

Quality Enhancement through Student Engagement

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Introduction

This chapter presents an institution-wide case of enhancing the quality of academic provision at an English University through broadening the interface between students and academic staff (faculty). We describe how new relationships are building a sense of ‘belonging’ characteristic of a learning community; and we demonstrate how this in turn leads to enhancement of ‘dimensions’ of academic quality as described by Gibbs (2010).

Gibbs (*ibid*) discusses how attempts have been made to measure academic quality for the purposes of comparing institutions; although the report questions the efficacy of such comparisons, it does nonetheless usefully identify a number of dimensions of quality organised according to the 3P model (Biggs, 1993). These dimensions are categorised as either one of presage (institutional context), process (learning and teaching practices) or product (student performance or educational gain) variables. For the most part, this chapter describes an enhancement agenda that is focused upon a process quality variable – and more specifically the student engagement dimension, with particular reference to the extent and quality of student-faculty interaction.

The United Kingdom’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), in a handbook of its process for auditing higher education institutions (QAA, 2006), defined quality enhancement as “*the process of taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities*”. This definition resonates well with our work as we have sought to take such deliberate institutional steps by putting in place a suite of initiatives that have utilised the agency of students to improve the quality of learning opportunities and their sense of belonging to a learning community. It is important to add that these steps, though conceived by and driven from an institutional level, are made manifest through the agency of faculty and students at the points of curriculum design and delivery.

Previously, although mechanisms that supported quality enhancement as an activity have been manifested within the action plans relating to annual cycles of quality enhancement at all levels of our institution, the involvement of students in these processes was limited. Although diligent

ingathering of student perceptions was commonly carried out, and formal student representation at boards and committees was in place, for many students the outcome was only witnessed as the reporting back of decisions made. However, it is of course possible to use such ingathered student data in much more effective ways in relation to quality enhancement (Klopper and Drew, this volume).

In recent years however, student engagement has become a crucial issue for UK higher education. Debates that contrast conceptions of students as customers or as active partners are prevalent and have gained prominence. One reason for this is the shift of funding emphasis, moving from the state to the student with a threefold rise in undergraduate fees for many programmes. A notable feature of this new focus on student engagement has been the inclusion in the new UK Quality Code of a chapter on student engagement (QAA, 2012). Within that chapter, the overarching expectation expands on the QAA's 2006 definition of quality enhancement to advocate articulation with the student engagement agenda:

“Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.”

So, this concept of students as partners in the delivery of quality assurance and enhancement agendas extends the notion of faculty-student interaction to include an expectation for student engagement with the quality bureaucracy of universities. Notions of the meaning and scope of student engagement have been fluid for some years. Like other dimensions of quality, some constructs of student engagement are just about quantifiable; for example Kuh (2009) equates student engagement with notions of the time and effort students invest in the pursuit of measurable learning outcomes. A less measurable approach may also be helpful here; a number of authors have referred to a ‘sense of belonging’ as central in consideration of that that results from student engagement (Goodenow, 1993; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). This ‘sense of belonging’ seems more likely to arise from a student/faculty active partnership paradigm than one that conceives students as customers.

Certainly, for us, the notion of a sense of belonging is an important dimension of quality and we would contend that such a sense emerges from the construction of a broad and deep interface between faculty and students. It is this central philosophy of broadening the interface through the development of a learning community that underpins all of the initiatives described in this chapter.

Underpinning philosophy

The notion of students as ‘customers’ has been critiqued for many years and the social constructivist model of learning acknowledges the importance of students taking an active role in their learning. Far less examined is the role students play in the shaping of the opportunities to learn that universities place in front of them; less examined still is the role that students may play in supporting the academic quality infrastructure to help deliver a student-shaped enhancement agenda.

Our institutional journey towards developing a learning community through student engagement began as far back as 2005 when institutional review of the University by the UK Quality Assurance Agency acknowledged the strength of university quality assurance processes but also recommended a greater focus on enhancement. Data from student surveys also demonstrated a student learning experience that could be characterised as one of a relatively transient student population attending just for scheduled teaching sessions and not remaining engaged on campus outside of these fixed periods of time.

