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Social life high on wish list

Rebecca Attwood

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Students value good extracurricular activities just as much as high academic standards. Rebecca Attwood reports.

A good social life and extracurricular activities rank alongside teaching quality when it comes to the factors students consider most central to their university experience, The *Times Higher's* annual student survey reveals.

Many of the attributes that students cited as being most key to their university experience were related to academic study, including a well- equipped library, a good relationship with teaching staff and a fair workload.

But when Opinionpanel Research examined which factors actually correlated to students' decisions to recommend their university, it found that the "soft" and social aspects of student life were valued far more highly than expected.

While "high-quality staff/lectures" scored highly, so did "good community atmosphere", "personal requirements catered for", "good environment on campus" and a "good social life".

Shirley Pearce, vice-chancellor of Loughborough University, which topped the table, said Loughborough achieved its success on both academic and non-academic grounds.

"We are over the moon," she said. "In my view, this is a consequence of the environment that our staff work so hard to create at Loughborough.

"In terms of both academic and non-academic aspects, we have a first-rate campus, and whether it is academic staff, estates, catering, gardening or support staff, we have fantastic teams with a real commitment to excellence. We also have an excellent students union we work very closely with."

Cambridge University claims second place, with high scores in academic areas, including personal relationships with teaching staff and small group tuition. It also scores highly on extracurricular activities and societies, accommodation and community atmosphere.

Mark Fletcher, president of Cambridge University Students' Union, credited the collegiate environment. He said: "There is a real community feel."

"Having 500 people living and working in the same place makes people feel very attached to their college. There are also hundreds of societies, so there's something for everyone. Students really enjoy their time here and the fact so many would recommend the university to a friend is encouraging."

In third place is Glasgow University. Mhari Wilson, president of Glasgow's Students' Representative Council, said: "I am not surprised Glasgow scored highly.

"There is so much to do on campus and over 90 clubs and societies. I think students recognise that extracurricular activities are not just about what you get out of it but are good for your CV.

"There is a strong sense of community here - it is a really positive place to be."

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* The data in the final column were not used in the final analysis. They were used at a national level only in a correlation analysis to help determine the relative importance of

the 21 attributes measured.

Methodology for The Times Higher's student experience survey

The Times Higher commissioned this poll of full time undergraduate students from Opinionpanel Research. Respondents were members of The Student Panel – Opinionpanel's proprietary research platform for undertaking independent quantitative research.

Polling took place throughout the 2006/07 academic year, covering students in all year groups at nearly every higher education institute in the UK. Panel members were prevented from contributing to the survey more than once during the year. More than 22,000 students took part in the survey.

The survey data were analysed only for institutions with 30 or more participants – a total of 106 institutions. On average, institutions received 206 ratings each. The results presented here are for the 50 highest rated institutions. We acknowledge that the differences between institutions seen here are largely statistically insignificant. The Times Higher sees these ratings as a celebration of best practice in the sector. The institution ranked first – Loughborough University – was named winner of the *Times Higher's* Best Student Experience Award for 2007.

Students were asked how strongly they agreed that each of 21 attributes applied to their university, on a scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). The table shows the average score for each institution on each attribute.

The Overall Score for each institution (with a maximum achievable of 10.5) was calculated as follows. The 21 attributes were divided into three categories of relative importance, as measured by association with a scale of overall satisfaction (the extent to which the respondent agreed that they would recommend their university to a friend). The institution's average score for the nine "most important" attributes was multiplied by a factor of two. The average score for the five "fairly important" attributes was multiplied by 1.5. That for the seven "least important" attributes was not increased. The three weighted category averages were then averaged to yield the Overall Score.

We are interested in developing and refining our use of correlation analysis to determine attribute weights. In a recent brief review of our approach we noted that students at differing institutions place varying levels of importance to each of the attributes measured when correlated against the 'output' measure of recommending their university to a friend. As such, we intend to conduct a full and comprehensive review of our methods of calculation and attribute-weighting before the release of the 2007/08 student experience tables. I would welcome your comments.

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SHEFFIELD SHINES: GREAT COMMUNITY, GREAT LOCATION

It seems there are plenty of reasons for students to like Sheffield, a city with a "village-like" atmosphere and the Peak District on its doorstep.

So it is perhaps not surprising that Sheffield University appears in the top ten of the Times Higher's student satisfaction league table.

Students rated its student union joint number one with Loughborough University's, while social life, community atmosphere, extracurricular activities and societies, and the university environment at Sheffield also scored highly.

Mark Willoughby, president of the university's students union, said: "Sheffield is a great city as a whole. It has got a real village-like atmosphere.

"The Peak District is very close by - it takes just 15 minutes to get into the countryside."

He said the university's popularity was reflected in the fact that the university has the country's highest rate of students staying on in the city after completing their studies.

Sheffield's student union was recently named Students' Union of the Year by the sports, social and private members' club trade magazine Club Mirror.

The union also runs an award-winning volunteering programme and has an impressive 212 societies - one of the highest numbers in the country.

In a recent internal student satisfaction survey, 95 per cent of students said the union had added value to their life.

Mr Willoughby said: "Because we are a city university, the union becomes a great focal point.

"We have the highest annual turnover of any student union in the country at £11 million a year and we have a very good relationship with the university - it is very supportive of our work."

Rebecca Attwood

MAKING FIRST YEAR MORE FUN BOOSTS RETENTION

Teaching staff should consider inverting the curriculum to get first-year students engaged and to improve course retention rates.

The suggestion was made last week by Brenda Smith, assistant director of the Higher Education Academy, at a conference on the student experience hosted by the 1994 Group.

Leading a seminar on assessment, Professor Smith said: "I think we should put our best teachers and give the most feedback in Year One, because the evidence is that if students get to the end of Year One they will stay.

"Some institutions leave professors to the third year and do all the boring stuff in Year One. Why don't we invert the curriculum, as one computing professor did in Wales?"

"He said: 'OK, build a computer. We will provide the materials and if you want to buy it that's fine, but there's no pressure to do so'.

"So they built the computers in teams, and then they started taking out the components and asked: 'What does this do? How does this fit in?' and the retention that year shot up.

"We often save the most exciting things ... to the third year," Professor Smith said.

The seminar also invited academics to consider how to improve the delivery of feedback.

Professor Smith said: "Why does induction have to be in the first year? What about the second year? What about three months into the first year? What about the third year?"

"Students tell me: 'I don't know what the difference is between a Level 2 and a Level 3 assignment because no one's told me. But suddenly my grades have gone down in the third year. What are the differences in those standards?'"

Arguing that appropriate feedback and assessment is a vital but sometimes overlooked component of successful teaching, she said: "If we get assessment right, we can get learning right."

John Gill.

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