

Welcome

The re-evaluation of the student experience continues within the Higher Education sector. This is reflected in the Times Higher Education Survey of 2013, where across the survey there was increased movement with more institutions moving between the top, middle and bottom thirds of the table and jumping by at least 20 places since 2011.

Perhaps this is down to students reassessing factors that had previously been taken for granted. Perhaps this is as a result of the more commercial aspect of higher education today. Whatever the driver, institutions are becoming more aware of the whole student experience and seeking to enhance this across the board, addressing the academic, pastoral, administrative, cultural and social aspects of their offering.

In this edition of the newsletter, we hear from David Christmas at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, about how they use the results of the National Student Survey to help them focus their planning and understand the areas that require attention.

In our second article, a PGCE student tells us how he felt the post-graduate teacher training application process had improved compared with his previous undergraduate experience. And finally, Ruth Gunstone, from Buckinghamshire New University, shares with us how they have transformed their thinking to celebrate arrival as much as we have all traditionally celebrated graduation: by introducing the Bucks Welcome.

NEWSFLASH!

Birmingham, UK – March 2014

Processfix celebrate five years of improving the student experience with their 150th workshop in higher education at the University of Birmingham



Maintaining positive momentum in the student experience

SOAS (the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) has more than 5,000 students from 133 countries on campus and around 3,600 students around the world are taking one of their distance learning programmes.

This student body recently moved SOAS up 44 places, from 86th to 42nd, in the overall ranking of the National Student Survey (NSS) 2013. We spoke to David Christmas, Director of Student and Registry Services, to find out how SOAS have created and will maintain this positive momentum in respect to the student experience.



Every year, we look at the NSS results forensically, develop action plans for areas of concern and use these to drive change. These areas have ranged from issues around marking and feedback, through to the administrative processes that impact on the student experience. It is in these administrative areas that we have worked with Processfix, using their workshops to help us develop and improve our processes.

A key area we addressed initially was the post-graduate admissions process. Although we are going paperless with undergraduate admissions this year, it is the post-graduates who are really aware of the service they receive from an institution. Unlike the undergraduates, post-graduate applicants have direct experience of the service

“80% of post-graduate offers within 2 weeks; about the right turnaround time for a quality institution”

from each individual institution they apply to. An undergraduate would perceive their admissions to be managed partly by UCAS, therefore making it unlikely that they would attribute service issues, or successes, entirely to an individual institution.

It's a competitive market place, so we set ourselves the target of making 80% of post-graduate offers within 2 weeks; about the right turnaround time for a quality institution. I'm happy to report that we're pretty much there now.”

We asked David how SOAS have integrated the student

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SOAS jump

44

places in the National Student survey

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voice into their changes and development. He explained that SOAS are very keen to involve students: "Sometimes it's just helpful to adjust the language we use, as technocrats we tend to use jargon that doesn't mean anything to a 19 year old! In our recent Processfix workshop on the enrolment process, we asked one of our student sabbatical officers to join us for the full 3 days, and I'm happy to say that this was a great decision as she made a very good contribution. Not only do students bring a different perspective to the process, but also the more students understand about how things work, the more it improves mutual understanding and relationships between the institution and the student body. In fact, in terms of overall relationships, the workshops have great team building spin offs; we always come away with better working relationships between all involved."

"students bring a different perspective to the process"

David expanded on the recent enrolment work: "The enrolment process is very complicated; we have made a lot of improvements: reducing queuing time from hours to minutes is an obvious win, but

there are still so many stages to address. Historically, we've been a bit like the old style Foyles, or a Moscow department store, where you would pick up your goods in one place, have them packed in another, and pay in a further place. Our focus now is on making enrolment a 'one-stop shop' for most students.

"good administration leaves very little impression; it's frictionless"

Other areas where we are continually focused are the marking processes and the admissions experience. We have ended up with a good quality online system and quicker responses, meaning our staff have more time to deal with real queries, rather than spending time on low level administration.

One interesting thing is that good administration leaves very little impression; it's frictionless. Students only notice the bad things. One of the challenges of managing operational areas is that the things that go well don't get very rewarded. On the flip side, any complaints are really free market research. Listening to them can only support us in improving our processes for the benefit of the student."

