Notes of the StARs Forum - Thursday 1st December 2016
1.15pm -2.45pm – Riverside (RBG008)
Topic: Timetabling

Present:
31 StARs/Institute Reps
James Gunther – **JG** (Vice President Education)
Ross Renton – **RR** (Pro Vice Chancellor Students)
Kevin Pickess – **KP** (Academic Registrar)
Elise Masterman – **EM** (Assistant Registrar – Timetabling)

Also in attendance: Hemaka Pathiranage - HP (Vice President Student Activities) Sophie Williams (Students' Union Chief Executive, taking notes)

Welcome and Introductions: JG welcomed everyone to the first StARs Forum of the academic year, as well as the panel. He explained the purpose of the Forum; to discuss the student-led timetabling system that had been introduced this year. JG handed over to KP.

KP explains the context for the University changing the timetabling system this academic year, with salient points as follows:
- The change was a direct result of student feedback from internally and nationally led surveys (e.g. University of Worcester Student Survey and National Student Survey);
- Historically timetables were set in advance of the academic year. This limited choice as modules inevitably clashed and were then not available to some students;
- Last year, a new process was introduced for final year students, turning the timetabling system on its head – asking students what they wanted to study and then setting the timetable around that;
- It meant that modules were not unnecessarily replicated e.g. data revealed that one module appeared in 66 courses. By asking students first, actual demand meant that the module only needed to be accommodated across 8 courses, reducing pressure on timetabling and ensuring students who chose the course were catered for;
- Students were asked by cohorts if they wanted to have Wednesday afternoons free or if they were happy to have modules arranged then.

KP explains the University's current approach around timetabling -
The timetable is fixed for professional courses with placements;
- The timetable is fixed for first year students, based on applications and offers. These students select their modules when they arrive. Some Universities do offer student-led timetables for first years and ask for choices in August but this does not happen here at the moment as difficulties can arise with this approach, especially for joint honours students;
- Timetabling aims to uphold a number of core principles:
  o Students have enough time to move between sites/classes;
  o Wednesday afternoons will be kept free wherever possible if the cohort wish it to be;
  o Consistency in room allocation where possible - same sites and rooms to avoid confusion (this can be hard, however, due to course patterns and delivery e.g. foundation and professional courses);
  o Not to have too many modules on one day for individual courses or long days over 7 hours;

- o Not to have late lectures one evening (until 9.15pm) followed by early morning lectures (9.15am) the next day;
- o Students are able to attend mandatory modules.

KP explains the process behind the change and issues experienced:

- Information was collected from staff and students before allocations;
- Registry changed the way students could access and view their timetable information so they didn't need to look at plasma screens or on the website but got personal timetables week by week;
- Unexpected, significant software issues were experienced which affected the initial roll-out. Codes were disrupted so students couldn't see their information, causing widespread issues. Registry are meeting with the software supplier to ensure there is no reoccurrence as it was very regrettable and should not have happened - Registry offer a genuine apology;
- This problem also meant that Registry were unable to troubleshoot in the first few days /weeks as they normally would e.g. incidences where they may have broken any principles listed above;
- Registry accept that some students had long days this year which they would previously have been able to address much more quickly – they are already looking at Semester 2 to avoid any reoccurrence;
- Some longer, chunkier courses to lead to some inflexibility in the system.

JG stated that the Students' Union had had a few (but not lots of) complaints from students around timetabling at the start of term but had been pleased that all had been dealt with quickly by the University. JG invited questions from the StARs:

Questions	Response
Re: Software issues from Joint Honours Ecology and Environmental Science: The issues were around Aug/Sept. A lot of students on this course are mature students juggling jobs and children. A message explaining the issues to us would have helped.	KP – Registry do very much acknowledge this; it had almost gone into lockdown to resolve the issue, when it should absolutely have communicated better to all what the problems were. Registry had absolutely learnt from this.
Same student: Another issue for his course was confusion over research modules for Joint Honours, with students finding themselves on different modules in the middle of their course/s. The students had to keep checking what modules they were on. Again, proactive communication around this was needed so students better understood their choices.	KP – acknowledged it was a very good point. Registry needed to be much clearer when asking students for their choices and explain that students can't do research modules across both subjects. Getting it right in the beginning will reduce the number of problems later on.

Re: Long hours in one day from Accountancy:	
Accounting students do have one long day on a Friday 9am -6pm but prefer that. Can we request for the same to happen next Semester as it helps many of us plan ahead e.g. childcare	KP – where the same modules run on more than one occasion, students can swap but can't currently do that on SOLE; students can swap modules on SOLE but not versions of the same module. Students need to make such timetabling requests through their module tutors, explaining their rationale - they are not expected to do so themselves. Tutors then liaise with Registry. EM – Module tutors have been asked to tell Registry when students want to change or move modules or make specific requests – they have been sent an email. Students are welcome to ask that tutors get in touch with her. Once that liaison has taken place, students will be notified

	individually re their modules. I can't be done via SITS or SOLE but only the timetabling database.

