

## **UEASU and the UEA Student Charter**

### **Purpose of Paper**

On the Student Charter item in July we submitted as follows:

- Whilst we recognise that the standard timetable for review of charter means a formal review is some way off, we believe the document to be so little use in its present form that we cannot support its continued publication in its present form (and would want references to joint development with the SU and SU Officer photos associated with it to be removed from the University website).
- We would therefore in addition argue that the main joint review of the document be brought forward to 2016-17.

We were not present for the meeting but the minutes record as follows:

- Resolved: that UEASU representatives should produce a clearly articulated case for bringing the review of the Charter forward which would then be considered by LTC.

This paper delivers on that suggestion.

### **Background**

“The University of East Anglia’s commitment to providing an exceptional student experience depends upon a dynamic and effective partnership between its staff and students. Our Student Charter outlines the nature of this relationship by setting out what you as a student can expect from the University and, in turn, what is expected of you.”

UEA Student Charter, p1.

Anecdotal evidence shared by student officers last year UEASU suggested that awareness of the UEA student charter is very low amongst the student body. In a survey of 100 student staff carried out in late Sep/early Oct, only 3 students indicated that they were aware that the Charter existed at all.

With that in mind, the outgoing Education Officers were keen to review not only the content of the charter, but to test whether the content is situated within a broader strategy that is ‘lived out’ and seen through both how UEA is managed, organised and perceived by the staff and students that constitute the current UEA community.

This firstly required testing the assumptions that the charter in its current form is not recognised as reflecting the reality of the experiences of staff and students – that the ‘dynamic and effective partnership’ the charter states as fact needs attention; but that furthermore recognition of the charter itself is not widely embedded.

As a result TSEP, the Student Engagement Partnership, was engaged to conduct two workshops in May/June to test these assumptions using a randomly selected group of staff and students.

The second aim was to test the concept that the very methodology of creating and ‘living’ a student charter should be revisited and that potentially taking another approach would not only produce different results in terms of the content of the final document but also build a strategy around how the

document would be used strategically in an ongoing 'cycle of partnership' to embed enhancements and challenge those areas of the University community where a culture of partnership is not currently exhibited.

TSEP's report is attached.

## **The UEA Charter**

The UEA Charter is mentioned in the BIS student charter working group report of 2011, and in 2015 that same working group produced a new report reviewing the progress of student charters such as UEA's which were 'early adopters' of the approach. The report rightly draws attention to a need to re-evaluate the whole approach given the shifting context of HE in the intervening years, where fees have increased to £9000 a year, the sector has further diversified along with the demography of student populations.

Furthermore in the QAA commissioned report from the University of Bath: Student Engagement in Learning and Teaching Quality Management: A Study of UK Practices - Research Findings (Pimentel Botas et al. 2013) concern was expressed about whether student charters in the form of those typically found at institutions who adopted them in the mid/late-2000s were having a 'meaningful influence on the learning environment'. It is worth pointing out that a number of other similar organisations have approached TSEP around the same concerns and that there are clearly some cross sector, thematic reasons for the perceived weaknesses of student charters.

*"For a student charter or partnership agreement to lead to tangible enhancements to the learning environment, account must be taken of the full cycle of production, dissemination/ enactment and review. At the stage of producing and agreeing the student charter the expectations should be in alignment with what is known about student success and be derived from open dialogue between students and institutional staff about values and behaviours in their shared learning community."*

The piece of work which we initiated with TSEP is based around work which they conducted with other Universities and Students' Unions looking at and reviewing their student charters and is very much in line with recommendations that are outlined in the BIS Framework for Partnership document.

## **Conclusions**

- The TSEP report supports our assumptions that the Charter should be reviewed and provides a framework approach for doing so
- Both staff and students expressed the sentiment that they felt the administrative 'centre' of the university was somewhat distant from their everyday experience
- Staff and students felt that statements on student engagement encompassed in the current charter were not reflective of the reality of their every day experience at UEA
- A particular reflection of the staff was to query who the charter was meant to be an agreement between, because the use of 'the university' and 'students', misses out the fact that the staff community at UEA feel disengaged themselves from decision and policy making processes
- When tested on this concept, students were in agreement and the notion of whether a 'whole UEA' charter might be a more interesting approach

We are promoting TSEP's central recommendation that a working group is established containing both Union and University staff to guide the process of Charter review in the next year, as a partnership approach to the entire process is important in order to ensure an end result that is widely recognised and valued.

Theo and Maddie  
SU Education Officers 2016-17