David's top tips for a successful Processfix workshop

- Get the scope clear as early as possible; one that tells you who your stakeholders are.
- Involve all stakeholders in the workshop: from service developers, providers and service users (in our case: the students).
- Manage senior management expectations on what is achievable and realistic. You may be surprised how much support you will have for radical change if you are clear from the outset.

What do students think about the application process?

In this edition our focus is on the student experience and we caught up with post-graduate student Ben, who is currently studying for his post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE) at the Institute of Education.

Unlike the majority of post-graduate courses, a PGCE application is done through the central UCAS teacher training portal, rather than direct to an institution. We were interested to know how Ben's experience of the process as a post-graduate, compared to his previous experience as an undergraduate.

the GTTR* system worked well. It was a simple system and didn't require us to re-enter the same information more than once for the separate applications."

One of Ben's friends had been out of education for nearly a decade. Her feedback was that she found the process this time pretty straight forward as a whole: "It may be



"the process itself was very easy to access and the system worked well"

"I had expected the process to be fairly complicated; from what I remember of UCAS, there was lots of information to enter and the whole system would run slowly as it struggled to handle the amount of people using it. But the process itself was very easy to access and

because I am older and slightly more organised, but if anything, I feel the process was easier this time around." We asked Ben what he felt were the most important things that any provider can do to support a student's application: "Overall, I think so long as you're given clear guidelines for completion, a clear outline of all the steps in the process, together with timings and links to any relevant sites (e.g. for funding), it's a relatively pain free exercise!"

Just a snapshot from a couple of PGCE students, but good to hear that the UCAS applications process is continually evolving.

*GTTR: Graduate Teacher Training Registry, now changed to UCAS Teacher Training

In the spotlight: Ruth Gunstone, Director of Student Services, Buckinghamshire New University

In this quarter's spotlight Ruth talks to us about the Bucks Welcome: the upbeat approach to induction and enrolment that Bucks implemented in September 2013. Ruth has a wealth of experience to draw on when considering how the student body's expectations have evolved over time. She joined as a part-time lecturer in English in 1978, when the University was the Buckinghamshire College of Higher Education. Over the past 35 years she has been involved across the institution as a Course Leader, Head of Department and Deputy Dean; she also helped to design the institution's first humanities degree programme. Her current focus, as Director of Student Services, is on all the extra things that a student experiences beyond the actual course they are taking.



What does "looking out for the whole student experience" entail?

Largely speaking, we look after the student journey, between their first phone call, to the point of departure. I am responsible for pastoral support, which covers: learning needs, specific needs, disabilities, mental health problems and accommodation needs. We provide all those extra things to students to ensure that they get the best out of their study experience.

Why did you focus on the enrolment process?

When we were reviewing all of our processes, we realised we were investing time and energy

into recruitment, but then when the students stepped onto campus, we did not have a coordinated welcome. We also create a huge buzz around our graduation ceremonies, so decided that we should celebrate enrolment as well. Just as graduation celebrates departure, the Bucks Welcome celebrates the student's arrival.

And how did the staff perceive the 'extra' work?

What was great was the buy-in from all staff right from the initial discussions. Just as they do for graduation, staff took on additional responsibilities and it really caught people's imaginations. They were pitching in above and beyond the norm, right to the point of someone developing, off their own back, a phone App for the week!

What were the key changes you made?

First of all, we were able to develop a new team with a new leader (myself!) around the student induction event.

We decided to throw out the way we had previously done things, where we had a line-up of different service areas all talking about their particular areas. We wanted to look again at the information students received and what was most useful.

The biggest, most noticeable change was the hiring of our local 1,000 seat theatre, the Wycombe Swan. We booked it for the whole morning of arrival and had very big welcome sessions to celebrate the students' arrival. This allowed us to get inspirational and motivational messages across to all the students at the same time.

Our Vice Chancellor, Professor Ruth Farwell, gave a welcome address, in her formal robes, which gave it gravitas; the students felt as if they'd really arrived!

We also started our welcome on 'move in Sunday'. Quite a large percentage of students move into halls of residence that day, before the Welcome Week starts, so we opened up much more of the campus. Bucks Students' Union was open selling tea; there were helpers on campus; clubs and societies were present and our upcycling project was available, where helpers have gathered all those things previous students have left behind, then wash and clean the items, before then redistributing them to those who can't afford, or have forgotten to bring, key items.

