

# Background

Strathclyde Student Congress is an element of the Students' Association's representation structure which has existed since 2006. The aim of Student Congress is to provide representatives from across the student community the opportunity to come together and discuss the learning, teaching & quality issues which impact on all students at Strathclyde.

Now in its 2<sup>nd</sup> year reincarnated as a full-day Conference-style event, Strathclyde Student Congress continues to epitomise the partnership in the development of the student academic experience between students and staff, the Students' Association and the University. The event is aimed at standing out in the calendar for representatives across campus by being the only full-day conference-style event to be held in the University's Court/Senate Suite with a high-level and professional tone embedded into the agenda and resources utilised to their maximum availability.

The event took place on Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2010 with class, course and faculty reps from all five faculties in attendance for the full day (10am to 4pm).

The agenda was very much focussed around the current enhancement theme of '*Graduates for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes*'. The first part of the agenda was centred on the major discussion topics in the sector including recognising skills & development and revisiting curriculum design. The second part of the day shifted to the more institutional level discussions about learning spaces and student support through the academic experience.

As with the previous year's Congress, the discussion groups continued to be the most popular part of the day for delegates with 48% of delegates choosing them as the parts they liked best about the event. This sense of being part of the discussion about the larger issues which affect all Strathclyde students is a prominent part of what delegates seem to value through this event. This is helping us to embed the partnership approach to the development of learning & teaching at Strathclyde that we have been and will continue to pursue.

With 70% of delegates who are continuing students stating that they want to be more involved in the representation process next year, we have certainly achieved our objectives of inspiring and developing student representatives for the future.

### **The aims of Student Congress 2010:**

- Further develop a community of representatives on campus
- Expand Student Rep's knowledge of projects being undertaken by the University of Strathclyde in relation to Learning & Teaching Development
- Provide an opportunity for Student Reps to identify and investigate common themes in Learning & Teaching and the student experience at the University of Strathclyde
- Inspire Student Reps to seek further involvement in student representation throughout their academic careers

# DISCUSSION GROUPS

The discussion groups formed the main part of the agenda on the day. The topics were chosen as a representation of the current and future issues relating to the Enhancement Theme of '*Graduates For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*' and complimented the two major presentations of the day:

- Recognising Graduates For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century
- Graduates For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The National Picture

Unfortunately, due to some of the sessions over-running, we had to remove the discussion group surrounding Curriculum Design & Employability.

We made sure that the subjects were 'universal' topics - i.e. topics that all students at Strathclyde could relate to.

Participants were split into three groups with around twelve to fifteen in each and were facilitated in the discussion process by one of our facilitators:

- Ian McCartney - Membership Services Manager, USSA
- Nicola Summers - ASK Advisor, USSA
- Al Wilson - Democratic Services Coordinator, USSA

The 'pyramid' model of discussion was used for the discussion groups in order to draw out depth to the final conclusions. A paper with 3 questions/sets of questions was included within delegate packs for each of the four topics. The Class Reps were first given a general introduction and background to each of the topics by the facilitator. This information was drawn together prior to the event in a short research paper compiled by the Democratic Services Coordinator.

Delegates were then asked to answer the questions individually before being split up into groups of three or four to discuss their answers and debate their conclusions. All of these smaller groups were then brought back into the larger group of around twelve and the questions were addressed and conclusions were drawn through majority and unanimous agreement. These notes have since been pulled together and overall outcomes are drawn out below.

## Topic 1 - Accrediting Informal Learning

1. Do you currently participate in anything that could be considered 'informal learning' and do you think that you should be able to gain academic credit for these activities?
2. Do you currently participate in Personal Development Planning (PDP)? How do you think the HEAR will compare to PDP activities?
3. Are there any other ways in which you feel you could develop skills outside of the class room and how do you think these could best be assessed/accredited?

The first question formed the crux of the discussion, both for individuals and groups with the definition of 'informal learning' and what should and should not be accredited leading to some lengthy discussions. Every student could give at least one example of things that they were involved in that could be considered 'informal learning' and most gave a range of activities that they already participated in. Examples included part-time employment, volunteering and caring for a family member. The volunteering ranged from being an elected representative to various Students' Association groups and clubs as well as external sports and volunteering for local charities.

Participants broadly agreed that the University had a role to play in offering extra and co-curricular activities/opportunities to students as well as encouraging students to take up these opportunities wherever possible. An interesting differential was defined between what home and international students considered informal learning. Home students focussed on part time work or volunteering activities, whilst for international students attending a range of social events was an important part of their learning experience. Although these may not immediately seem like important learning experiences, the international student representatives present felt that social and extra-curricular events gave them an opportunity to develop their language and social skills, giving them increased confidence in dealing with people of various nationalities and cultures. It was felt that these skills would help them when they entered into the world of employment far more than more 'traditional' forms of volunteering would.

