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A Comparative Study of the Perceptions of Professional Staff on their Contribution to Student Outcomes

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Abstract

This study examined the perceptions of professional staff on their contribution to student outcomes. An online Delphi survey method was used to collect data from two expert panels: professional staff based in faculties and professional staff based in central university departments. The aim of this method is for the panels to arrive at a consensus. The expert panels were asked to rank ten propositions which support successful student outcomes. After three rounds the faculty based panel had reached only a 'very weak' consensus, and the non-faculty panel only a 'weak' consensus. The highest ranked proposition for both panels was the first, namely: 'Institutional behaviours, environments and processes are welcoming and efficient; that is, students' enquiries are dealt with promptly, knowledgeably and with a friendly manner'. Propositions relating to organisational culture were ranked relatively low indicating that professional staff may underestimate their contribution to these propositions.

Key Words

Professional staff; student outcomes, student experience, student retention, student success, organisational culture.

Introduction and background to the study

With the growing emphasis on the National Student Survey, and the introduction of increased fees, the centrality of the student experience has never been so important in the UK. Similar issues can also be seen in other European and North American higher education sectors. The new fees framework in the UK, together with the Access Agreement, has also brought the retention of students into sharp focus. Add to this the increased number of collaborative partners many institutions now have, where control of the student experience and the 'institutional culture' is more remote, and the need to understand how all staff groups perceive their contribution is an area worthy of exploration. Despite this, there is a dearth of literature representing the views of professional staff about the impact of their work on the student experience or student outcomes (Graham, 2010). This lack of literature has been commented on for over a decade but very little appears to have changed (Conway, 2000; Szekeres, 2004; Graham, 2010). As a full discussion on the changing roles and titles for this group of staff is beyond the scope of this article, the term professional staff will be used throughout. However, it is acknowledged that the term 'professional staff' is popular for some non-academic staff roles but the precise definition is not universally accepted (Whitchurch, 2008; Sebalj et al, 2012). It is doubtful that any one term can adequately describe the

wide ranging roles which fall outside of a traditional academic contract, but for ease of reading this term will be used. The term 'student outcome' is used here to incorporate students' experience of the institution, as well as what happens to them in terms of completion and optimal achievement.

One of the researchers is an academic programme leader and found that increasing amounts of time were being spent trying to resolve non-academic issues for students, who found the university processes complex and not user-friendly. Students generally reported a perception that some professional staff in centralised departments did not seem to appreciate how much of an impact their processes, and approach to student problems, had on the student experience. Graham (2011), reported the results of a Delphi Survey examining this very issue and identified two main areas for further research: firstly a comparative study between faculty based and non-faculty based professional staff; and secondly a comparative study with another institution. This paper will focus on the findings related to comparing faculty and non-faculty based professional staff, in a UK institution. The results of the comparison with Graham's findings were presented at the Society for Research into Higher Education annual conference (Graham and Regan, 2013) and will be the focus of a future paper.

This study is based on an assumption that the propositions of Prebble et al. (2004) are correct and that such institutional behaviours are not the domain of academic staff alone. From their meta-analysis of 146 international studies, thirteen propositions were identified that represent institutional behaviours found to promote positive student outcomes. That is, characteristics of institutions that will do well for their students in terms of retention and success, as well as their overall experience and satisfaction. Given that professional staff make up such a high percentage of the overall higher education staff, their contribution to retention and success of students is beyond doubt. What is not clear is whether professional staff themselves recognise that, and how they perceive that contribution.

Literature review

The main thrust of Graham's (2010) thorough search of literature in this area, is that there is insufficient to draw any significant conclusions about how professional staff perceive their contribution to student outcomes. Graham (2010) concluded that the voice of professional staff has been largely silent and the area is woefully under-researched. In contrast, Graham (2012) found that there had been a wealth of literature about the changing identities and practices within this staff group but with little, or no, direct reference to their contribution to the core business of student outcomes. As far back as 1998, McInnis argued that: 'As universities are increasingly held accountable by external agencies, the extent to which administrative staff support core values is crucial' (McInnis, 1998 p.170). Yet there seems to be very little written about how professional staff perceive their contribution to identifying and upholding core values, which presumably are deemed to promote retention and success.

