of students on my course highlighted disorganisation throughout many of our modules and due to the overlapping nature already in terms of our learning and knowledge, this has caused a severe amount of confusion. This has continued in Semester 2, despite receiving module outlines. An introduction to the modules with vital dates discussed as well as an understanding of which work will go towards our overall grade for the modules would be invaluable (Early Childhood Professional Practice)
- Students (and staff!) need clarification of reading weeks – one of 4 lecturers on CDME says we have a reading week in Week 8 but the others say not. Difficult to plan without this information, (particularly for commuting students and those with other commitments)

- More notice about EYTS qualification – we were told 2 weeks before interviews that it is a big decision
- Joint honours: Students have complained about the lack of support for joint honours students within the University. This is mostly regarding selecting modules.
- I understand Worcester Weeks were on the agenda at the last Forum but I understand that they have been met with particularly negative feedback. I think they need to include activities that students feel is worth their while – often they are not well advertised either
- All the general resources for **all** students should be made available as pdfs on a specific web page, so any student can access any document at any time (Harvard, ILS, Student Services etc.)
- University Closure during the Floods. My modules all take place on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Thus, during the week of the floods all of my modules were cancelled. Provision has not yet been made to address all of the missed lectures etc (sociology)

CT: The University was not closed on either day. Lectures were cancelled from 4pm on Wednesday 12th February and on Thursday 13th February.

Suggestions for topics for future StARs Forum:

- Canteen
- Travel expenses
- Selecting modules (I don't know what my overall grade is – how do we find out?)
- Online submission and feedback process
- StARs' responsibilities – I want to contribute more or set aside specific times to talk to students (not really confident in my role)
- Strikes – where do we stand on them?
- ILS – on the ILS website there is no information about many resources – Harvard document, types of printers and where they can be found and a lot more; their website is 75% useless for any student looking on it.