By 2008, the university had started to develop a series of activities with the intention of fostering greater levels of student engagement through the purposeful creation of a learning community. This has since manifested itself at multiple points in the ‘curriculum design and delivery life cycle’ (JISC, 2009) and indeed, through a nascent student employment scheme, outside of the curriculum too.

Taking such a broad-brush approach to student engagement has evolved from a philosophical position that notions of ‘community’ and ‘belonging’ are not confined to the curriculum elements of a university education; universities are entrusted with three years or more of a student’s life and as such, this time represents an opportunity for personal development and growth. We believe that only by supporting a holistic conception of the university learning experience can institutions hope to connect with students to the degree that learning communities thrive and thus create a fertile environment to support the faculty-student interactions required to sustain a learning community. Thomas (2012) connects ‘belonging’ with student success and we sought to embrace that ideal through the initiatives described in this chapter.

There is sector-wide evidence such as that summarised by Zhao and Kuh (2004) and echoed in our own institutional experience, that such engagement leads to a variety of positive outcomes for students (‘product variables’ under Biggs’ 3P model nomenclature) including enhanced performance at the point of assessment, improved progression and higher levels of social development. Our premise is that as we (faculty/staff) broaden our interface with students, so they do the same with us; student/faculty discourse becomes more extensive, more involved and crucially more reciprocal. As a consequence, we see a greater sense of community and joint responsibility to enhance the learning experience of all

students; such communities of mutual learning are well discussed in Raiker (this volume). Only with this willingness, even expectation, to be involved can the student body as a whole become influential to such a degree that they are able to co-deliver institutional enhancement agendas. We have sought to make such student/faculty discourse a cultural norm.

Of course, a philosophy alone is not sufficient to drive the step-change in culture required to realise the ‘learning community’ and so co-deliver a shared quality enhancement agenda with our students. We have attempted therefore to deliver our aims through three parallel, but aligned initiatives. These are described fully later in the chapter and illustrated with case studies as appropriate, but a diagrammatic representation of this suite of initiatives and their relationship to one another and our overarching philosophy is given below as Figure 1:

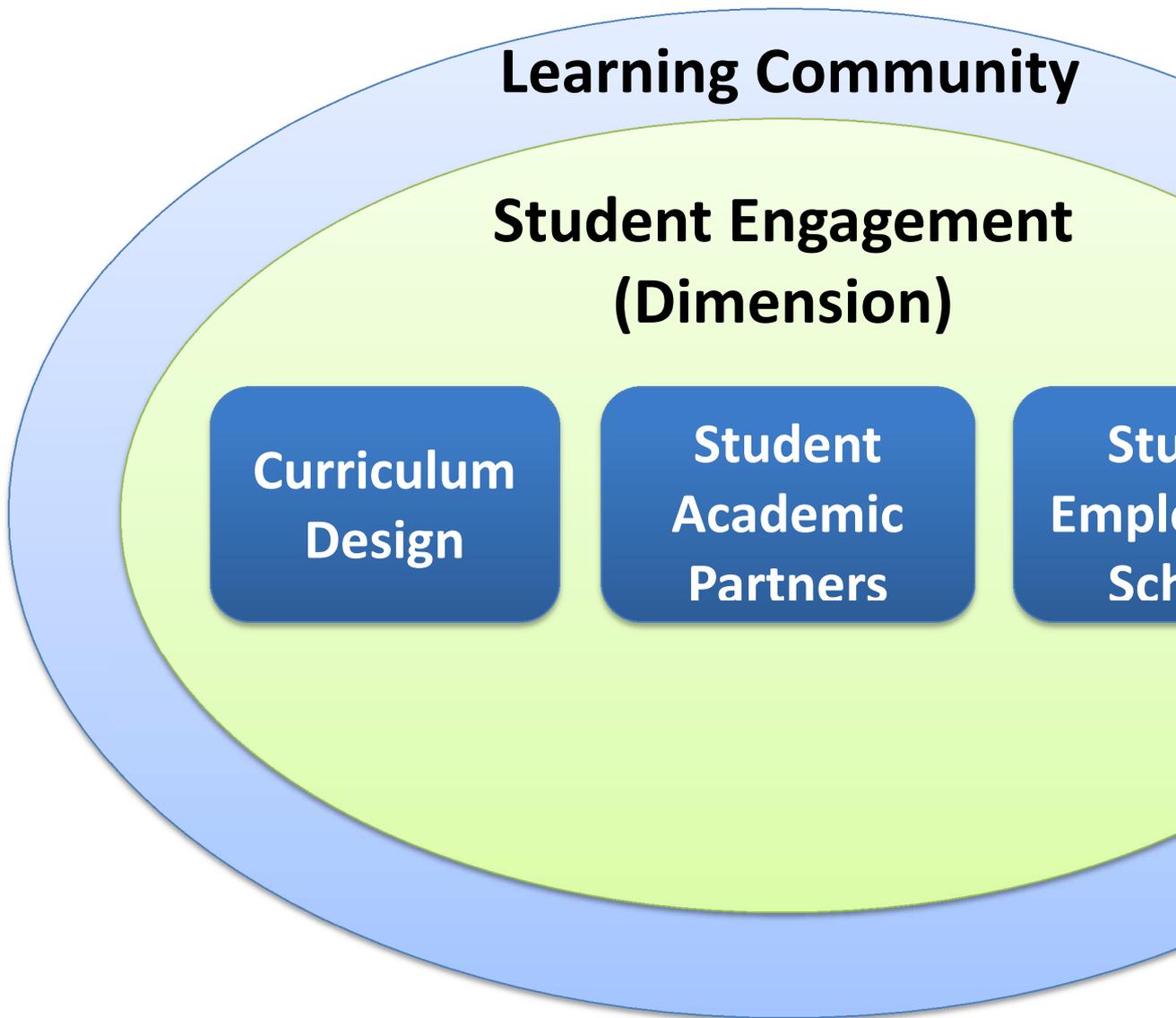


Figure 1: Relationship between initiatives and overarching philosophy

Our activity, led from one of the University's central departments – the Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching is best understood when presented under three headings – curriculum design, Student Academic Partners (SAP) and students employed by University.

Introduction to the initiatives

Our curriculum design initiative includes two projects: RoLEx (Redesign of the Learning Experience) an overarching curriculum design initiative and the T-SPARC project (Technology-Supported Processes for Agile and Responsive Curricula), a new technical system and institutional process for designing and approving academic programmes.

The SAP initiative is an employment scheme for students to work in partnership with academics on learning and teaching projects.

The Student Employment Scheme initiative offers general employment opportunities across the institution and also includes the Student Academic Mentoring Programme, a student employment activity whereby students are paid to mentor other students.

It is our view that for progress in the area of quality enhancement through student engagement to be achieved, ownership is needed at a number of levels including within programme teams of faculty and students.

In the early stages of our student engagement work a crucial step was to obtain the support of senior university managers and as a sequel to that, the resource to underpin local initiatives. The first steps involved discussion at the University Senate and its sub-committees to ensure not only clarity of intention but also support for the direction of travel from the full senior team. When this had been achieved, the next step was to ensure a full range of opportunities for participation. These opportunities were made manifest through the parallel initiatives introduced above and expanded on below.

It is our view that three conditions are necessary for these project opportunities to deliver the aims of our coherent strategy. Firstly the principal (though not exclusive) locus of student engagement activity should be close to curriculum design and delivery, or as Thomas (2012) describes it, having 'proximity to the academic sphere'. This is important because this is the area into which students are most likely to be attracted as they see a real opportunity to enhance their own learning experience.

Secondly, some central coordination is necessary so that resource may be provided equitably and synergies between different parts of the institution optimised. Finally, it is crucial that this central coordination comes from a centre associated with enabling enhancement and change through effective evaluation, rather than through a culture of compliance and risk aversion that sometimes accompanies a purely assurance-focused paradigm. This setting up and coordination of our suite of initiatives has formed the basis of

the ‘deliberate steps’ called for in the QAA’s definition of quality enhancement.