The central role played by professional staff in student perception of the institutional culture and values seems to be appreciated by management and academic staff; the question is whether professional staff themselves appreciate the contribution

they make, and whether they perceive that the institution recognises and values it. From the relatively small body of evidence in this area, it would appear not to be the case. That evidence suggests university administrators feel under-appreciated and unvalued (see Dobson, 2000 and Allen Collinson, 2006 for example), or even ‘invisible’ (Szekeres, 2004 p. 7). Nationally the proportion of professional staff is over 50 per cent (HEFCE, 2012), and in the institution being studied, 65 per cent of staff are professional staff. It is somewhat surprising then that so little is known about how they perceive their contribution to student outcomes.

Research questions

The following research questions were posed:

- To what extent is there consensus among professional staff based in faculties about their perceptions of their contribution to student outcomes;
- To what extent is there consensus among professional staff based in central departments about their perceptions of their contribution to student outcomes;
- Are there any differences between the perceptions of professional staff based in faculties and those based in central departments?
- How do the perceptions of professional staff in this institution compare to those of the Australian institution studied by Graham (2010). This question is not the focus of this paper.

Methodology

We have replicated the methodology used by Graham (2010) but with two panels rather than one. Graham (2010) used a modification of the Schmidt Delphi method (SDM) (Schmidt, 1997) to rank the order of thirteen propositions derived from a meta study by Prebble et al. (2004). Graham (2010) later reduced these to the ten used in this comparative study (see Figure 1). These propositions reflect institutional behaviours concluded by Prebble et al. (2004) to be supportive of positive student outcomes. The SDM (Schmidt, 1997) has three phases: a brainstorming phase to generate a list of issues; a phase to consolidate the list; and the final phase to rank the issues identified in the list. Graham (2010) considered that the work done by Prebble et al. (2004) equated to the first two phases of the method.

No.	Proposition	Description
1	Institutional behaviours, environments and processes are welcoming and efficient.	Students’ enquiries are dealt with promptly, knowledgeably and with a friendly manner.
2	The institution provides opportunities for students to establish social networks.	Student clubs, societies and activities are supported, and facilities and events are provided to support socialisation.
3	Academic counselling and pre-enrolment advice are readily available to ensure students enrol in appropriate programs.	Students are provided with high quality advice and information concerning program choices, and links are established with secondary schools.

6	Orientation and induction programs are provided to facilitate both social and academic integration.	Both academic orientation and general orientation programs can improve student experience.
7	Students working in academic learning communities have good experiences.	The deliberate use and facilitation of learning communities has a positive impact on student experience.
8	A comprehensive range of institutional services and facilities are available.	Student experiences are improved by the provision of services and facilities that support both the social and academic integration of students.
9	Supplemental instruction is provided.	Academic support activities, in programs that students find difficult, improve student experience.
10	Peer tutoring and mentoring services are provided.	Students benefit from well-designed and well-run peer tutoring and mentoring programs.
11	The institution ensures there is an absence of discrimination on campus, so students feel valued, fairly treated and safe.	Students need to feel safe, valued and respected.
13	The institutional culture, social and academic, welcomes diverse cultural capital and adapts to diverse students' needs.	The diverse backgrounds of students should be affirmed and accommodated.

Figure 1 Prebble's Propositions

The Delphi method uses a group of experts in the field being studied, in order to create group consensus from the views of the individual experts in the group, known as a 'panel of experts'. The panel do not need to meet physically and Graham (2010, p.214) describes it as 'a series of questionnaire rounds, which is interspersed with controlled feedback to the participants based on the results of the previous round'.