Re: Integration of timetabling with SOLE from Psychology and Business:	
Would it help if the systems were integrated?	KP – The level and detail of information required can only be stored on the timetabling database. Choices for timetabling can be made through SOLE now but you can only select what module you want to do, not which version of that module. At the moment, the information from SOLE is transferred across manually.
Same student: We are aware of instances where students got their timetable before the tutors and tutors did not know where to go. Would better integration resolve this?	KP – the University are in the process of modernising the linkage between the 2 systems and ease the flow of data behind the scenes. Part of the project plan is to deliver personalised timetable for staff — this will help feedback and 2-way communication.

Re: Room allocation from Archaeology:	
Would future enhancement of the system mean providing appropriate rooms for courses? We sometimes have totally inappropriate rooms and furniture in there for the work we are doing.	KP – it is the responsibility of staff to tell Registry what their requirements are for their course activities. Requirements can also change quite a lot through the year for the same course. The University accept that some rooms are inappropriate for some activities e.g. group work. This can also be at odds with the principle of not wanting to move students around too much and keeping consistency over the 12 weeks. RR – staff tell us moving around can present problems for them. We are looking at how we can better reconfigure rooms across the University. It's a sector-wide issue. We need to look at how technology can help and having flexible labs etc. to enhance facilities.

Re: clashes with school holidays from Psychology: We can study some mature and personal topics. This year, the timetable / Worcester Week didn't correspond with school half term and there were lots of mature students on our course who had trouble attending due to childcare.	RR: We are expected to run to a University calendar, whilst understanding that people have caring responsibilities and so we will do what we can to help, such as the nursery and early timetables. We could put in more formal registrations too on courses to monitor attendance, which we choose not to. This is about a long term conversation and about teaching staff talking to students and making it clear what the expectations are around attendance. People on fulltime courses are expected to manage other commitments in order to be able to attend. We are talking about building in more flexibility in the nursery for, e.g. shorter stays and building a new nursery to increase capacity. KP – we have never aligned the University calendar with school calendars and it would be impossible to do so – some local schools and academies can set their own holidays and schools in Birmingham may also then be

	different, which is where a lot of our students come from. We also have to accommodate the November graduations in the current Worcester Week.

Re: Wednesday afternoons free from the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science: Lots of sports students have lectures late into the night and on Wednesdays which can make it difficult to take play sport for the University at the highest level and causes students to choose between sport and study or miss lectures, especially if games are away. Sport is also an integral part of this Institute.	KP – the University does understand that and it's a real challenge across the sector on how to deal with it. We can't take out an entire day to accommodate away games, for example, as that would be unfair on others. We try not to use evenings too much and also to stick to our principle of not having late lectures one day followed by early lectures the next. We encourage students to talk to their lecturers/tutors on a case by case basis. We also ask whole cohorts if they are happy to have modules on a Wednesday afternoon. KP – We are aware of particular issues in sport and are working really hard on that as there were a lot of late changes to the timetable.
Same student: A lot of modules still don't have specific rooms and students are getting emailed the day of the lecture to tell them where it is, which can be difficult. We have had some at Lakeside and no transport was provided and many didn't go. We have had seminars taking place in coffee shops or the library or Riverside because staff are having to come up with a last minute solution. One time everyone studying in Riverside was asked to leave so a lecture could take place.	RR – We need to think carefully about Lakeside being used for teaching as we don't yet have the necessary investment and infrastructure there. Apologies that you have had that experience as I was not aware. It will be a great facility in the future but we need to discuss with the Institute how it's used and with Estates on how transport can be provided. RR – Overall across the University we do have enough facilities but it is stretched at certain times of the year, e.g. the first 4 weeks, when health and education are on campus.
Re: modules in rooms that are not fit for purpose (course unknown): How can we change a room if we feel it is not fit for purpose as we use our laptops and the lecturer can't look at our screens to help us?	KP – talk to the module tutor and explain why you are finding it difficult and they should then liaise with Registry.
Same student: The module leader agrees with us and seemed to think other tutors have mentioned it but were told as we were a group of 90, we couldn't be moved.	KP – suggest that she go back to Registry and we will look at it. RR- if you let JG know the course, we can look into it.
Re: late night lectures from Institute Rep for Humanities and Creative Arts: I have struggled to get positive feedback about the timetable and mature and commuter	KP – We know there have been issues on a small number of courses with 9-9 lectures. We wanted to avoid that