Parallel initiative: curriculum design

RoLEx

We have reported previously (Bartholomew et al, 2010), how our institution embarked on a pan-university quality enhancement (through curriculum redesign) project in 2008. This project, known as RoLEx (Redesign of the Learning Experience) was tasked with facilitating the migration of the entire undergraduate portfolio from a 12-credit module structure to a 15-credit module structure whilst enhancing, and making more efficient, the programmes we offered our students. We learnt a great deal during this project. We learnt that student aspirations in relation to being involved in the redesign, and thus quality enhancement, of their own learning were set at a very low level; that faculty tended to engage with students, and other stakeholders, in a tokenistic way and also that our curriculum design and programme approval mechanisms, although robust in scrutinising the end *product* of curriculum design (as represented by the definitive documentation) were poor at having any oversight of the design *process* itself.

The low student expectations of involvement in quality enhancement through curriculum redesign were problematical and we soon realised that we needed to manage the expectations and aspirations of those entering Higher Education and to expand the ways in which students could engage with the University in the common aim of enhancing the student learning experience. A number of initiatives emerged from this intent, which focused upon a new relationship with students and the Students’ Union.

Technology-Supported Processes for Agile and Responsive Curricula (T-SPARC):

This project has run from October 2008 through to July 2012 and is one of just twelve projects funded in the UK to develop more effective approaches to designing curricula and approving programmes. Although an account of the details and technical specifications of the new on-line system is outside the scope of this chapter, it has made two important contributions to bolstering student engagement in quality enhancement through curriculum design:

- For programmes being submitted for approval through this system, artefacts that represent evidence of student engagement in the design

process (for example through forums, videos, links to Facebook and survey data) is a *requirement*.

- Through the investment made in a range of audio-visual technologies to capture and share student views on their learning experiences.

Students' contributions to curriculum design activity allow for a very important set of experiences and perspectives to be considered as part of the quality enhancement process.

As part of the overarching T-SPARC project, colleagues piloting new processes to designing courses were asked to bring forward evidence of student engagement in curriculum design. The primary purpose of this requirement was to ensure that programme teams made full use of new opportunities, partly through the provision of new technology and partly through new policy-based expectations, to ingather student perceptions of various aspects of their learning experience and to work with students to address issues raised through this ingathering activity. An example of such can be found in the recent development of a Graduate Diploma in Psychology; this programme team used video-based technology to facilitate the virtual interviewing of students to learn about their perceptions of assessment practice. In this case, sixteen questions asking about experiences of assessment were put to twenty-five students yielding a total of three hundred and sixty-six clips. These clips formed a set of resources for the programme team to refer to so as to inform their design. This case offers an example of how, under the new approaches to curriculum design, such data can contribute to the auditable evidence of the student voice being incorporated into curriculum design decisions.

Curriculum design: summary of quality enhancement

We would contend that a better design process leads to better programmes and that the systematic inclusion of, and response to, the student voice at the point of designing (or redesigning) curricula will have the consequence of curriculum design outcomes that are fitter for purpose. Changing the institutional processes for curriculum design and approval so as to provide student-focussed opportunities for the enhancement of curriculum quality can thus be seen as an 'institutional deliberate step' as referred to in the definition of quality enhancement we offered earlier in the chapter.

To give the reader an impression of the amount of online interaction our new system elicits, figures from a recent design cycle are included below as Table 1:

Provision	Online discussion posts	Number of artefacts uploaded
Suite of six	494	166

overlapping programmes		
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Table 1: Online activity related to an online curriculum design and approval cycle

Parallel initiative: Student Academic Partners

The SAP scheme has been running since 2009 and has focused on providing funding and support for student and staff teams to enhance the quality of localised learning experiences. In the three years since its inception, over five hundred students and over two hundred faculty members have jointly shaped over one hundred and thirty innovations that impact upon the learning experiences of our students. For the University, not only does this refresh the curriculum, but it also provides a body of change agents who can impact on the wider student learning experience.

“I’ve not felt that we’ve been the students and they’ve been the staff, we haven’t been told what to do, it has been refreshing and quite nice to have this equal standing. I think it has worked well so far because we have a good mix of approaches, how we work and how we have learnt off each other... you feel like you are learning and growing rather than just being told, which is quite nice...we just feel like a team, there is no hierarchy or anything so it’s great.” (Student 1)

The University has embraced student engagement through partnership within the corporate plan and is delighted with the impact of these projects and the engagement of students and staff. We are nonetheless aware that the employment of 200 students per year on SAP activities is only a small proportion of the total student population at our University. However we do think that the introduction of this number of change agents into the student community every year does have a positive effect on the overall culture of the institution.