"it really caught people's imaginations"

To maintain momentum, we built a central programme across every day of the week for the first week and uploaded this onto a central website, making sure that for the two-hour lunch slot every day there was something happening, so no one had any reason to feel lost or lonely. We provided a food fair, circus fun, acoustic music, theatre, the traditional Freshers' Fair and a Health & Wellbeing Fair.

Plus, to give everything a really positive image, everything was colour coordinated, from the small Bucks Welcome badge which staff wore, to balloons, right through to a giant hoarding outside the campus that shouted out the fact we had a Bucks Welcome!

How did you measure the success?

Enrolment went incredibly smoothly. Thanks to the new processes, we cut two whole days out of the enrolment process. We also managed to contain it to the working day, rather than the process extending into the evenings,

as had previously happened, so that was a benefit to the staff.

For the students, it was much more streamlined, with virtually no queuing! They had had the opportunity to submit photos and other important details online.

Our best measurement was in the feedback we had, with lots of complimentary emails from staff and positive feedback from the students. One said: "I enjoyed starting; it was a new beginning for me."

The Bucks Welcome set everybody up for a positive start; we really did our best for the new students and the atmosphere was very different from previous years.

If you were going to do it again, what would you do differently?

We are already doing it again, as we're rolling it out to our sister campus in Uxbridge and will be doing similar activities for the January/February intake. We're going to extend it to our part-time courses as well, right down to thinking about our online induction for distance learners.

"The Bucks Welcome set everybody up for a positive start"

Overall we're very happy with the concept and now feel that we have a much better model which we can adapt and refine. One change we will make is to move the Health & Wellbeing Fair to a different time slot as having it at the end of the week didn't really work out as well as it could have done; I think the students were partied out by then!

About us

Organisations rely on processes to get things done. Often these simply evolve over time and become inefficient ways of working. Processfix bring powerful, proven and behaviour-changing techniques to bear in a professionally facilitated environment.

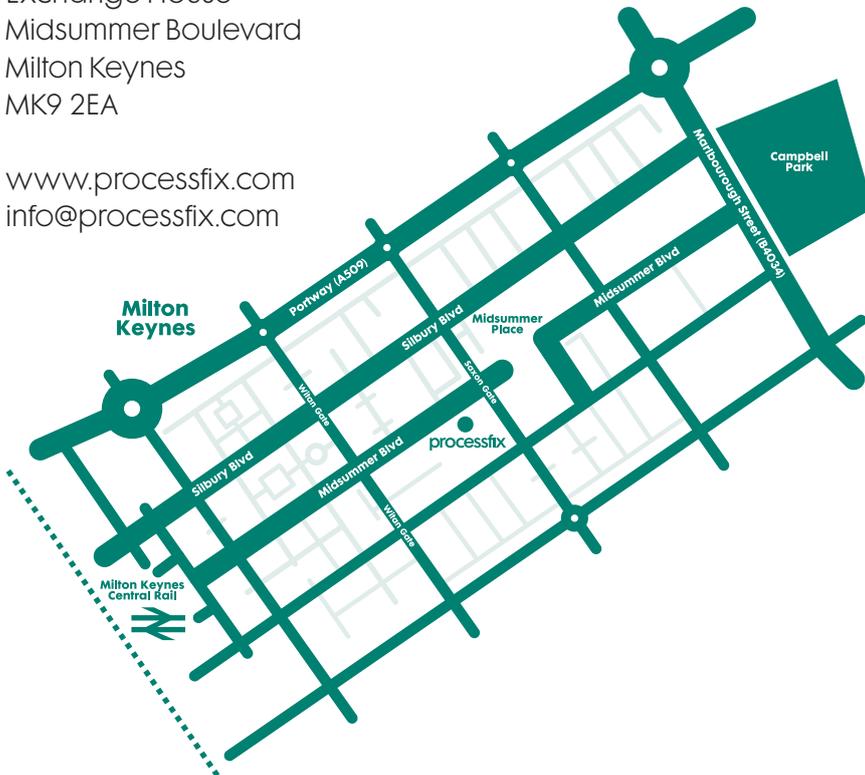
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