students I've talked to are struggling. Some have 9-9 lectures and are not getting home on public transport until midnight, which brings safety into question. They are unhappy with an increase in late lectures from 6-9. Students need to be informed before of module timings so they can make appropriate choices as at the moment they are either not attending or leaving early. For some it has increased financial burden due to childcare. They are struggling to change modules now as the others are all full. I've been told quite a few examples and some are being raised at course committees.	happening but haven't done as well as we'd have liked to. EM has sent an email asking for tutors to let Registry know if it is still happening to see if we can address it now. 6.15 – 9.15pm is a genuine slot in the timetable and sometimes we have to use it. The number of evening lectures in the IHCA is even with that of other Institutes as we try and spread them evenly. Some students do prefer them but we know others don't so there is a tension there.
Same student: Some students have 2 or 3 late lectures a week which doesn't seem fair. Some have said that Worcester is known for being an inclusive University but that this is at odds with that and that it's about getting numbers up.	RR – Our focus is on the student experience, which is where we put the vast majority of resources. The challenge is about how we use the space we have effectively. We need to avoid students having 3 or more evening lectures a week and look at that, and we need to get timetables out as early as possible to help those with other responsibilities. We need to profile more to understand the areas most affected. The Director of Sustainability is working with First Bus to ensure transport is available later into the night at reasonable cost.
Same student: Would it be possible, if the majority of students were unhappy, to apply for a different time slot?	KP – Sometimes if we try and move things it can create clashes elsewhere but if we can we will. RR – we are asking tutors to monitor issues and report back.
Re: retaking modules from Psychology: Some students who are re-sitting 2nd year modules in their 3rd year are having to cross out modules they'd like to take for their career progression due to clashes	KP – The timetable is organised on the basis that students will pass and progress in their modules – it would be impossible to generate a timetable that accommodated re-takes as well. This needs to be looked at on a case by case basis.

RE: blocks of lectures from Joint Honours Maths and Computing Is there a policy on having 6 or 7 hours of lectures one after the other in blocks e.g. a 4 hour session in Maths followed by a 3 hour session in Computing? Are we able to have that?	RR – We need to think about how and why we are delivering these long sessions, working in partnership with the tutors who know their subject area. We need to be looking at how technology can help us to do that, e.g. students preparing before lectures and then the time in class being used for more detail / discussion. Some Students as Partners (SAP) projects going on across the University are looking at just this sort of thing. KP – Registry timetables what it is asked to by staff. StARs should talk to staff if they feel a module could or should be delivered differently and explain why.
Same student: There are some clashes with mandatory modules in Maths. We have 4 hours on a Wednesday morning which means we can't do the mandatory module in the other subject. Same student: One module was cancelled in May and students couldn't pick another module until July/August as everything clashed.	KP – we will look at that immediately as that shouldn't be happening – one of our key principles is that students are able to attend mandatory modules. KP – that shouldn't have happened as any re-timetabling should be done in March. We will pick that up after the meeting.
RE: overcrowding from Psychology: There were issues at the beginning of term with lectures being overcrowded. With the government taking the cap off student numbers, did we have too many students at the beginning of the year and if so, is this a wider issue?	RR – Government policy lifting the cap is affecting all Universities and Worcester exercised restraint. Some courses took more on, Psychology being one, and they asked to split groups in a particular way, which we addressed as soon as we learnt about it. The new Head of Psychology is very much on board with this. There isn't a widespread issue around overcrowding. Teaching staff and Timetabling need to talk more in some instances and it also goes back to the point about creating more dynamic, flexible spaces and furniture that can have multiple uses. The University may need to take some risks with this, which is a healthy thing to do. We will manage growth very carefully where subjects have appropriate potential.
Same student: The conference centre is often used as a lecture room which isn't great as you can't really see the lecturer. Is there development work looking into better lecture rooms?	KP – some lecturers like the conference centre as it can be used for group work and lectures. RR – technology needs to come in here e.g. Psychology students were given tablets to enable them to download resources, which had very good feedback.

KP concluded by saying that Registry have learnt a lot from this year and what they need to do better, including communication. Key things have come from today, such as clustering on single days and the number of evening sessions over one week. KP thanked everyone for their feedback.

JG thanked everyone for attending and gave details of the next StARs forums as:

- *Personal Academic Tutors: Thursday 2nd February 2017 16:30 - 18:00 in EE G087 Urwin Lecture Theatre (Edward Elgar)*
- *Technology Enhanced Learning: Friday 17th March 2017 13:15 - 14:45 in RB G008 (Riverside Building)*
- *Topic TBC: Friday 28th April 2017 13:15 - 14:45 in RB G008 (Riverside Building)*

HP spoke briefly to the students about a magazine he was creating to promote the successes of students. He encouraged students to submit articles on interesting things they had done on their course, with the deadline being 15th December. Articles needed to be just 500 words with a picture and can be submitted to h.pathiranage@worc.ac.uk