Design

This study comprised two 'virtual' expert panels; one of faculty based professional staff and one of professional staff based in central departments. For the purpose of this study we used a criterion of employment in this institution for a minimum of 5 years, as being an 'expert'. Approval to approach staff was obtained from faculty deans/departmental heads and faculty administrators. Ethical approval was gained from the appropriate university research ethics committee. We used an anonymous online survey in order to minimise any risk of coercion and reduce researcher workload.

Having restricted participation to supervisor levels in the catering and facilities areas, the total study population was 427. Of the 427, 101 were faculty based professional staff, and 326 were non-faculty based. Of the 101 faculty based professional staff, 84 were female (83 per cent). Of the 326 non faculty based professional staff, 210 were female (64 per cent). The length of service for potential female participants ranged from 5 to 40 years, and 5-30 years for males.

From the 101 faculty-based invites we received a total of 20 acceptances to participate, which was lower than hoped. From the 170 non faculty-based invited, 28 acceptances were received, which was comparable to the panel size in the original study (Graham 2010). Despite this, the response rate in the first round was only 15 in the faculty-based panel and 24 from the non-faculty-based panel. The reasons for ‘no response’ are likely to be multi-faceted but one email response seemed to indicate that, despite a clear explanation in the Participant Information Sheet, there had been some misunderstanding of the purpose.

“I am sorry but having looked at the questions I do not feel able to complete the questionnaire. I thought the survey was going to be about my role as administrator but this is asking for views on the student experience.”

(Participant in response to round one)

This apparent disconnect between the role of the administrator and the student experience is particularly striking as this is a faculty based administrator and it was this panel who had the lowest response rate overall. Without wishing to generalise from one email, it may be possible that other respondents also felt this disconnect between their role and the student experience.

Data Collection

Data collection comprised three rounds which, according to Schmidt (1997), is the optimum number for obtaining a consensus. The same instructions used by Graham (2010) were sent to staff, with a link to an anonymous survey supported by ‘Survey Monkey’ software. They were then asked to rank, by allocating a number between 1 and 10, to each of the propositions: 1 being the proposition to which professional staff consider they contribute most, and 10 the least. Results from the previous round were included with the second and third round requests. Data was collected every calendar month for three months from October 2012 to December 2012. Staff were asked to self-identify the staff group (within the general term of professional staff) to which they belonged. Figure 2 show the numbers of respondents from each category, and for each round of the survey.

Role	Faculty-Based			Non-Faculty-Based		
	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
Administration	10	10	7	3	3	2
Technical	1	0	0	12	9	8
Service	1	1	1	1	1	1
Facilities	1	0	0	2	2	2
Student Support	2	1	1	4	1	4

Figure 2 Faculty Panel: Roles in the University

Data analysis

We replicated the data analysis used by Graham (2010). Kendall's coefficient of concordance (W), utilised by Graham, has been reported to be the best metric for measuring non-parametric rankings (Okoli and Pawlowski 2004). In line with the use of SDM, Graham also used Schmidt's interpretation of Kendall's W .

Table 1. Interpretation of Kendall's coefficient of concordance

W	Interpretation	Confidence in rankings
0.1	Very weak agreement	None
0.3	Weak agreement	Low
0.5	Moderate agreement	Fair
0.7	Strong agreement	High
0.9	Unusually strong agreement	Very high

(source: Schmidt 1997, cited by Graham 2010)

Results

The results for Kendall's coefficient of concordance are illustrated in Table 2 below. For the non-faculty-based panel, there was increasing agreement with each round. Nevertheless, even by round three agreement among the panel was still only 'weak'. In addition the response rate had fallen from 24 panellists in the first round to 18 in the final round.

