Report of the ‘Leading academic engagement with students and students’ union’ project

Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LF) and University of Winchester

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

Over the last decade there has been a steady and considerable increase in focus on student engagement. Rather than rehearse the well versed arguments about whether student engagement is important or not – it clearly is – this project has sought to examine 4 leading models of student engagement to capture their strengths and benefits for the students involved.

With funding from the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE), this project was undertaken by the University of Winchester led by the Director of Learning & Teaching, Yaz El-Hakim and Honorary Research Fellow and former President of the National Union of Students (NUS), Aaron Porter. To oversee the project, a steering group was chaired by Professor Elizabeth Stuart, Senior Pro Vice Chancellor, University of Winchester with expert representatives drawn from across the sector. The members of the steering group were:

Professor Elizabeth Stuart (University of Winchester) - Chair
Dominic Doherty (Queens’ University Belfast Students’ Union)
Yaz El-Hakim (University of Winchester)
Julie Hall (Roehampton University)
Laura Holman (Anglia Ruskin Students’ Union)
Charlie Leyland (University of Exeter & University of Exeter Guild of Students)
Luke Millard (Birmingham City University)
Aaron Porter (University of Winchester)
Ellie Russell (National Union of Students)
Gwen van der Velden (University of Bath)

I would like to place on the record my sincere thanks to Professor Stuart and the members of the steering group for their insight, support and guidance, and to Debbie Mildenhall (University of Winchester) for servicing the steering group.

BACKGROUND

Whilst there has been a steady increase in the attention paid and activity undertaken in relation to student engagement over the last couple of decades, this has undoubtedly been accentuated by the introduction and subsequent increases in tuition fees for home/EU students.

As the funding has gradually shifted from the state to the individual for the cost of tuition, successive governments have sought to instigate initiatives to give students greater say over their experience. Notably in 2005, the introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS) has left an indelible imprint on the higher education landscape and has shaped institutional decision making to address the 22 (now 23) questions which the survey seeks student views on.

There have also been important initiatives to support students such as the guidance for institutional governors on university governing bodies working with their students’ union¹ from the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) and the National Union of Students (NUS) designed to support partnership working between governing bodies and students’ unions.

Previous work from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) has been important in pulling together research into student engagement and the provision of resources. In 2010, Professor Paul Trowler and Vicki Trowler undertook a significant review of research in this area and their findings are available online\(^2\). Funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the HEA have also worked jointly with NUS to develop a student engagement toolkit with a range of resources aimed at supporting and developing this agenda institutionally\(^3\).

The Quality Assurance Agency too have taken significant steps forward in advancing the student engagement agenda. The steady increase of student involvement at institutional level, notably through the introduction of the student written submission to feed into reviews, the increased focus of student engagement in the new Quality Code\(^4\), the QAA student advisory board (previously the sounding board) and student members of audit and review teams has changed the landscape of student engagement, and has helped to oversee a transformation in the ways institutions and students’ unions engage with this issue at all levels through the institution.

Nationally, successive governments have sought to place more focus on mechanisms for student engagement and the student voice too. Under the previous Labour government a National Student Forum was established along with student juries, but perhaps more welcome and indeed useful was the funding to develop the Students’ Union Evaluation Initiative (SUEI) which set out a framework for assessing quality and improvement in students’ unions, and helped to raise the bar of student leadership.

The coalition government took the student engagement agenda forward by placing an emphasis on increasing the information which current and prospective students can utilise, notably through the Key Information Sets (KiS) and also through the report on Student Charters\(^5\) co-chaired by Professor Janet Beer (Vice-Chancellor, Oxford Brookes University) and Aaron Porter (President, National Union of Students 2010–11) which recommended all HEIs introduce or update charters led jointly by the institution and the students’ union.

The controversial higher education White Paper, ‘Students at the heart of the system’\(^6\) (June 2011) set out a number of ways in which student engagement should be further prioritised by the Westminster Coalition, with a particular focus on more information being made available to prospective and current students. ‘Dimensions of Quality’\(^7\) a paper by Professor Graham Gibbs undertaken for the Higher Education Academy in September 2010 was widely cited in the white paper with his assessment of aspects that contributed strongly toward a high quality

\(^2\) HEA Student Engagement research, [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/studentengagement/Research_and_evidence_base_for_student_engagement](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/studentengagement/Research_and_evidence_base_for_student_engagement)


\(^4\) QAA Quality Code: [http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code/Pages/default.aspx)


learning and teaching experience.

