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Impact of working in outreach on student ambassadors' perceptions of university

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Project Overview

This study sought to provide evidence of a relationship between students' perceptions of their course, their university and their role working as a Student Ambassador in the context of widening participation outreach.

I felt that students had not been given the opportunity to talk about themselves in relation to their work and the place of that work in their overall university experience. I was also interested to see if there was any suggestion that this experience contributed to student success.

There is a paucity of literature specifically relating to students' perceptions of being an ambassador and whether those perceptions have an impact on their experience of their time at university. The emphasis on perception rather than outcomes was deliberate. The research was designed to capture the student voice through both a survey and by employing a Listening Rooms (Heron, 2019) methodology.

This paper reports on a mixed-methods study that investigated the perceptions of students who work in a university outreach team as Student Ambassadors. The aim of the project was to determine whether working as an ambassador had any influence over students' perceptions of their university experience.

Project Objectives

- To capture the perceptions of student ambassadors working on behalf of Educational Engagement
- To determine whether there is a relationship between students' perceptions of university and their role working as an ambassador

Methods

A literature search was conducted to provide evidence to support the study. Searches were limited to English-language papers from 2010 onwards. Focused searches typically yielded few relevant results, so the search was deliberately kept broad. Relevant articles were analysed and compared with survey responses to identify common themes that could inform the next stage of the research: the Listening Rooms.

The survey was completed by 30 student ambassadors working to support outreach within Educational Engagement. They represented different courses across all seven of the university's faculties. The survey elicited views towards the role and its impact on the students personally in relation to their course and time at university.

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"Listening Rooms" is a qualitative research method first used by Emma Heron (2019) who explored "hard listening" to better capture the student voice among paired friends. It was felt that this method would allow students the freedom to have a more open and genuine conversation than alternatives. In this project, the Listening Rooms were conducted by a student project assistant to avoid researcher bias and any potential conflict of interest.

The prompts for the Listening Rooms were derived from responses to the survey and further evidenced from clear topics that arose in relevant articles identified in the literature review. These were then grouped into four main themes, distilled into single words or phrases, and then used as prompts to guide listening room participants in their conversations.

The prompts were *Impact*, *Engagement*, *Identity* & *Skills/Knowledge*.

Key findings

Responses to the survey were coded and split into themes. This thematic analysis allowed for subtle nuances in meaning where similar phrases were used to mean different things. For example, motivational themes related to the reasons students chose to become ambassadors but also the reasons cited as continuing as an ambassador and continuing with their course and working towards their career goals.

- Students were generally proud to work for the university and took pride in their role as an ambassador
- Students benefited from the opportunities to develop wide-ranging skills
- Students felt more connected to the university and engaged in wider university life
- Students felt more inclined to do well on their course as they were grateful for the opportunity
- Students appreciated and valued the "Listening Rooms" as it allowed them to reflect deeply and talk to other ambassadors about their experiences

Implications for practice

The findings here demonstrate that working as a student ambassador is a beneficial and important role in the lives of these students. The method itself is of great potential benefit

to all students as it highlighted the need for time and space for reflection as well as the importance as connecting with other ambassadors.

Recommendations

- Work with faculty and the careers service to promote the student ambassador scheme
- Work to improve the sense of community among the student ambassadors
- Build in time to reflect in small groups and the opportunity to feedback to larger groups of students - "Circle time"

Outputs

A summary of the project has been presented to an all staff meeting of Educational Engagement (9 Nov, 2022) and discussed with a number of colleagues.

This work has produced evidence to support proposals for related projects looking at community-building, sense of belonging and student success. The recommendations will also form part of a review into how we manage the scheme within the service.

It is hoped that this project will be written up as a paper and presented at a future RAiSE conference (Leeds, 2023) and submitted for publication in the Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning.

Challenges

The timing of the survey was unfortunate because it coincided with a number of other surveys that are routinely sent out leading to what I believed to be survey fatigue. Although a response rate of approximately 14% is not unusual, it is low. Similarly, the fieldwork clashed with both exams and vacation time impacting the availability of the students.

The listening rooms were held online which was easier in terms of students' availability and administration but did then require a good quality internet connection and clear sound. Some of the dialogue was marred by the poor environment one of the students was in making the recording difficult to hear.

Specific to this project was the need to distance myself, as researcher, as far as possible from the ambassadors due to the nature of my role within Educational Engagement. A potential conflict of interest was identified through the ethical review and extra support was required from colleagues to administer the survey and from a research assistant to conduct the listening rooms.

There was no comparison group because of the added administrative burden in identifying students to take part. In a larger-scale, longer term project, this is something that might help to ascertain how much of the perceived benefits are down to working as an ambassador.

Next steps

The findings for this project are important and relevant to a number of streams of work across the university and within Educational Engagement, notably, sense of belonging and student success.

More specifically, the project feeds into conversations around surfacing skills and how we might give students the space and time to reflect in order to understand their own growth and development and how we might then give them the tools to articulate and demonstrate those skills in such a way that it aids their career development and employability.

The idea that student ambassadors enjoy speaking to other ambassadors about their role and their experience of university is also part of that reflection process but highlights a need for them to feel more a part of a community and improve their sense of belonging.

This community-building is work that has potential within Educational Engagement.

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