

Understanding student learning gain: using student-staff partnerships within Higher Education to inform the continuous improvement process

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The Higher Education sector has increasingly been subjected to an ongoing process of marketisation. Students are now seeking assurances regarding the value for money of the course that they decide to study. Understanding the learning experience of students on a course, or in the context of marketisation, the students' own perception of their learning, has now become an imperative.

This paper considers a *student-staff partnership* approach to gather students' own perceptions of the *Learning Gain* that they have achieved on a university course. This understanding can then be used to improve teaching for subsequent cohorts of students. The *Learning Gain* model used considers both the explicit knowledge gained by a student called *Distance Travelled* (models and theories) and their tacit understanding called *Journey Travelled* (practical skills and know-how). Data was collected from Business/Finance students at a UK university.

The research follows an inductive approach, using a 'survey' based primary data collection strategy, with a cross-sectional time horizon and a non-probability purposive critical sampling method. This mono-method research uses self-reflective surveys to collect ordinal (ranked) data from participants.

Questions were derived from intended learning outcomes and were based upon descriptive linguistic labels ranging from 'No Change', 'Minor Improvement', 'Moderate Improvement', 'Significant Improvement' to 'Exceptional Improvement'. This enabled participants to reflect holistically upon how they perceive their own learning to have changed from studying this university course.

Analysis of the data collected by this study identified differences in student learning against individual questions, and more importantly, against *Distance Travelled* and *Journey Travelled*. Questions reporting high levels of perceived learning indicated successful

teaching, and good practice that could be identified and disseminated. Questions reporting low levels of perceived learning indicated potential problem areas which presented an opportunity for rethinking the delivery and support being provided so that a more effective educational experience could be generated. Students reporting high or low *Distance Travelled*, whilst simultaneously reporting the converse for *Journey Travelled*, are thought to indicate a natural disposition towards either explicit knowledge (theoretical) or tacit understanding (practical).

The evidence from this study demonstrates that taking a *student-staff partnership* approach has provided the teaching team with a helpful understanding of the education being delivered. In the context of academic development, this will influence proactive actions to be taken as part of the continuous improvement process for enhancing teaching delivery and effectiveness and ultimately ensuring the quality of the course and its value for money.