Table 2 Kendall's coefficient of concordance and its interpretation for each round

	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
<u>Non faculty-based panel</u>	N=24	N=18	N=18
Kendall's W Interpretation of W	0.21 Very weak agreement	0.24 Very weak agreement	0.32 weak agreement
<u>Faculty-based panel</u>	N=15	N=12	N=9
Kendall's W Interpretation of W	0.24 Very weak agreement	0.20 Very weak agreement	0.12 Very weak agreement

The results for Kendall's coefficient of concordance for the faculty-based panel shows a reverse trend to that expected in such a study, showing only a very weak agreement by round three. According to Schmidt (1997) there is no confidence in the rankings at this level. Furthermore, the response rate dropped from 15 panellists to only 9 in round three.

Table 3 shows a comparison of the rankings between the non-faculty-based panel, and the faculty-based panel. It also shows the percentages of panellists ranking each proposition in the top half of the table. The results from round two for the faculty based panel, in which there was the greatest consensus, are used here.

Table 3 Faculty vs. Non-Faculty: Overall Results

No.	Statement	Faculty - % in top half of ranking	Non-Faculty - % in top half of ranking	Faculty -- Mean rank	Non-Faculty - Mean rank
1	Institutional behaviours, environments and processes are welcoming and efficient.	83.3%	94.4%	3.13	2.36
2	The institution provides opportunities for students to establish social networks.	33.3%	44.4%	6.83	6.42
3	Academic counselling and pre-enrolment advice are readily available to ensure students enrol in appropriate programs.	50.0%	44.4%	4.96	5.86
6	Orientation and induction programs are provided to facilitate both social and academic integration.	75.0%	77.8%	4	4.03
7	Students working in academic learning communities have good experiences.	25.0%	27.8%	7.04	6.83
8	A comprehensive range of institutional services and facilities are available.	58.3%	83.3%	5.42	4
9	Supplemental instruction is provided.	33.3%	33.3%	6.42	7.08
10	Peer tutoring and mentoring services are provided.	41.7%	16.7%	6.83	7.86
11	The institution ensures there is an absence of discrimination on campus, so students feel valued, fairly treated and safe.	50.0%	66.7%	5.04	4.72
13	The institutional culture, social and academic, welcomes diverse cultural capital and adapts to diverse students' needs.	50.0%	44.4%	5.33	5.83

The most highly ranked proposition for both panels was the first, namely: 'Institutional behaviours, environments and processes are welcoming and efficient; that is, students' enquiries are dealt with promptly, knowledgeably and with a friendly manner'. This proposition was ranked in the top half by 94.4 per cent of non-faculty-based panellists and 83.3 per cent of faculty-based panellists. Other propositions that were consistently ranked highly over the three rounds were 6, 8 and 11 but 8 and 11 less so for faculty-based panellists. Proposition 6 is ranked marginally higher by the faculty-based panel compared to the non-faculty based panel. This is perhaps influenced by the increased role for faculty-based panellists in on-going induction activities throughout that first term. Central support departments tend to be involved in the initial induction period but thereafter it may become more focussed on faculty-based activities.

Discussion

The lack of consensus between the two panels may have been anticipated, due to the many varied roles, but a greater consensus in faculty-based staff was anticipated, given the homogeneity of self-identified roles of panel members (see Figure 2). This suggests a lack of consensus amongst faculty-based administrative staff about the nature of professional staff's contribution to student outcomes. One possibility for this is that the discipline culture of the faculties is so varied that administrative staff, even those based in faculties, contribute to the student experience in very different ways. In particular, the amount of interaction that faculty-based staff can expect to have with students can vary widely across the institution. For example, students of fine art and design, and those on performing arts programmes may spend more of their time on campus to utilise studio facilities. This in turn potentially builds closer relationships with the professional staff of the faculty. By contrast, students in the faculty of humanities may have less contact time with any institutional staff and may only see administrative staff when submitting assignments. The differing needs of the programmes and the students studying them may create different cultural relationships with all staff in the faculty, not just the professional staff. If this is the case a consensus is less likely. It also means that any staff development would need to be sensitive to disciplinary cultures and contexts.