More generally, the last decade or so has been an acknowledgement of a change in culture across higher education where student engagement is integral to most institutions. Examples such as the SU executive meeting with the Vice-Chancellor, staff-student committees in every department, students represented on all key university committees are no longer seem exceptional, but rather have become the minimum expectation.

The last few years has also seen a significant re-focus on the priorities of students’ unions. During the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s their main focus was largely on the provision of commercial services, volunteering, clubs and societies. However the last decade has seen a substantial re-balance toward understanding the learning and teaching experience of students and ensuring that this is communicated to the institution. Students’ unions have placed a considerable focus on developing and supporting course/academic representative systems, often working jointly with the institution. There has also been a trend toward building an evidence base of new research, along with existing data such as the National Student Survey and minutes from staff-student committee meetings to inform dialogue between the SU and the institution. In turn, this has started to see a diversification of the students involved in the SU away from a narrow focus on full-time, 18-22 year, home students toward a more representative reflection of the higher education student body. Institutions too have wanted to work collaboratively with the students’ union to develop and advance mechanisms for listening to students. Over time this has seen the campaigning activity of students’ union encompass an increasing number of learning and teaching matters such as the improvement of feedback on assessed work and the reform of assessment. A leading example of this was the Bucks New University students’ union who published a 10 point education campaign centred around member-led, evidence based aspects of the learning and teaching experience they wanted improved:

http://issuu.com/simonmcdowell/docs/educationsupportdoc_webversion_9-11-09

The increasing focus on learning and teaching matters and an increasing focus on leadership of the student experience has to a large extent been led by NUS. NUS at a national level has increased its work and focus on learning and teaching matters to support students’ unions, but has also undertaken with partners comprehensive national research into the student experience since 2008. Dedicated internal staff resource to develop NUS’ own expertise in this area has provided considerable support to students’ union to help support and develop student leadership in students’ unions. It has also researched, consulted on and published a number of charters on learning and teaching matters setting out good practice including feedback, assessment, internationalisation and online learning.

CASE STUDIES – leading academic engagement with students and students’ unions

As the purpose of this project is not to describe all forms of student engagement, rather we have focussed on 4 models of engagement which are sector leading and likely to become more prominent over time.

Based on an overview of emerging trends in student engagement we have highlighted 4 leading examples of student engagement described as follows digital/online engagement, students as change agents, student academic partners and enhanced representation. An institution which can be considered good practice for each model of student engagement has been selected and a combination of focus groups, research and interviews were compiled for each to develop the 4 case studies below.

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8 NUS/HSBC Student Experience Research 2008:
NUS/HSBC Student Experience Research 2010/11:
NUS/QAA Student Experience Research 2012:
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Student-Experience-Research-12-Part-1.aspx
CASE STUDY 1 - Digital/online engagement (Open University)

Overview of the system

The OU had the highest levels of student satisfaction in the country in 2011-12 and as such was a key institution for this project to examine. The uniqueness of the institution meant that the structures used to ensure that students were engaged in the development of the institution and the programmes within it, was of particular importance. In conversations and looking through the documentation provided by the OU, it became clear that it was not just an open space for all the students to feedback within that caused the satisfaction or even the engagement. This was partly due to the unique way in which technology is used in order to create opportunities for students to communicate with the central representative system of the OU. This project identified the model of online engagement and representation that the OU created with and through the OUSA in order to maintain a high position of satisfaction and dialogue between the students and the staff. In looking at the experience for students and speaking with members of staff at the University, a clear picture was gained around the standardisation that exists creating learning experiences on a range of the modules fit the expectations of students studying. In having a clear mode of delivering the educational experience through a digital media can offer several consistencies across a wide range of modules and although distinctions across modules was clearly alluded to, the methods and processes of gaining students feedback seemed to be consistent and constant in any module offered. However the feedback was the very bottom layer of student engagement in enhancing the learning experience.