However, the more difficult question was whether or not any of these activities could be assessed or should be accredited. Many students who already volunteered through the Students' Association pointed out that they were already certificated through the Student Volunteer Awards based on the number of hours volunteered throughout the academic year. Only hours which were spent volunteering on Students' Association activities are counted towards the overall hours and the awards are given for 50, 100 and 200 hours. All students who achieve these hours are presented with a certificate jointly signed by the President and the Principal.

There were, however a few drawbacks to this model. Firstly, this was merely recognition of how many volunteering hours had been accrued throughout the year - it did not give any indication of what skills or knowledge had been required or developed to carry out the tasks associated with the activities. Secondly, although

this was certification of carrying out activities through the Students' Association, as it was very much an internal recognition process, there are concerns about just how much weight such a certificate would hold with employers. On this point, most participants agreed that one major advantage of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) would be that it would be nationally recognised, meaning that it did not matter where in the country you had studied, all employers would view them with equal weight.

Personal Development Planning (PDP) prompted a surprisingly divergent response from participants. The theory behind PDP was generally viewed as a good idea as students could chart how they had progressed throughout their academic careers as opposed to listing them all on a CV post-graduation. However, whenever we discussed student experiences of the scheme, the comments were predominantly of a negative nature. Some students had never come in contact with PDP, others viewed it as a chore and not conducive to the initial objective of personal development and skill building. Several students raised the issue of staff support for PDP as, in their experience, most of their lecturers didn't understand PDP or how to use it, so the students were immediately turned off from the idea of using it at all.

Overall, students did not think that PDP in its current format was working and the introduction of HEAR could have a more positive impact. Further to above comments, as opposed to PDP, it would be a national scheme and not unique to the institution. HEAR would also be more institution-led whereas PDP seemed to put a lot more of the burden on students. There was still disagreement on what could or should be included and, in the end most delegates agreed that only things that could be strictly assessed or controlled should be included. Also, on the issue of volunteering, some students wished to get more recognition for these activities whilst others saw this as counter-intuitive. They argued that formalising volunteering would take away from the point of participating in it in the first place - i.e. "to have fun and get away from assessment & work...". Also being able to 'sell' oneself on a CV, application or interview was seen as a skill in itself and formalising this would leave less room for 'standing out from the crowd' in recruitment processes.

Finally, the discussion surrounding what types of activities outside of the class-room would be useful to develop skills and to be assessed produced a further insight into the distinction between volunteering activities and learning activities. Although many students wished for their volunteering to be accredited in some way, they felt that 'assessing' them would make them less enjoyable and may take away from the altruistic nature of volunteering within the University and surrounding community. Student reps, however, almost unanimously placed high value in the opportunity to take on placement or other co-curricular activities throughout their academic careers and that these opportunities should be a focus for Universities, both at an undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Learning out side of the class room should be:

- a. Academically accredited - 32%
- b. Recognised, but not academically accredited - 58%
- c. Not accredited at all - 10%

## Topic 2 - Learning Spaces

1. Where do you spend most of your time carrying out 'self-directed learning' (e.g. the library, at home, in halls, etc.)? When do you study most (e.g. during the day, in the evenings or at weekends)?
2. What 'non-academic' factors contribute to where you choose to study? (e.g. employment, accommodation, volunteering activities, etc.) What factors make up the ideal personal learning environment? (e.g. atmosphere, physical location, resources, equipment, etc.). Are they currently met at Strathclyde and how/how not?
3. How would you rate your formal 'directed learning' spaces? (i.e. lecture halls, tutorial rooms, etc.) How far do they meet your needs and how could they be improved?

With regards to where students study, as might be expected, there were a range of answers which were influenced by course type as well as individual preference. The 'traditional' study space of the library was not viewed in a very positive light by student reps, however, when it came to 'intense' periods of study, it was the place where most people ended up studying.

Many participants agreed that studying in the comfort of one's home was preferable if possible. This meant that you could concentrate on study, but quickly move on to social or relaxation time without having to physically move location. Most students put how they used study space down to personal discipline - i.e. blocking out distractions. However, the library came in for some criticism as it was not necessarily viewed as the quiet, individual, academic-focussed study area that it should be. There was a feeling that 'quiet areas' needed to be enforced so that more students would get the benefit out of them.

The atmosphere had a huge influence on where students chose to study. For example, many students talked of their aversion to studying in computer labs as they had a tendency for some people to use them for more of a social/common room space meaning that it was not conducive to academic study. This was viewed as a problem as more and more information and study time is devoted to online materials and not being able to focus was a real drawback to studying. This meant that more people were choosing to study at home or in halls to avoid distraction. However, there was certainly a value associated with computer labs which were a bit less formal and were used for group work activities where students could discuss and work at the same time. There was suggestion that this could be better dispersed or divided across campus - computer labs for individual study separate from ones for group work, so that everyone knew what was expected from them and others. It was clear that there were two types of study (individual and group-based) and that, for the majority of students present, they would prefer distinct study spaces for each.

