

Case Study of a Student Conference in Animal Nutrition

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1. Proposal

Title of the project: Case Study of a Student Conference on Animal Nutrition

Location: Department of Agriculture, University of Newcastle, NE1 7RU, England

Project Leader: Dr Olivier Sparagano (Lecturer in Animal Production Sciences)

**Team Members: Dr Alan Younger (Head of Department of Agriculture)
Dr Peter Rowlinson (Sub-Dean for undergraduate students and module leader)
Professor Sandra Edwards (Chair of Agriculture)
Dr Abdul Chaudhry (Research Associate on Animal Nutrition)**

This project will enhance the communication and learning skills of our Final Year students (Stage 3) within the Faculty of Agriculture and Biological Sciences by requiring them to organise a conference on topics related to their BSc programme. It is often the case that students attend conferences to present short talks, but they rarely have any involvement (or organisational tasks) with conference preparation.

Our aim is to evaluate a student-organised conference event on an educational basis.

A case study of this event will be developed by

- (1) Assessing the students' feelings about this event by sending them questionnaires at the start, halfway through and on the day of the event;
- (2) Assessing the event impact from participants attending the conference (for instance organising and non-organising students, academics, and guest speakers);
- (3) Evaluating the benefits for the students and the academic staff members involved in this project;
- (4) evaluating the impact that this event got on our local community (within the University and in Northeast England) and
- (5) evaluating the organisational workload needed to realise this event (working time used by staff members and students for instance).

This new teaching and learning approach for the Education Community would help other member of the LTSN community in preparing similar events. This case study will be available on the LTSN web-site and the copyright of such material would be made available to the LTSN Network granting us permission to publish the results.

If successful, the grant of £1,000 awarded by the LTSN will help us to invite external guest speakers and pay for their trips, for advertising the conference and printing the proceedings, scientific programmes, flyers, preparing evaluation questionnaires (at different stages of the event preparation) and if possible publishing the project outputs in educational journals.

We foresee the following timetable:

September 2001:

Result regarding our grant application;

September/October:

Organisation of student working groups (scientific programme, media, editing...), discussion on the two half-day sessions to be organised and questionnaire 1 given to organising and non-organising students.

October – December:

- Contact potential guest speakers
- Preparation of the scientific programme (The students are also deciding what specific topics they want to present at the conference)
- Conference room/equipment booking
- Preparation of programmes and flyers
- Evaluation of Questionnaire 1 before preparing Questionnaire 2 given in January 2002

January-March 2002:

- Preparation of abstracts and conference proceedings
- Advertisement to local Press and contact with local community leaders
- Invitation of the guest speakers, industrials and community leaders for the round tables
- Questionnaire 2 given to staff members, organising and non-organising students.

March-April:

- One-day conference on Animal Nutrition organised at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. (Suggested date: Wednesday April 24th, 2002)
- Evaluation of Questionnaire 2 before preparing Questionnaire 3
- Questionnaire 3 given to staff members, conference participants, organising and non-organising students.

May-June:

Printing of the Conference proceedings

- LTSN given proceedings (available on our Departmental web-site as well) and information on expenditures (if requested).
- Evaluation of Questionnaire 3 and writing conclusions of the case study (time spent by staff members and students will be recorded on a monthly basis).

We hope that the LTSN will see the novelty of such approach and the beneficial not only to our students to be confronted at this stage with academic and non-academic professionals to learn different communication skills but also to the Bioscience Community.

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2. Report on original aims

2.1. Assessing the students' feelings about this event by sending them questionnaires at the start, halfway through and on the day of the event

As planned, three questionnaires were given to the students following this module in October 2001, January 2001 and May 2002 (the conference was organised by the students on April 24th, 2002). The first questionnaire was also sent to students from Year 1, 2 and 3 not following this module and to staff members either from the grant holder's department or from other Faculty departments (see separate questionnaires). Students' feelings were neutral at the beginning but were quite low at the time of the second questionnaire. It was exam time and their first set of letters to potential sponsors did not give any positive result. Students were more relaxed for the third questionnaire given after the conference.