Rationale

In providing opportunities to all students to provide feedback to lecturers and module leaders on each segment means depending on the level of the organisation being examined can lead to open dialogue and clear direction of change from the student body. That a multi layered approach of online and physical representation and elections allow the student voice to be heard and often acted upon as well as

Key strengths

Consistency is one of the key strengths, in the way that systems are institutional yet segmented according to programmes and regions. In the OUSA, there is a strong emphasis on the ‘Central Representatives’ system, but given the scale of the institution there are key aspects such as:

- Student Association Representatives (both regionally and nationally)
- Student OU Council
- Local Assemblies
- Central Representatives and OU Governance
- Disabled Students Group

Reward/recognition

Being a central representative or a representative at any of the hub meetings nationally allows the students involved to gain a level of experience and recognition for being in that role. The students involved in that aspect are given a thorough round of training and development to support their development in that role.

Impacts

Through the multiple layers of engagement and representation skills are trained and honed around: representing policy documents and changes, understanding how the University works, working with Academics, dealing with committee papers, report writing, communications skills and team work among other benefits.
Impressively one of the key impacts is that even with the scale of the OU and OUSA, students and staff intimated a relatedness and involvement with the University which illustrated that a combination of online spaces, assemblies, regional and national hubs and central representatives allowed the integration of the two methods to compliment the dialogue. It was also stated that because the OU had always done evaluation and reflection in a way that pre-dated NSS and other metrics that the culture was very much more matured.

CASE STUDY 2 - Students as change agents (Exeter)

Overview of the system

Students as change agents was developed to give students the opportunity to identify, research and make the case for improvements. Initially focussed around the learning and teaching experience, projects now have a wider range including students undertaking outreach and community volunteering.

The premise of the programme is to explicitly flag to students that if there is something they want to change, they will be supported to undertake this. Usually assigned a mentor from within the institution which can help guide the student as to how best to make the case for change; which evidence to compile, recommendations for improvement and decision making bodies that can ensure these changes come into effect. Projects are generally commissioned or signed off by staff-student liaison committees (SSLC) and students are able to decide which aspects of their experience they would like to see changed or improved.

To help devolve decision making to college level within the university, each college has appointed a change agent representative to support students in putting forward a project. The constructive and collaboration relationship between the institution and the students’ guild was also cited as being important in retaining the student-led nature of these projects.

Rationale & Key Strengths

In addition to letting students give their views about their higher education experience through more traditional means such as surveys and staff-student committees, change agents advanced this by giving students active decision making power over their experience. This fitted with stage of the relationship between the institution and students’ guild who not content with simply listening to the views of students, wanted to grant them more power over the solutions of areas to be improved.

The students’ guild also stressed the importance of ensuring that student partnership moved from simply consulting students, to actively empowering them to decide what should change and how it should change. In an environment where institutions place a great deal of emphasis on student engagement, it was felt that the activity needed move beyond simply listening to students.

Reward/recognition

There is no formal reward or recognition as such. However participation in the programme can count towards the Exeter Award. Most students when interviewed cited their primary motivation as being the opportunity to see something improved or change something which previously frustrated them. For some, it was also seen as something practical that could be included in job applications post-graduation as an example of using imitative, project management and showing that they were the kind of student who would take opportunities presented to them. Some students were also proud of the legacy it left behind, particularly if their change was embedded into future university practice.
Impacts

As the focus of the projects have broadened out, the impacts have been felt in quite a wide range of areas. There have been around 40 projects supported in the three years the programme has been in place and examples of the impacts include:

- improving employability in niche areas like Archaeology and Theology, as well as industry-focused subjects like Engineering
- producing essay-writing guides for science subjects
- developing schemes for second and third year students to help first years with language tuition
- improving academic assessment and feedback practices
- investigating how seminars can be run to make them more useful
- integrating new technology (such as interactive clickers) into lectures and other teaching
- English Care Homes Reading Project
- Recording of lectures so students can catch up afterwards or revisit in revision periods.

The Students as Change Agents initiatives has also helped to push forward the debate about student engagement onto active empowerment of students and has been cited in numerous publications aimed at the higher education community. Students themselves have also been invited to present at institutional conferences to share the changes they have engineered.

