Communication Ambassadors in Fife – communicating the merger to students

**Outline of Development**

Focus groups were held early on in the merger process to find out what students’ views on the merger were, but these had low attendance. The Colleges wanted to consult with students on the merger process so the Students’ Associations at the two colleges proposed that they manage the process of gathering views to feed into a wider consultation. They proposed employing a team of students to act as Ambassadors to go out and talk to students to gather their views.

The Communication Ambassadors Scheme had two aims:

* To share information on the merger with students;
* To gather students views on the merger.

The work had a very quick turnaround time due to time constraints: it was the last term of the year and there was a very short amount of time to set up the Scheme. The Students’ Association prepared a paper outlining the Communication Ambassador Scheme, its purpose and how it would work, with costings. This had to be approved by both College Boards as funding had to be made available. While the Colleges agreed to fund the Scheme, as a merger project, the costs were set against future Transitional Fund money. Funding of £3000 was committed, enough for eight Ambassadors to work for four hours per week for twelve weeks plus associated costs (photocopying and travel mainly). A job description for the Communication Ambassador was prepared by Partnerships for Change, and each Students’ Association was responsible for recruitment and selection and applicants had to apply for and be interviewed for the role. In addition, all successful applicants were required to be CRB checked.

Once recruited, students underwent training to support them in their role which consisted of 3 key elements:

* What is happening during the merger – dispelling myths and creating knowledge
* Communication skills and how to start conversations
* What information is needed – key aspects of the learning experience.

The training lasted two and a half hours and was supported by a workbook, consultation resources and merger information leaflets.

From inception to the Communication Ambassadors being equipped to carry out their role took around 6 weeks.

All conversations were required to be recorded by the Ambassadors to provide mainly qualitative data, but also some quantitative data. Over a period of 12 weeks, the Communication Ambassadors visited all the Colleges’ campuses, speaking to a vast array of students from all courses and levels. An excess of 700 conversations resulted in information

needing to be recorded which suggests the Ambassadors spoke to many more students than this. They were also approached by staff to provide information. The consultation report was able to identify some significant key issues raised by the students, but also possible changes and solutions highlighted by them.

Generally, considering how quickly the project was developed and implemented, the Communication Ambassador Scheme was a success. They generated massive amounts of information for the Colleges, raised awareness of merger with a large number of students and enjoyed the whole process. It is important to provide training for Ambassadors and supporting materials to ensure consistency in information gathered.

Neither Students’ Associations had staff support able to manage the Ambassadors so they were line-managed by the Student Presidents as an interim measure in order to retain student control over the project. This is far from ideal and raised concerns with the Presidents over capacity and appropriateness of management structures. There was not time to debrief the Communication Ambassadors at the end of their contracts as it was the end of the term. Ideally an exit interview or focus group should be built in to discuss how they felt about the whole experience and any views and opinions they might have developed based on the information they gathered. It would be possible to use the Ambassadors in a more critical manner at this point, to analyse some of the information to ensure it the final report truly reflects students’ views.

The final report was written by Partnerships for Change but required additional resources to collate and filter the information. Colleges need to provide staff support to collate and filter the information and to write the report, under the supervision of the Students’ Association.

Contact

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