Researching a Diverse Student Population:
The Business Education Research Group (BERG) - 2003 to date.

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Introduction

The Business Education Research Group (BERG) was formed in December 2003 to focus on educational research and the experiences of students within the business domain. In the wake of the UK Government decision to increase HE participation through widening participation, BERG carried out research to examine business students' expectations of the Higher Education experience. In addition, students' reasons for non-attendance at lectures, the usefulness of new technology for students, the characteristics of academically excellent students, transferable skills and the value of work experience placements have all been explored and investigated. This paper provides a thematic representation of BERG research completed and published by summer 2008.

Student Retention

Several studies have probed into factors related to student retention. Bennett (2003a) provides an academic model to explain why students withdraw. Financial hardship was identified as a 'powerful influence' when associated with difficulties in academic performance and the 'level of commitment' to an academic programme. Individual self-esteem was also seen as a 'crucial' factor.

In a similar vein over concerns about non-completing students, the study on 'catching the early walker' (Bennett, Kottasz and Nocciolino 2007) used turnstile data to show that a significant number actually withdrew within a few weeks of beginning their degree programme. Follow-up research with a sample of 'early walkers' pointed to a range of significant factors, including dissatisfaction with services and individual students recognising that they had not selected a suitable undergraduate course.

Further research on this theme (Bennett & Kottasz 2006) compared the original hopes and predictions of first year undergraduate students, and the subsequent reality after the period of the first few weeks had passed, and how this affected levels of satisfaction. A range of factors had been underestimated by the students,

such as the amount of time they would be required to spend attending lectures and the number of hours required for individual study.

A study of the impact of non-attendance on academic success (Kottasz 2005) indicated that some students simply find lectures boring, but that this may be due to a lack of individual motivation, or perhaps a mismatch of teaching and learning styles. Time-management was noted as a particular problem for students, and it was suggested that this should be taught at the beginning of the programme. Related research (Shaw & Kottasz 2005) addressed the non-attendance of students who eventually hand in work that is below par, instances of plagiarism and student failure to meet deadlines. It proposes a curriculum spine of research methods elements as an alternative structure that could provide an improved learning experience. In addition, differentiated teaching strategies, a greater understanding of the student experience and a focus of facilitating 'empowered independence' are suggested.

At the other end of the spectrum, the study of 'characteristics of academically excellent business studies students' (Bennett & Barkensjo 2005) focused on academic excellence. In the present context of widening participation, student loans and increasing student debt, it is interesting to note that:

> *"Overall the results suggest that academic excellence…has as much to do with individual aptitude…conscientiousness and hard work, internal locus of control, personal study skills, and intrinsic interest in the subjects of a degree programme, as it has to do with socio-economic background or financial circumstances".* (Bennett & Barkensjo 2005, p.18)

Teaching and Widening Participation

A number of studies have investigated course provision and teaching approaches aimed at accommodating widening participation students.

Staff opinion on and use of new teaching methods such as group work and information technology (IT) was canvassed (Bennett 2002). While lack of time, feelings of inadequacy, and the absence of a reward system all impacted upon the implementation of new teaching methods, possession of a formal teaching qualification was found to be a major and positive determinant here.

Research was also conducted into students experience and perceptions of introductory 'higher education orientation' modules that aim to help students to develop required skills. In an initial study (Holley *et al.* 2003) data provided by students via questionnaire revealed the most helpful elements to be the Library/Learning Centre and collaborating with other students. A subsequent study (Bennett, Mousley & Ali-Choudhury 2008) exploring the personal characteristics of

students taking these modules, suggests that intrinsic motivation to study influenced how useful the provision was considered to be by individuals. Those with lower academic self-concept appeared to have unrealistic expectations, and anxious students and those who were unprepared for university life appeared less likely to benefit from the introductory units.

The use of learning style instruments (LSI) with regard to curriculum development and the perspective of users has also been investigated (Pheiffer *et al.* 2003; Pheiffer, Holley & Andrew 2005) . While noting the many problems in trying to match up teaching styles with students' preferred learning styles, the authors nevertheless recognise the potential of employing LSI as self-development tools to empower students from diverse backgrounds. In some cases study habits had been augmented in response to this educational intervention.

Another concern for the university lecturer is that of student plagiarism and this is highlighted in Bennett (2005). The hypothesis here is that the occurrence of plagiarism could be predicted via three attitudinal considerations, two personal traits and three situational factors.

Educational Technology

Members of BERG have also authored papers regarding the diverse delivery of courses and the practicalities of educational technology. 'Which room is the virtual seminar in please?' (Holley 2002) looks into the online learning experience of students. This research considered student expectations, staff expectations, institutional aims and student resistance to change. Feedback showed a high level of student satisfaction; however, not all students were ready to engage.

Educational technology also came under scrutiny in Bennett & Kottasz (2001). Students were consulted about the possibility of delivering parts of their undergraduate learning experience via menu-driven, touch-screen software. Irrespective of the degree course, it was noted that individual motivation to succeed, individual curiosity and personal involvement in study were all important factors in whether or not the students thought such systems to be a good idea.

Multimedia has also been specifically considered in regard to the learning experience (Holley & Haynes 2003 – case study of the development and application of a multimedia learning tool), as has the 'usefulness of new technology with new students' (Holley, Andrew & Pheiffer 2004). That study cautions that virtual learning environments should not be forced on students and makes the point that reading information online is as valid a use of the system as interacting via the posting of messages. It observed that 'lurkers' who do make use of the site but do not interact via the message boards are still engaging with the learning environment.

Employability

Through a content analysis of job advertisements, Bennett (2003b) provides insight into the expectations of graduate employers in relation to transferable skills for marketing, general management, finance and human resource management positions. He emphasises that:

> "…higher education institutions which are serious about wanting their graduates to be more employable should study carefully current trends in employers' demands for particular personal skills…and then develop these skills in undergraduate programmes". (Bennett 2003b, p. 19)

As the work of BERG focuses on business courses, one area that has grown in importance is the recognition of entrepreneurship. A recent study (Bennett 2006) investigates the connection between definitions of entrepreneurship and pedagogical techniques. It concluded there was no general consensus in the definition of 'entrepreneurship', except for a belief that entrepreneurs had different attitudes to risk and were more success and achievement orientated.

Bennett *et al.* (2008) considers the relevance of work-experience from an industry perspective. The heads of graduate recruitment in 900 British firms were consulted on the main benefits of work-experience periods, the value towards employability of paid work during term-time and vacations, and the contributions to employability of academic group work. The study found that work placements continue to be looked on favourably and are recognised for their developmental potential. Formal work placements as an integrated part of a degree programme were considered of higher value than paid employment during term-time or holiday periods.

Conclusion

BERG research will continue to focus on areas that are relevant to a diverse student population. Higher Education institutions recognise the relevance of both research and practice in a modern educational environment. Academic research explores and investigates the theoretical approaches that support well-informed educational practice. While aiming to guide students and academics towards enhancing their effectiveness through research activities and pursuing intellectually rigorous and operationally relevant research, BERG will encourage its members and contributors to continue with the important research work in which they invest their time and efforts.

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