In the vast majority of cases the detailed proposals for participation in these initiatives arose in programme teams within individual schools or departments. Through such mechanisms it was possible for faculty/staff to pursue long-standing issues and for students to participate proactively in enhancement rather than merely to be reactive contributors to institutional processes. In such ways, partnerships could be forged. An interesting by-product of this approach has been the emergence of not only shared agendas but also pleasingly, the development of new perspectives. It has, for example, been a regular finding that faculty/staff report that they have gained new insight through working in partnership with their students. Mäensivu et al. (this volume) offer an interesting case study of the interpersonal dynamics of such ways of working.

The central SAP coordination team have adopted a contagion model for change and charge all SAP participants, faculty and students, with ‘infecting’ others in their locality with their enthusiasm and ideas. No project is ever funded for a second year as each project team is also charged with persuading those who have the local resources that their innovation is of such value that it needs to be embedded into normal operations the following year.

“...this SAPs thing has already started to infect ideas that are going on in the faculty about how we do define our relations with students Because we are stuck with this absolutely horrendous thing of customers which I think is so wrong. I think it could have a significance way beyond the SAPs project itself in that we are entering uncharted waters about how students view themselves and how staff operate in academia and it is really up for grabs.” (Faculty member 1)

The equality of the relationship between students and staff is key to the SAP development and reflects the philosophical underpinnings of trying to create a sense of ‘belonging’. Perhaps significantly, our students are paid for the work they do with us, as the vast majority of students who study at our university require paid work to support their study. We believe that we would discriminate against those students who need to work if we did not pay as only those who could afford to engage, that is those not needing paid employment, would. To highlight the partnership, the induction process for all SAP partners emphasises the equality of development opportunity for both faculty and students.

Of course, ideas may originate with students or faculty, but through the wider buy-in that comes with a partnership model we believe that more significant change will be delivered. To give the reader an impression of the sorts of projects that are delivered through SAP, we offer a sample (of titles) drawn from the 2011/12 academic year below:

- Better Retention through Improved Orientation (BRIO)
- Student Targeting Active Resources for Students (STARS)
- Shaping the Administrative Services within a Faculty: supporting the ‘student journey’
- Using feed-forward feedback to enhance the Personal Tutor experience for students
- Teaching Mentoring and Curriculum Development Scheme
- Constructive Learning Activities for Analysis and Design with Lego MindStorm.
- Developing a Real-Time Research Workshop for Undergraduate Research Methods Training

The approach to innovation and change through SAP has been recognised through (UK) national awards (Times Higher Award for Outstanding Support for Students, 2010) and through adoption by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in its ‘Students as Partners’ Change Programme (2012) offered in conjunction with our University. This opportunity has seen ten universities join this HEA Students as Partners change programme enabling them to explore how they might adopt and indeed reinterpret our student-as-partner approach to enhance the quality of their own education provision. As one of the sector leaders in the area of student engagement some may feel our university has developed a definitive recipe for effective furtherance of academic quality through influential student engagement. We believe however that we have only just started along this journey of change and are now seeking to learn from our experiences so that the broadening of student participation in such activity, through increased student numbers, can be achieved.

Analysis of the first three years of SAP cohorts shows that the SAP population broadly mirrors that of the University. Table 2 shows the average student attainment on their study programmes. This data is reassuring in that it demonstrated that student take-up of the SAP opportunity was not limited to the student educational elite; this may represent evidence that our decision to pay students for their work does result in a pattern of take-up representative of the wider university.

