Student Support Initiative Award 2017

1. Outline the project of initiative and what makes it innovative and inspiring.

Understanding and applying for funding is often fraught with difficulty for students for a variety of reasons. For some it is simply that they have had very little experience of managing their finances, something their parents / families have always taken care of, but for others it may be that they are moving away from home for the first time, are coming from a care experienced background, are carers for family members or face other challenges. The Admissions and Student Funding Team have become increasingly aware over the last 2 or 3 years that whilst they might be meeting the basic needs of students, there was more that they could do to improve –

* The pre-course information provided to students concerning their funding
* The level of support available to students in the lead up to the start of their course to support them with their funding application
* The level of support available in an ongoing basis, especially in terms of fulfilling the attendance and academic progress requirements to ensure that their funding remained in place.

A number of specific issues / changes encouraged the Admissions and Funding Team to take a fresh look at the way they interacted with students and how they could enhance the process for them whilst improving how the work was managed from their point of view.

The introduction of an online application process for funding in 2014 created challenges for both members of the funding team and students. The new system resulted in a “remote” application process where students were left relying on written information with little or no face to face support. Feedback from Student Focus Groups and Student Surveys was generally negative about the process and the information surrounding it. Issues with our funding processes were also picked up as part of our Education Scotland Review which suggested we need further consideration around the speed of funding application processing.

We were therefore aware that we wanted to make changes to the funding process for students from the pre-entry stage through to the processing of their application. We wanted to take a more innovative approach which put the student at the centre and provided support to them in a holistic way through each stage of their funding journey.

1. Detail how the project was delivered, from the planning stage through to its successful conclusion.

Initially the funding team considered –

* What needed fixed
* What could be fixed – not everything was in our control (have limitations in that online funding set up across partnership / funding guidelines set by Scottish Funding Council and not ourselves)
* How we could go beyond the ‘fixing’ stage and come up with an approach which was dynamic and provided holistic support to student, improved our processing rate / time for funding applications.
* What might realistically be achievable and in what timescale.

We began by carrying out some research to look at best practice across the sector. We considered the pre-course information which we provided to students prior to them submitting their application along with various policies and procedures that governed student attendance.

Whilst the online nature of the application process had created the feeling of “remoteness”, we looked at ways that we could improve communication to ensure that students had the information they needed to be able to make informed choices and how best to provide extra support to those who felt they needed it. We also considered how we could provide a face to face element of support within this process.

Based on our information gathering the team decided to implement a *range of initiatives* designed to overall support the improvement the funding process.

There has been a redesign of the information available to both FE and HE students including-

* A new Welcome to Inverness College booklet which includes high level information on funding to get individuals thinking about it at an early stage – this is sent out with all offers
* A new funding booklet with more detailed information across all funding options
* Postcards about each type of funding which are tailored according to student group
* A new Attendance and Absence guide for students – provided at induction
* Absence reporting cards detailing how to report an absence

As well as pre-course information we have also introduced -

* Use of text tools to text students to alert them if there’s a need to visit our Guidance Team when we can foresee problems with attendance/absence.
* Series of funding drop in surgeries over the summer and at the start of term (both for August and January start programmes) so that we can provide the face to face support which individuals desire and practical help in completing online applications
* For FE students we have introduced a new monitoring and tracking system which flags individuals to the PAT who have outstanding funding evidence
* Funding Officer provided a Q and A session at the Students Representatives Committee – helped to dispel some common myths and gave clarity around funding process
* Provided an input on funding at an all staff briefing to ensure staff were up to speed with high level info regarding attendance and funding, particularly important for PATs
* Track staff register marking to ensure funding is not blocked for individuals due to non-completion of a register. Introduced a new email alert when a register is not complete within 48 hours
* Introduced a fortnightly report on processing of funding to provide a regular overview of any backlogs occurring. Also helps us to keep a check on the balance of our discretionary funds and make decisions accordingly
* Tailored approach to funding / attendance for care experienced students and student carers

The Team have also developed an across college approach to resolving funding issues and now work closely with our Transitions Officer to ensure that Care Experience Students receive additional support when applying for and receiving funding. We also work with our Health and Wellbeing Officer and individual Student PAT’s enabling us to provide individual help and support to students on a case by case basis. The nature of this tailored approach is dynamic and ensures that the student is at the centre and receives the specialist support around funding which they require. This tailored approach has also meant that the funding team have been better placed to make discretionary decisions on funding and have benefited from the background knowledge of an individual which has come from our Health and Wellbeing Officer and / or our Transitions Officer.

Next steps – plenty of ongoing work to do – we will look critically at the success of the initial improvement projects we have initiated and how we can build on these going forward into new academic year. We plan to –

* Engage with student forums across college including face to face meetings to look in detail at what students feel problems with funding / attendance are
* Improve induction material for students and availability of funding staff members at induction
* Produce a short video to help students complete the funding application process – to be available on our website and on student induction site on blackboard
* From August ’17, introduce a fortnightly bursary payment, instead of monthly, in response to student feedback and to help individuals manage their money in an easier way
1. **Outline the projects outcomes within the institution and beyond with relevant supporting evidence or testimonial.**

**Processing Rates**

We have traditionally had a substantial number of students who have not completed the funding process. This was highlighted during our Education Scotland Review which was carried out in December 2015. At that point we had 145 outstanding applications for Funding. This was due to students being unaware of how to complete applications and due to the lack of clarity which they had around the whole process. This lack of clarity directly impacted on students taking the next step in terms of handing in their funding evidence and closing off the process. Following the initiatives which we have put in place we only had 8 students in Dec 2016 who had outstanding funding evidence.

We have had positive feedback from the Head of Student Services who is clear on the positive impact our initiatives have had on students -

*The initiatives which the team have put in place around funding to holistically improve the process have had a directly positive impact on the ability of our students completing their applications and closing them off / getting funding in place. Funding is such a critical part of the student journey and the team have looked at the entirety of the process, from pre-entry to frequency of funding runs, to ensure that the process is student led. We are delighted to also receive positive feedback from students on the changes which we have made as part of this improvement project –*

*My application was dealt with quickly and efficiently, I was able to commence learning with all my funding in place.*

*When I contacted funding they were very helpful.*

*The funding officers have been very helpful and assisted in helping me get SAAS funding quickly*

**Across College Partnership Working with Care Experienced Leavers**

We have also received positive feedback from other staff members including Barbara Brown our Transitions Officer -

*As transition coordinator at Inverness College UHI I support care experienced students and student carers. These students often have chaotic lives and can miss days in college as a result which can inevitably impact on bursary payments. These students rely heavily on their bursary, so having the support of the college to understand their situation is critical. The IC UHI Admissions and Funding Team have become a key link for me when liaising with students regarding their absences and authorised hours.*

*The team have individualised the support given to these students, working out plans to suit their situations that will cause as little disruption to their studies and bursary. The team are very understanding and support the students sensitively to ensure efficient resolution. If the team were not flexible and understanding of the individual situations of these students I have no doubt that they would have withdrawn or had more unnecessary stress added to their already busy stressful lives.*

*The admissions and funding team regularly update me when these students are approaching the authorised hours limit – this gives me the opportunity to contact the student and find out if there are any issues they have not spoken to me about that may be out with their control. This open communication with the team means I can support my students better and try to prevent problems quicker -* Barbara Brown *-* Transition Coordinator