

SCHUMACHER COLLEGE

QAA REVIEW

STUDENT SUBMISSION REPORT



Introduction

Schumacher College hosts a relatively small number of postgraduate students, ranging between 35 and 50 in any given year. For the academic year 2015-2016, the three postgraduate programmes were staggered, which posed some challenges to collecting student data. Two began in September, 2015: MA in Economics for Transition and MSc in Holistic Science. In January, 2016, the third began: MA in Ecological Design Thinking. Given the small size of the student body, gathering student views took place both formally and

informally in conversation. One challenge was that each Master's programme includes a five-month non-residential period at the end, during which dissertations are researched and written. Nevertheless, two formal focus groups were held in the spring, with five students present in each--representing the three programmes. We also conducted an online survey available to all students, with several reminders to all to participate. Fifty percent of the postgraduate students chose to participate in the online survey. Amy Seefeldt prepared and authored the student submission, based on the data collected through participating in the regular Postgraduate Programme Group, the Postgraduate Committee meetings, the two Focus Groups, and the online survey, which consisted of four composite questions corresponding to each of the four areas reviewed by the QAA (Academic Standards, Learning Opportunities, Enhancement, and Public Information). The survey utilised the exact question language suggested in the QAA lead student rep guide. Amy is a participant in the MA in Ecological Design Thinking programme. She began the programme in January, 2016 and will complete in December.

Student representative body

Since the student body at Schumacher is so small, we have a single student representative for the QAA Review process. In addition, each postgraduate programme has one or two student representatives who sit on the Postgraduate Programme Group (which consists of the coordinators of each postgraduate programme, the head of the college, senior lecturers, and the postgraduate programme administrator. The committee is chaired by the Postgraduate Quality Coordinator/Administrator), which meets bi-weekly, as well as the Postgraduate Committee and the Joint Board of Studies. The atmosphere at the college is both warm and open and this extends to the postgraduate programme groups, where students regularly bring their suggestions and concerns, along with affirmations for what is working well at the college. The student representatives serve as a channel for any and all suggestions for improvement, from wi-fi connectivity and newspaper subscriptions to suggesting the possibility of cross-programme projects and portfolio assessment. Participation in the focus groups was enthusiastic and free. Participation in the online survey, frankly, was a little harder to solicit, but the 50% of the student body who participated did so thoroughly, offering substantive observations and comments in response to the questions. Since the student body is so transient and the 2015-2016 cohort is now dispersed around

the world, the submission has not been democratically approved by the student body, though it has been made available.

How effectively has the college addressed the recommendations of its last review?

For any postgraduate student at Schumacher, this would be difficult to say. Students are resident at the college for only seven months in any of the postgraduate programmes. What is clear to students is that the college is committed to improvement. At each Postgraduate Committee meeting, reports are presented of actions the college has taken in response to suggestions from students, staff, or Plymouth University, the degree-awarding body of Schumacher College. In particular, more than half of the responses to the student survey note a push from the Postgraduate Quality Coordinator and Administrator to implement a greater degree of rigor, professionalism and adherence to procedural best practice throughout the college, despite its small size and 'family atmosphere'.

How effectively does the college set and maintain the threshold standards of its academic awards?

ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Student views on the academic standards are mixed, but positive overall, with strong praise for the innovative thought encouraged at Schumacher College and a clear desire for a more innovative approach to assessment that would better align with the kind of radical thinking they are expected to demonstrate and cultivate.

Some clear patterns around academic standards emerged through the survey, in particular. Students almost universally acknowledged their awareness of the college rules on plagiarism. Half of the respondents said they had access to external examiner reports. Nine of the fifteen respondents commented that the feedback after an assignment was thorough, timely and helpful, though three students explicitly mentioned that they found the criteria given before an assignment confusing. Two students commented on the variance of feedback between instructors.

Worthy of noting, five students commented on the conventional nature of assessment as being at odds with the spirit of the college. One student put this succinctly: "In essence what I am trying to

say is that Schumacher College has a spirit of radical thinking, exploration of new ideas and openness to do work in unconventional ways but through the feedback and the grading it is incentivising a more conventional approach to academics." Another student said, "Out of frustration I decided to work much less on my assignments, play safe with the subjects...I got much better grading but it made me feel sad."

While that perspective on assessment could be seen as a problem, the more encouraging side of this is that half of the survey respondents and all of the focus group participants commented on the way that Schumacher elicits and welcomes student input in meaningfully contributing to articulating the path forward for the college. Rather than negatively criticising, students expect to help shape the college and its programme. Students recognise this environment as healthy. One student said, "Schumacher always asks us to give feedback on the programmes, so they can improve it more and more." Another said, "I saw a lot of input from students in programme design." Students in the focus groups commented particularly on the way that the head of the college makes himself available to hear student ideas for new programmes or improvements on existing programmes in times set aside for discussion and, informally, over meals at the college.

On the question of whether or not assessment grows more challenging as programmes progress, the verdict was thoroughly mixed. Students mentioned that different assignments may be set and marked by different instructors/lecturers, depending on the module. Each has his or her own style, which can be both beneficial and frustrating. Some mentioned the need to adjust from grading systems in other countries--a common theme, as Schumacher hosts many international students. One student said, "The assessment criteria seemed to be more or less equal in my experience throughout the course but they were fair and appropriate in the tension between scientific rigor, personal experience and artistic expression."