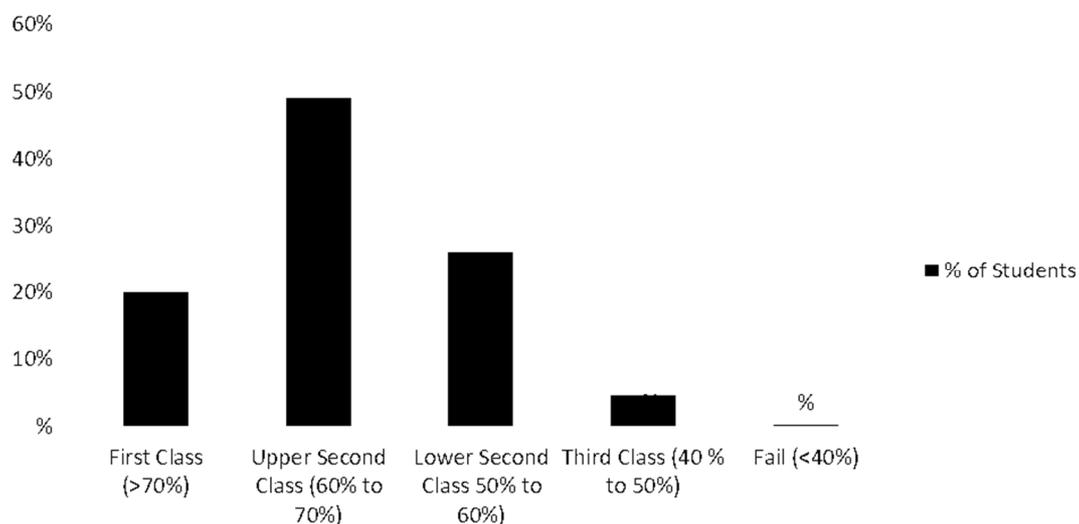


Table 2: Three years’ analysis of the average module performance of all SAP students

Our contention that the SAP scheme fosters a sense of community is borne out in the comments students and staff made as part of their evaluation of the scheme:

“Felt good to be part of the university – not just a student...very rewarding to be able to discuss issues with lecturers and staff as an equal – both trying to improve things.” (Student 2)

“We are at the start of something that is really exciting in the University. We are beginning to see students starting to act as the flag bearers for student engagement and there is increasing good will and understanding. The Student Academic Partnership Scheme has helped to do that too. I think we are gathering a critical mass of people that see the value.” (Faculty member 2)

As observed above, we consider our continuing work is now to build upon the success of the SAP initiative, to capitalise on the principles we have declared and to cascade our philosophy and approaches more widely so as to deliver broader engagement of the student body.

Student Academic Partners: summary of quality enhancement

These examples of active partnership between staff and students illustrate some of the ways we have sought to empower students to influence the design of curricula that they and their peers will go on to study. These types of student engagement activity are essential in generating a learning community where faculty-staff interactions are bolstered and process variables of quality enhancement can be addressed. It is critical that the deliberate steps we make to improve the learning experience include student agency since students bring a perspective to bear on issues of crucial importance that we, as academics, cannot bring ourselves – namely the ‘lived experience’ of study. Through this they participate in the academic learning community and as one student partner highlighted:

“Yes, my attitude towards Birmingham City University has changed. As a student you take things at face value and don’t fully appreciate nor understand the hard work staff members invest into the University to make students’ experience and learning enjoyable. (Student 3)

This breaking down of the barriers between students and staff within the learning community enhances understanding and increases satisfaction of both students and staff. For the University, an overarching appreciation of the value of the student perspective and a respect of, and confidence in, students’ collective ability to assist in enhancing the quality of their learning experience goes beyond periodic activity relating to specific curriculum design work and underpins one of the major strands of our coherent strategy.

Parallel initiative: Student Employment Scheme

In 2011 the University embarked on a strategic development to engage students further within the fabric of the University. Supported by the HEA and the Leadership Foundation, the University participated in a Change Academy initiative whereby it sought to devise a philosophy and plan that would see over one thousand students working in all aspects of the University's provision by 2015.

The desire to employ our own students was based upon the principle that we value our students so highly that we should wish to employ them ourselves. The simply self-imposed question of 'if the university that educates the students is not willing to employ them, then how can it expect other employers to do so?' offers much food for thought. In addition to this overarching philosophical position, the University would also benefit from the affordances of a flexible workforce that could meet demand quickly, whilst providing our students with opportunities to develop the employability skills and experience that come from real employment. In that sense, an aim of curriculum design – to enhance the employability profile of our students – can be delivered through extra-curricular student engagement. These outcomes, related as they are to student abilities on exiting their programme, could be seen as 'product' variable deliverables in relation to our quality enhancement agenda. Huet et al. (this volume) also write about the value of extracurricular activities (in their case research grants) as opportunities to develop students' transferable skills.