More details: [http://as.exeter.ac.uk/support/educationenhancementprojects/current_projects/change/](http://as.exeter.ac.uk/support/educationenhancementprojects/current_projects/change/)

CASE STUDY 3 - Student academic partners (Birmingham City)

Overview of the system

Student academic partners invites students to move their learning from beyond the classroom and formal contact, to gain a greater insight into the working of their department or another aspect of the institution and to help shape and influence future developments. Through a formal and open application process, students are invited to apply for roles as an academic partner, for which they get paid £10 per hour, to undertake project related roles within the institution.

The programme itself is run jointly as a partnership between the institution and the students’ union including a role which is jointly employed by both organisations, further reinforcing the spirit and partnership and the brokerage of opportunities for students.

Rationale

Given that universities need to employ a wide range of roles in any academic year, it made sense to open relevant opportunities to students. Not only does it allow students to earn a small amount of money alongside their study, and also provide with work experience which will be helpful when students come to apply for jobs as graduates. There is also an added benefit which provides students with a more in depth understanding of how their institution/department or service operates (depending on where the student is based).

Key Strengths
Building on the focus which the institution has on providing opportunities to students, this is clearly an example of ‘practicing what they preach’ by offering relevant roles to students. For students it provides an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of how their institution works, the chance to develop a relationship with staff outside of the classroom, practical work experience and also a source of revenue for the students.

The projects which the students are working on as academic partners are invariably focussed on aspects of their student experience, and therefore it is often reassuring for other students to see a fellow student helping them improve their experience.

Again, unlike some of other systems for student engagement this empowers students to direct and take responsibility for the change they wish to see, rather than simply being consulted via a survey of a staff-student committee.

Reward/recognition

The motivations which students have for getting involved are quite varied. For some it is a convenient chance to undertake some experience, for others it is the motivation to earn some money and for some it is to lead on a particular project that they are passionate about. A number of students also reflected that this practical work experience in a higher education setting supported them with gaining further employment, and for others created the incentive for future study at postgraduate level.

Impacts

Over 3 years, there have been a wide variety of projects undertaken. The Students as Academic Partners website have captured video case studies reflecting the impacts from a number of projects. Impacts from 2011-12 are here: http://www.bcusu.com/learning/saps/previousprojects/2011-2012/

Examples of projects taken up by student academic partners include using learning resources in a different way, a new way of assessing work, academic support resources, a repository for professional development information or just a framework of capturing the student voice, the value and impact of these projects is endless.

The programme itself has also secured significant national coverage, including winning the Times Higher Education award for student support in 2010.

More details: http://www.bcusu.com/learning/saps/

CASE STUDY 4 - Enhanced representation (Roehampton University)

Overview of the system

To build on other forms of student engagement, the institution and students’ union were keen to find a forum to allow a range of students drawn from different backgrounds and constituencies to give their views directly to the university senior management. This forum is known as the student senate. In addition to providing a forum for student views, an annual budget of £50,000 is set aside to allow the student senate to address areas for improvement and therefore moves this beyond a consultative body, to one that is granted decision making authority.

Rationale

To address the ongoing agenda of student engagement, and again wishing to move beyond simply listening to the views of students the senate with an attached budget ensures that students can take practical steps to improve their student experience. It also allows the
university senior management team to hear directly from students, complimenting existing forms of student engagement between the students’ union and the university.

**Key Strengths**

More than simply being consulted, students are granted an element of authority to directly address aspects of the student experience they would like to see improved. It is a relatively uncomplicated and concise forum which ensures that once a decision is made, there is little complexity in seeing a decision converted into an action and a change. It is seen to be complimentary to existing engagement between the students' union and the institution, and also ensures that senior staff in the institution are getting to hear from students directly. For students too, rather than just presenting an endless and uncosted list of changes, it helps to concentrate decision making on the greatest priorities students would like to see changed, as well as a recognition of what is required in order to bring about the change.

**Reward/recognition**

Whilst there is not any formal reward and recognition for being a member of the student senate, the termly meetings are not a significant burden on the students. Indeed a number of students have stated that there is a keen sense of pride and recognition in being able to take a place on the senate, as it provides a high profile opportunity to represent the views of fellow students. It has also provided an example of extra-curricular activity which students have been able to apply to job opportunities for graduating students.