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

In general, students place a high degree of confidence in the staff of Schumacher College and respect their training, continuing research, and sensitive facilitation of courses. One point worth mentioning is that one third of the survey respondents spoke of the unique opportunity at Schumacher to engage with staff personally through the daily meals shared by the whole community. Several students in the focus groups talked about the privilege of being able to raise questions around the lunch table if time did not permit in class sessions. Through these informal conversations, students also spoke of learning about staff research interests and continuing projects.

Given the high proportion of Schumacher students who are international, it should not be surprising that six students explicitly mentioned how they felt welcomed and cared for, though one student also said that more language support would have been helpful. Another mentioned that he or she would like to have a “more organised online database.”

As a case study of the college’s responsiveness, in the MA in Ecological Design Thinking programme (running for only the second year), the order of the three taught, theoretical modules was switched around as a result of student feedback and their length and content was altered. The balance shifted from direct instruction, to direct instruction plus more hands-on practical exercises and the students in the second cohort expressed great satisfaction with the outcome.

Several students mentioned a vague sense that there was a student charter of mutual expectations being drafted, but none had details or knew of its content. Over the course of the academic year, several efforts were made by the college to encourage students to draft such a document for themselves, but in the focus groups, students did not express much interest, possibly because of the short duration of their residency at the college (seven months).

On the whole, students are very satisfied with learning opportunities at Schumacher College, including the embedded discussions of employability and entrepreneurship that take place throughout the courses. The only critiques offered included a desire that, “...the staff could be less siloed and more coherent and cohesive” and that there be more support in terms of “translating aspirations into action”.

ENHANCEMENT

Students in both the focus groups and the survey unanimously agree that the college not only listens to student voices but goes as far as actively eliciting a continuous stream of feedback and working together to codesign the future of the college through online forms and through in-depth discussions during and after each module. One student put it like this: “The modules are dynamically co-designed and re-shaped every year, something that I really valued. In my last educational institution, these spaces were constricted to an online form, and we all filled them up isolated from the others. It is so much better how we did it in Schumacher, being all present, face to face and allowing the ideas of others to cross-pollinate each other, creating real value for future

generations."Students openly and enthusiastically praise the ethos of continual improvement, in particular through the dedication and work of the postgraduate programme quality control coordinator and the postgraduate programme administrator.

PUBLIC INFORMATION

Of the four areas explored in this student submission, the area of public information identifies the most potential action steps for improvement. In particular, students name increased language support and greater ease of access to recordings of lectures as the top steps the college could take to better support student learning. Perhaps these are not surprising suggestions, given the college's high percentage of international students. Some students did acknowledge their awareness of language support available through Plymouth University but complained that it was both complicated and time-consuming to avail of the help there, making access prohibitive. About the college website, students commented universally that it was functional and included all necessary information, but the majority also noted that the actual lived flavor of the college was difficult to experience or understand from the website. Suggestions were made of adding a few more short videos to capture and better communicate life at the college to prospective students. A few students also mentioned that the new establishment of a worldwide Schumacher network promised to improve the flow of information about Schumacher out into a greater audience and therefore, hopefully, improve the flow of students to Schumacher College. Several students commented that it was contact with former students that really helped them understand Schumacher and desire to participate as a student.

Theme: Employability

The impact of a Schumacher education is apparent in student responses to questions about employability. Most students (two thirds) both directly challenged the notion that education is primarily about preparing for a job AND commented that they felt prepared to find or create not only a job but a livelihood. One commented, "I feel much stronger, hopeful, prepared and with new eyes to go out there to the world as a change maker, most likely as an entrepreneur." Another said, "I am totally inspired and ready to enhance my own company." A third and very representative remark was, "I don't think the role of education is merely to train people for jobs. Schumacher helps people see the world in a radically different way which can help them excel in

any career choice. As an employer, I would look favourably towards people that had gone through the Schumacher experience, regardless of specific skills. That said, I think there are jobs that it can prepare you for. I feel that the experience has helped my career as a futurist, especially the philosophy of science." Students seem engaged primarily in redefining both education and employability.

Conclusion

Listening to the students in focus groups and reading their comments through the online survey, one striking pattern emerges, that Schumacher students possess a profound affection for the college and a deep commitment to its future success. These are engendered by the distinctive quality of the teaching-learning relationships students forge through experiences in the classroom, in nature, and around the table at meals. Over and over, student comments refer to the personal and individual quality of their learning experience. By no means do students see the college as perfect. Their suggestions for improvement are both precise and shared quite commonly across the three programmes. From all the comments and observations made by students, three clear recommendations emerge from the students to the college:

1. That there be a greater degree of communication and collaboration across the postgraduate programmes, so that opportunities for joint learning might be found and meaningfully developed.
2. That the bureaucratic processes in the college, particularly around (ironically!) the collection of feedback, be streamlined so that students could participate meaningfully.
3. That innovative forms of assessment and feedback be more actively incorporated into the approach to learning and teaching, so that these processes would better align with the underlying, paradigm-shifting ethos and approach of the college.

This submission has been shared online with students.