The most obvious difference between the two panels is in their response to proposition number 8: A comprehensive range of institutional services and facilities are available; that is, student experiences are improved by the provision of services and facilities that support both the social and academic integration of students. 83.3 per cent of non-faculty based staff ranked that in the top half, with a mean ranking of 4. This compares to only 58.3 per cent of faculty-based staff, with a mean ranking of 5.42. This finding would suggest that those staff based in central departments feel professional staff (generally) contribute more to these wide ranging services than faculty-based staff do. This seems to be consistent with the fact that staff based in faculties are perhaps less aware of the university-wide facilities and services, than colleagues in central departments. Depending on the department, professional staff in some central support departments may have a wider view of the student experience and outcomes, whereas faculty staff may have a far deeper understanding of the needs of their specific

department, faculty and subject than central support departments. Alternatively, when ranking the propositions they are perhaps basing their judgements of the contribution of professional staff by their own role.

The differences in proposition 3 and 10 also seem consistent with respondents judging the contribution of professional staff in terms of their own specific role. To remind the reader proposition 3 is: 'Academic counselling and pre-enrolment advice are readily available to ensure students enrol in appropriate programs'; and proposition 10 is: 'Peer tutoring and mentoring services are provided'. Whilst pre-enrolment advice may well feature more in the role of professional staff in faculties compared to those in central departments (apart from registry services), proposition 10 is perhaps more surprising. It is entirely possible that faculty based staff perceive the importance of peer tutoring and mentoring more acutely than centrally based staff, but this survey asked them to identify the contribution of professional staff; not the importance of the statement. That point was emphasised on the instructions for the panellists, as it was something Graham (2010) had picked up after her first round. If faculty-based professional staff are contributing to peer mentoring, I am not sure this contribution is recognised. More importantly, whilst development opportunities exist for students and academic staff with regards to peer tutoring and peer mentoring, none are currently targeted at this staff group.

Whilst the finding that there is slightly more consensus in the non-faculty panel, than that of the faculty-based panel, may be surprising; gaining a better understanding of how professional staff perceive their contribution to institutional behaviours is probably more important. Arguably the propositions which relate more to the overall organisational culture, rather than to facilities, services and the academic experience, are propositions 1, 11 and 13. These propositions relate to the feelings and perceptions that students will have from the moment they interact with an institution. Long before students experience the facilities and the learning experience, they will have formed views on institutional behaviours outlined in these three propositions. It is these propositions that will contribute directly to students' feeling of 'belonging' in an institution, which will play a major role in their retention and success (Thomas 2012). Proposition 6, relating to orientation and induction, also plays a major role in retention of students in that early period; but they have chosen the institution by that point. Both panels ranked the contribution of professional staff to orientation and induction programmes (proposition 6) higher than propositions 11 and 13. Whilst the contribution to such programmes is substantial, these activities are relatively short lived and concentrated in the first term, hence the timing of the survey may have influenced this response. In contrast, the contribution to proposition 11 and 13 would need to be consistent in all aspects of the students' university experience, for the length of their time with us. As the largest staff group in the institution; the contribution of professional staff will have a considerable impact on the demonstration of these propositions from initial enquiry to graduation and beyond.

Proposition 1 seems to be well embedded into the organisational culture and professional staff recognise their significant contribution to this institutional behaviour. However, it is suggested that the institution needs to make it clearer, to professional staff,

that their contribution to the institutional behaviours of proposition 11 and 13 will make a significant contribution to the way potential, and enrolled, students perceive the culture of the institution as a whole. Whilst cultural and ethnic diversity represents only a small percentage of the student population in this institution, these propositions relate to less obvious forms of diversity too. Students are very diverse in terms of their social capital. For example, students coming from middle class families, who may be familiar with higher education, and whose parents take an active role in the selection of the institution and admission processes prior to arrival, have a distinct advantage over students who have had to manage these processes without that help. The impact of this form of diversity may not be acknowledged and those students may need a lot more assistance from the institution; in particular professional staff. This needs to be handled very sensitively of course to promote the feeling that they do belong in higher education and that they have made the right decision: that is 'the need to feel safe, valued and respected' as proposition 11 outlines.