2.2. Assessing the event impact from participants attending the conference (for instance organising and non-organising students, academics, and guest speakers)

People attending the conference were asked to give two marks to the students: one for the conference organisation and one for its scientific value. The two guest speakers gave a mark of 97.5 (out of 100) for the conference organisation and 62.5 for the scientific value showing their high appreciation of the students' work. Staff members from the University were also quite impressed as they gave on average 75 and 67 for the conference organisation and the scientific value, respectively. On the top of these marks the students were also peer-assessing each others (including themselves).

2.3. Evaluating the benefits for the students and the academic staff members involved in this project

The first benefit for 23 out of 26 students would have been to pass this assessment with a majority of first and 2.1 marks. Therefore it seems the exercise, on a strict summative value, was worthwhile. Some benefits will also be generated for the students taking this assessment next year as we will improve the evaluation system and avoid some pitfalls mentioned in this report. The students also realised that this assessment was important for valorising their own CVs, a few months before looking for a first job.

The other positive impact was that another funding organisation decided to sponsor this conference for another five years. Furthermore, following this case-study my Head of School asked me to join an Undergraduate Teaching Committee, showing that this new curriculum activity has been noticed.

2.4. Evaluating the impact that this event had on our local community (within the University and in Northeast England)

Usually young colleagues were interested about this new teaching approach while the majority of senior colleagues did not discuss the outcomes from this LTSN-funded project. As the students decided not to advertise outside our University this conference we only received feedback from two external speakers. As the students did not want to invite the media or external professionals there was really little impact on the Northeast England community. Hence, it seems it could take a few years before this conference become public and known by our local community.

2.5. Evaluating the organisational workload needed to realise this event (working time used by staff members and students for instance)

Surprisingly, the workload for the module leader and myself was minimal as it was the students decision to invite us or not to their weekly meeting. The students always sent me the minutes of their weekly meeting to keep me informed of their progress (or quite often of their non-decision progress). Furthermore the students had to prepare the programme, room and catering booking and deal with the guest speakers (who I met only on the day of the conference). Hence, the workload was far less than a traditional teaching module. The students almost never contacted the three other staff members who were available to help the students.

3. Synthesis on the project outcomes

The first questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was sent to Level 1, 2 and 3 students. Level 2 and 3 students, obviously had already some ideas about what to do whereas Level 1 students (after working only for a few weeks at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne) were more interested in organising coffee breaks or the bar during the conference, instead of asking for some scientific responsibilities. Level 1 and 2 students were highly supportive of this new assessment with a 69.6% and 69.2% support, respectively, while stage 3 students gave only a 56.0% mark for this kind of assessment. However in this latter group 28% of the students

could not decide if it was a good idea or not to develop this new curriculum activity, whilst stages 1 and 2 students were undecided only for 4.3% and 7.7%, respectively. The stage 3 students following the module were disappointed that the marks given for the case-study would represent only 20% of the module marks. Given the workload associated with the conference organisation the students expected to see a heavier weighting for this component of the module assessment. Three students failed the assessment, 23 out of 26 feedback sheets from the students agreed on this failure while, not surprisingly, the three failed students gave themselves higher marks. At least one of the three failed students admitted that she did not work enough.

Interestingly I found a lot of support from non-academic departments in your University and from outside (from the LTSN for instance). Thanks to this LTSN funding and its first outcomes (see LTSN article from Emma Clamp) I got another teaching grant from another source to support this teaching approach for another five years.

4. Final recommendations

Colleagues who are interested in developing such a teaching module should go ahead even if other colleagues are not very supportive. However, I suggest that anybody going this route gets as much independence as possible to avoid being forced to take on board people who do not support your ideas until it works. You need also to obtain advance clearance at the Faculty Teaching committee level and may need to convince Degree Programme Directors (DPDs) that your new modules should be in their books for next year. So the highest workload was in fact associated with convincing and negotiating with other colleagues to accept this new teaching assessment.

It seems that in this instance we may have given the students too much freedom (even they complained about it) and this proved counter-productive with the students sometimes taking weeks to reach agreement. As agriculture students they did not know how to attract sponsors. Therefore I would advise colleagues developing similar learning exercises to step in on a regular basis to avoid these pitfalls.