A partnership with Northwest Missouri State University in the United States of America has shown us the wider benefits of student employment. These include greater student affiliation to the University, greater retention and improved student employee performance in their academic studies. Birmingham City University hopes to reap similar benefits as it seeks further to develop the creation of a vibrant and effective learning community. The University's senior management and Human Resources have been persuaded of the benefits of the concept and have embedded student employment within operational plans so that, in forthcoming years, student employment will become the normal mode through which temporary employment opportunities are filled.

As we pilot our approaches to student employment, so we have been able to collect narrative accounts of some of the people involved. Some of these narrative accounts are shared below:

“Working at BCU has enabled me to have greater respect towards the University. I feel proud to be a student and employee because it is a welcoming institution that is student focused. With this in mind, I look forward to the next day at work because I feel like a valued member of the team. I now appreciate students are not passive customers of their

learning experience but are able to personally enhance their learning and social development.” (Student 4)

We anticipate that student academic performance is also likely to improve, as students will be on campus for more sustained periods:

“I enjoy my time at university now and spend more time inside the campus instead of just coming in to the library to do my assignment and leaving. I feel I am giving something back to the University community at BCU.” (Student 5)

Students also report a sense of allegiance to their new employer, which drives improved performance. A Business School student reported that her job as an administrator in the Art and Design faculty has made her work more diligently on her academic subjects, as she *“did not wish to embarrass her new employer with poor grades.”*

Within the Student Employment Scheme the University has also initiated a Student Academic Mentoring Programme that seeks to employ over sixty students in academic mentoring activities across the University. Once again, this scheme seeks to partner students and staff in activities that offer mentoring opportunities across our institution. As one student mentor stated:

“It gives students a sense of worth. It certainly gave me a sense of belonging and made me feel that I could have an idea for some interesting or cool project and if it was accepted I could go with it. It is motivating to be able to do that with the support of the University and for students to get involved.” (Student 6)

Student Employment Scheme: summary of quality enhancement

What better way could there be to improve the learning experience of students than to employ them to work within the offices that have just imposed the systems and processes that the student has just experienced? The opportunity for direct and impactful feedback that leads to meaningful change is substantial. Through trust in our students, their abilities and their professionalism, we contend that the momentum to encourage further student engagement will grow and the value of employing students in various areas of the University’s operation will become clearer. We believe that through this engagement the sense of student belonging to an institution that values their views will develop and will facilitate the creation of a culture that encourages students to involve themselves in a shared quality enhancement agenda.

By complementing the activity relating to input into curriculum design and delivery with a more broad-based approach to student engagement in the institutional life of our university, we hope further to enhance the process and thus product variables of academic quality. We are convinced that such opportunities contribute to a bolstered sense of belonging that leads to greater engagement in a shared quality enhancement agenda.

Conclusion

Hardy and Bryson (2010) offered the view that student engagement increased student abilities and general thinking resulting in improved achievement and retention. This was extended to suggest engagement was a combination of intellectual application, diligence and participation in the learning community, supported by a sense of purpose. This viewpoint provides real resonance with notions of student engagement delivering enhancements in quality – in this case, product variables relating to student capability. Mainly though, the various initiatives put in place as part of a wider initiative, seek to influence positively the lived experience of studying at our university and thus relate to the process variables of a quality enhancement agenda.

We conclude this chapter by offering some National Student Survey statistics (Figure 3) which over the past four years for the following survey questions and responses:

1. I feel part of an academic community in my college or university
2. Within my course I feel my suggestions and ideas are valued

	2009	2010	2011	2012
Q1	65%	67%	72%	76%
Q2	65%	67%	75%	78%

Figure 3: Responses to the questions above for last four years

These figures are encouraging and support a conclusion that the initiatives we have described in this chapter have contributed to the realisation of a learning community and thus quality enhancement at an institutional level.

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