Proposition 11 states: The institution ensures there is an absence of discrimination on campus, so students feel valued, fairly treated and safe. Whilst 66 per cent of the non-faculty based panel ranked this proposition in the top half of the table (mean rank of 4.72), only 50 per cent of the faculty-based panel did so (mean rank of 5.04). Because of the student facing aspects of faculty-based staff, it is of concern that they appear not to recognise the significant contribution they make to ensuring students feel valued, and are treated fairly and without discrimination. The similarity between this proposition and one of the institutional strategic objectives is very strong, increasing the significance of this finding for this institution.

Proposition 13 states: The institutional culture, social and academic, welcomes diverse cultural capital and adapts to diverse students' needs. That is: The diverse backgrounds of students should be affirmed and accommodated. Again only 50 per cent of faculty-based staff ranked this proposition in the top half of the table (mean rank of 5.33). However, only 44 per cent of the non-faculty based panel ranked this in the top half of the table (mean rank of 5.83). Comparing this to propositions 1, 6 and 8 may give rise to the perception that professional staff consider their contribution to be more practical than to the organisational culture.

Perhaps the focus on targets, policies, performance indicators, regulation and audits are creating an organisational culture which clashes with the notion of engaging students as partners (van der Velden, 2012). This may assist in understanding why professional staff perceive they contribute more to the practical propositions than to the organisational culture. Cox and Orehovec (2007) found that any interaction with academic staff, even very casually, "help students feel important and valued as members of the institution' (p.360) Whilst they did not study professional staff, it is not unreasonable to assume that interactions with professional staff can also help students feel that they *belong* to the institution and that this is something that *all* staff should be aiming for. In other words, rather than the emphasis being on service targets, it should be on the collegial nature of all interactions to promote a sense of belonging. The emphasis on 'students as partners', embodied in the new Quality Code published by the Quality

Assurance Agency for the UK (QAA, 2013), points firmly in this direction too. In addition to recording numerical data on uptake of services, there is a need to develop a culture of wanting to know about the students' experience of that service. Two recent examples to illustrate this would be the reporting of numerical data relating to online enrolment and download of the university 'App'. These figures were widely reported in the university committee structure as evidence of success. However, anecdotally, students report technical frustrations with online enrolment and using the 'App'. Mechanisms for recording this qualitative data may not be prioritised in the same way.

Nevertheless, it is still surprising that there is not more consensus about contribution to proposition 13, given the diversity and equality agenda which is very prevalent in the institution. It might be that this is so embedded in practice that it was viewed as a 'given'. However, it may again illustrate that respondents were not considering the *contribution* of professional staff as the main point of the question. Whether the practice of valuing diversity is totally embedded or not, the contribution of professional staff to students' perception of being valued is critical in terms of retention.

What these findings seem to indicate is that professional staff undervalue their contribution to the student experience; and therefore to retention and success. This may be a result of feeling their contribution is undervalued by others (Dobson, 2000 and Allen Collinson, 2006). It is doubtful that this undervaluing is intentional or explicit but is consistently reinforced by the lack of research and development of professional staff. Opportunities for staff development are significantly less for professional staff and even when it is generic development, such as the annual staff conference, professional staff are not generally encouraged to attend. Thomas and Hill (2013) argue that institutions must increase the capacity of *all* staff to 'nurture a culture of belonging' (p4) through access to 'support and development opportunities as necessary' (p4). They go on to say that institutional policies should recognise the 'professionalism and contributions', of all staff, to the promotion of retention and success (Thomas & Hill, 2013 p.4). Despite this, in their summary of current and future plans, there is no mention of staff development, either specifically for professional staff, or combined with academic staff. Not paying specific attention to the development needs of professional staff may give rise to an unintentional message that retention and success is an issue for academic staff only.