When it came to what time of the day or week students studied, this was predominantly determined by the type of course they were studying. Whilst students

who studied courses with fewer contact hours studied on campus between classes and during the day, students who had a more contact-heavy timetable found that they studied at home at evenings and weekends. The next biggest impact was made by what hours a student spent in part-time employment. For instance, some students had classes almost all day and then worked a few days per week. This meant that the majority of their core study time was based at weekends, which gave little time for socialising or relaxing. Others studied during weekdays to allow time for employment at weekends. Some of the major aspects valued in self-directed study spaces included being quiet, well-lit, spacious and having easy access to computer equipment as well as refreshments.

The discussion surrounding the rating of 'directed learning' spaces over spilled into the panel discussion with Prof. Kenny Miller and Prof. Philip Winn. Within it, most students agreed that the basic needs were met within the current facilities. However, this was not good enough to cope with modern usage or teaching methods. For example, some students had experienced tutorials taking place in lecture halls. The atmosphere was good, but the layout of the room was too rigid to be useful. Modern teaching spaces need to have more light and be more flexible to meet increased and varied usage.

There was also discussion surrounding the equipment in lecture theatres. Some were of a very high quality, whilst others needed to be replaced. There was an acceptance that there was a phased plan of replacement, but there needed to be a minimum standard or quality and consistency. There was also concern over training for staff. Some lecture halls had recently been fitted with new equipment, but none of the lecturers knew how to use them properly, leading to delays to teaching and general frustration of both staff and students.

Overall, there was agreement that needs were being met, but for a university which aimed to be "the MIT of Scotland", serious investment and development would be needed to come anywhere near to meeting expectations.

From my experience the *directed* learning spaces at Strathclyde are:

- a. Beyond my expectations - 0%
- b. Adequate, but could be improved - 75%
- c. Below my expectations - 15%
- d. Inadequate - 10%

From my experience the *self-directed* learning spaces at Strathclyde are:

- a. Beyond my expectations - 2%
- b. Adequate, but could be improved - 54%
- c. Below my expectations - 36%
- d. Inadequate - 8%

### Topic 3 - Responding to Student Needs

1. What has been your experience of the Support Services provided by the University? Have they met your expectations and why? How best can the University deliver your support needs for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? (e.g. do you value one-to-one support, group or peer support, or access to information/online interactive support the most?)
2. What has been your experience of academic-related advice at Strathclyde? Has the advisor of study /academic counsellor system help you make informed choices about your degree programme or personal development and why?
3. How well have you been supported in terms of academic skills development at Strathclyde? (e.g. developing essay/report writing skills; plagiarism/referencing advice; researching skills, etc.) Have you ever made use of the subject specific support, such as the Maths or English Centres? Does this provide a good model for the future?

The majority of student reps were made aware of their academic advisor/advisor of studies at an early stage, but never really developed a relationship with them after that. This meant that most students discussed issues directly with their lecturers and never had any contact with their original academic advisor again. As with a lot of the discussions through this Congress and last year's, many issues boiled down to inconsistency between faculties and departments. Simple things like terminology confused students as it was different from faculty to faculty and this presented immediate barriers for students.

There was also inconsistency in terms of the quality of advice given by advisors and questions were raised as to what type of training was given to staff to ensure everyone had the same level of knowledge. There was also an issue regarding some advisors being from a different subject area than the student they are meant to be advising, meaning that they could only help in general terms and had to pass the students on to other staff for specific advice.

However, it must be pointed out that not all experiences were negative and many students seemed to value the advisor system - especially students who had changed courses or modes of study.

For non-academic related advice, students felt that some services were better advertised than others. For instance most students had come into contact with the Careers Service as they had an involvement in their course, but were unaware of other support services available unless they were specifically sought out. Most of the student reps had not had personal experience with support departments, but felt that most people they knew who had used them, generally had a positive experience. There was confusion over which support service to use and felt that everyone in support roles (be they academic or non-academic) should have the level of knowledge to act as a sign-post for other support departments. USSA's ASK department was given as an example of best practice in this instance as they had a

high level of knowledge and were able to direct students to the relevant University support department quickly if needed.

One-to-one and peer support were viewed as valuable aspects of support needs, however, this was not currently the case in most student reps experiences. Most students present said that if they had a problem, they would most likely talk to friends, a lecturer they knew well or the Students' Association in the first instance as they would not necessarily know which support department to approach. Before approaching someone in person for support, representatives felt that most students would turn to websites (University or USSA) for information.

In terms of academic skills development, again, the experiences ranged from department to department. Some had went through entire modules in their first year, whilst others had sought help through CAPLE and some had never had any specific support in this area. It was widely agreed that this sort of support and development was useful and should be a focus for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Not many students had had the opportunity to make use of specific study centres, however, those who had done felt that they were extremely useful for their personal development, giving focussed support on the specific discipline. This was particularly relevant for students who had entered into University directly from school as the style and type of reports/essays differed greatly in their degree course in comparison to school. Particular attention should be focused on advice on plagiarism as well as adequate continual feedback on submitted coursework.

In my experience, the student support services at Strathclyde:

- a. Meet my needs - 36%
- b. Go some of the way to meeting my needs, but could be improved - 54%
- c. Do not meet my needs - 10%