**Impacts**

The budget of £50,000 has been used to extend opening hours in the library as a trial period, a change which is now going to be funded permanently by the institution following the successful trial. In addition, more minor changes have been made to the university estate where students have wanted to see an improvement in services and the physical surrounds where they are taught.

More details: [http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/Corporate-Information/Student-Senate/](http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/Corporate-Information/Student-Senate/)

**CONCLUSIONS**

The project has brought together 4 leading models of student engagement, at a time when student engagement is central to the debate about the future of the sector. Whilst the 4 models placed at the centre of this project are not unique they are certainly innovative and are likely to become more prevalent across over higher education in the coming years.

The 4 case studies in this paper, also have 1 important feature in common. Rather than simply engaging with students and listening to their views, these projects actively seek to empower students to determine and shape the outcomes and changes they would like to see. **There is a growing recognition that leading forms of student engagement need to move beyond simply consulting and listening to students, but instead provide them with the opportunity, forum and resource to determine and shape changes collaboratively.**

There will continue to be an important role for more traditional forms of student engagement such as course representatives, staff-student consultative committees, surveys and module evaluation forms as they help to provide an evidence base, but institutions and students’ unions should see these as a foundation upon which to build in other initiatives that actively empower students in partnership with staff.

Active empowerment from students can often lead to ensuring that students ‘beyond the usual suspects’ are involved in student engagement. Where institutions and students’ unions have sought to identify the students that put themselves forward for more traditional forms of student engagement such as course representatives and ultimately as full time as sabbatical officers, they can often be skewed toward full-time, undergraduate, home, 18 – 22 year old
students. As some of these initiatives are more project oriented and can sit alongside study more flexibly, the motivations for students to get involved are usually more varied. As a consequence these projects have tended to be a little more successful in being more representative of the student population with a better gender balance, representative of post and undergraduate students, full and part time, different ages and home and international students.

Indeed, the interviews with students in these projects flagged that the ability to shape and determine change in these projects was often the key motivation for students wanting to get involved. Indeed when compared to simply being invited to serve on a staff-student committee, students felt that when the opportunity to actively change an aspect of their experience they were more inclined to put themselves forward.

Furthermore, students went on to say that they felt the benefits that are derived from active empowerment (eg. greater understanding of content, employability, research, negotiation, project management, team working, presentations etc.) to be more substantial than simply being a course representative, and would be more helpful to cite as examples when it comes to applying for jobs.

Each of these initiatives actively cited the involvement of the students’ union as being crucial to its success and legitimacy. Where future projects are developed and existing initiatives evolve, the involvement and input from the students’ union should be central.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

- Institutions and students’ unions should continue to review (on an annual basis) the means through which students are able to give views on their experience. Consideration should be given to ensuring that there are structures in place which give active decision making authority to students and are not simply being confined to be consulted and listened to.

- More thought should be given to how students can be supported and further encouraged to work in partnership with academic colleagues to ensure that they can shape their experience. For some projects (particularly those which are most time consuming) remuneration may be appropriate in order to recruit and retain students, particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

- Further consideration should be given to the training that is provided to staff to support the empowerment of students, including the additional workload this may present to staff both academic and support.

- Whilst students should continue to be supported to pursue changes that can be achieved over 1-2yrs, further thought is required to ensure that bigger shifts which may take longer to achieve (over several cycles of students) are not lost.

- Institutions and students’ unions should collate an annual summary of impacts and changes that have been achieved as a result of student led initiatives. There should also be an annual assessment of the numbers of students involved, and how this compares to the demography of students at the institution.

- Introducing a national survey to measure student engagement (rather than simply student satisfaction) is probably more appropriate given the focus there now is on engagement across higher education.

GLOSSARY

BIS – Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CUC – Committee of University Chairs
HEA – Higher Education Academy
HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEIs - Higher Education Institutions
KIS – Key Information Set
LFHE – Leadership Foundation for Higher Education
NSS – National Student Survey
NUS – National Union of Students
QAA – Quality Assurance Agency
SSLC – Staff Student Liaison Committee
SUEI - Students’ Union Evaluation Initiative