As a condition of being able to charge more than the minimum fee, Universities in the UK are obliged, by the Office For Fair Access, to set aside a significant amount of money to promote retention and success, particularly amongst widening participation groups. Over the past two years none of this money has been awarded to initiatives for, or by, professional staff groups in this institution. Professional staff have not been named members of departmental teams leading on these initiatives, although they are involved on a practical level. This does not give the impression of academic and professional staff working in partnership on equal terms. Parkes et al. (2014) concluded that 'Collaborative working by professional and academic staff ... emerged as being particularly important for student engagement, retention and success' (p5). They go on to argue that collaborative working between professional and academic staff has the potential to bring together many aspects of the students' experience, rather than it seeming fragmented.

This, in turn, will promote an impression of an integrated and holistic experience of the institution rather than a more piecemeal one (Parkes et al. 2014).

Limitations of the study

It appears from some of the comments on the surveys, and the drop-out rate, that the concept of ranking the *contribution* of professional staff to these propositions was not easily understood. It would appear that some respondents believed they were being asked to rank the propositions in order of importance. It was explained that all the propositions were important, but that the study was seeking to establish the contribution professional staff perceived they made to these institutional behaviours. Although we used the same instructions and information as Graham (2010), the fact that we were not personally engaging with respondents in collecting the data may have influenced understanding. Participants could email any of the researchers if anything was unclear but that is not the same as asking the researcher when they collect the data in person. In future we would recommend more face to face contact with panel members to re-iterate the nature of the ranking and the purpose of reaching a consensus. It is considered that the expectation of using results from the previous round to work toward a consensus, was not made clearly enough in our instructions to participants.

The online software offered more anonymity for participants but the formatting was rather inflexible. This meant that all the propositions were not visible in one screen, and it was necessary to scroll up and down in order to rank them 1-10. To assist participants, the propositions were sent as an email attachment with round two and three. Participants were advised to print them off and have them to hand when ranking the propositions online.

Conclusions

In response to the first three research questions posed, our conclusions are as follows:

- Based on the views of the expert panel, there is only a very weak consensus among professional staff, based in faculties, about their perceptions of their contribution to student outcomes. According to Schmidt (1997) there is no confidence in the rankings at this level. On this basis we conclude that a consensus does not exist amongst faculty-based professional staff.
- Based on the views of the expert panel, there is only a weak consensus among professional staff based in central departments about their perceptions of their contribution to student outcomes.
- Some differences, between the perceptions of professional staff based in faculties and those based in central departments, were noted but with such little consensus within the panels, it is not possible to generalise on those differences. Any differences that were noted would seem to indicate staff were ranking the contribution of professional staff from the perspective of their own role rather than more generally.

A lack of consensus would not necessarily indicate that students do not experience the propositions in an apparently consistent way across the university. In another context,

examining different professional groups within a clinical setting, Powell (2003) concluded that ‘Such a professional group may well have individual viewpoints and differing opinions, yet may be deemed to be like-minded by outsiders’ (p. 379).

Apart from the lack of consensus, there is some evidence to suggest that professional staff may not be aware of how crucial their contribution is to the organisational culture. It is suggested that this underestimation of their contribution to the organisational culture may not contribute positively to an institutional approach to the retention and success of our students.

Recommendations

Graham (2012) followed up her Delphi Survey with semi-structured interviews to explore in more depth the contributions of professional staff. Whilst that may not be the most appropriate method for further exploration in this institution, we would propose that the initial findings from this study provide a clear indication that further exploration is necessary. Graham (2013) also asserts that there is ‘a need for university management to recognise the contributions of professional staff to the core business of learning and teaching, and to explicitly value these contributions’ (p14). It is perhaps a lack of explicit recognition and valuing of their contribution to student outcomes, that contributes to an underestimation of this contribution by professional staff themselves.

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