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Student academic partners: student employment for collaborative learning and teaching development

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During 2008, Birmingham City University (BCU) began to develop approaches to enable students to have a greater ownership of the enhancement of learning and teaching at the university in order to break down some of the real and perceived barriers between students and staff. This work led to the development of the Student Academic Partners scheme which employs students to work in collaboration with staff on educational development projects spanning across the university. At a time when a number of institutions are considering student employment following the HEFCE funded project in 2009, this paper considers opportunities for student engagement in educational development and provides a case study of student employment at BCU as a cross-institutional approach to embedding collaboration between students and staff for learning and teaching development. Locating the scheme within the literature, practice and evaluation, we offer four principles for facilitating an institutional culture of collaborative educational development and evaluate the impact of the investment on students, staff and the institution as a whole.

\textbf{Keywords:} learning community; student engagement; learning and teaching; partnership; student employment

The motivation

In 2008, the university’s internal student satisfaction survey revealed that some students, particularly those based on smaller campuses, did not feel engaged as part of an academic community (MacDonald et al., 2008, p. 59). Birmingham City University (BCU) is a large university with 24,000 students, six faculties and eight campuses across the city. The diversity of provision and location makes it difficult to provide students with a ‘typical’ university experience. In response to the findings, the University’s Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) (Birmingham City University, 2010) brought together a group of staff and student officers from faculties and the students’ union to reflect on current practice and to develop proposals to improve student engagement in the university community.

Work at this initial event utilised a template of questions based on Fielding (Fielding, 2001, p. 110) designed for the primary and secondary school sector to support reflection on practice around student engagement. Fielding’s (2001) model

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includes a number of useful questions that were used to reflect on the environment for student voice at the university under a range of headings:

**Speaking** – who is allowed to speak and to whom?

**Listening** – who is listening? Why are they listening?

**Attitudes and dispositions** – how do those involved regard each other?

**Systems** – how often does dialogue and encounter in which student voice is centrally important occur? Who decides?

**Organisational culture** – do the practices, traditions and routine daily encounters demonstrate values supportive of student voice?

**Spaces and the making of meaning** – where are the public spaces (physical and metaphorical) in which these encounters might take place? Who controls them?

**Action and the future** – do we need new structures? Do we need new ways of relating to each other. (Fielding, 2001, p. 110)

The working group considered these questions for their own context at the institution and discussed the outcomes. A number of areas of consensus about the culture of the university emerged which included the following:

There is too much crisis management in dealing with student issues.

University processes are too much about document transmission and not enough about dialogue with students.

Physical and metaphorical spaces for dialogue between students and staff are mostly absent.

Engagement with students is often about hoop-jumping, more value is placed on demonstrating that you are listening to students than on actually listening to them.

These comments indicated a culture at the university in which students were positioned as passive consumers in that the university was seen as ‘the provider of products and services’ and students as consumers of provision and support (McCulloch, 2009, p. 171). Many of McCulloch’s (2009) criticisms of the model of students as consumers tally with the concerns of those taking part in the working group in that it:

- encourages passivity on the part of the student; compartmentalises the student experience as a ‘product’ rather than ‘process’;
- serves to de-professionalise the academic roles and encourage the ‘entertainment’ model of teaching;
- and reinforces individualism and competition at the expense of community. (p. 177)

An alternative notion of the student as co-producer had been offered as a challenge to the consumer model (McCulloch, 2009; Raymond, 2001; Taylor & Wilding, 2009) Students as co-producers value ‘the student, lecturers and others
who support the learning process as being engaged in a cooperative enterprise, which is focused on knowledge, its production, dissemination and application, and on the development of learners rather than merely skilled agents’ (McCulloch, 2009, p. 181). CETLs such as the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research had repositioned undergraduate students as researchers in order to challenge the ‘hierarchical binaries between teaching and research, and teachers and students’ (Lambert, Parker, & Neary, 2007, p. 534) and at the University of Manchester the Centre for Excellence in Enquiry Based Learning (CEEBL, 2009) employed student interns on a small scale to work with staff to integrate EBL into the curriculum. These empowering philosophies of students as active, critical agents enabled to facilitate change was an approach which we sought to embody through the development of the scheme.

Developing a philosophy

Working with existing literature about student voice (Fielding, 2001; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002), the group sought to develop some shared values which would underpin the design of any new activities. These included the following:

- **Promote respect and trust between students and staff**: the group acknowledged that in the past opportunities to engage students in learning and teaching development often focused more on the outcomes than on developing an understanding of the value which students bring to the institution.

- **Develop meaningful partnerships which acknowledge the expertise of students and staff**: due to time constraints and an emphasis on quality assurance processes the group recognised that opportunities for students and staff to invest time to work together in a significant way where rarely offered.

- **Acknowledge and challenge existing power relationships**: one of the biggest barriers to many students and staff working more closely together was seen as the traditional pupil/teaching power dynamic. Students often reported a distinct awareness of the power which academics held in their role as the ‘assessor’. The group recognised that in order to facilitate more productive relationships between students and staff it would be necessary to acknowledge and explore these relationships with students and staff.

- **Celebrate, reward and recognise good practice**: the group were aware that whilst a considerable amount of good practice went on at the institution it often took place within silos. The group wanted to provide opportunities for both students and academics to share and celebrate good practice across faculties and campus locations.

- **Encourage student and staff ownership of educational development**: the group recognised the importance of the ownership of educational development by those working and learning within a particular context. We felt it was important to provide opportunities for students and staff to jointly own the development of their own context and to be empowered to set the focus of any development activity.

The group sought to establish an approach that would enable students and staff to collaborate on educational development projects within all faculties at the university. At this time, we became aware of Northwest Missouri State University
(Sullivan, 2006) which employs over 20% of the students registered at the institutional in a variety of paid positions. Whilst Northwest does not have a history of employing students to lead educational development, their fully embedded student employment scheme demonstrated what was possible if an organisation committed ideologically and financially to student engagement through employment. The level of financial commitment to student employment at Northwest has become a central element of the package offered to fee-paying students. Whilst students are not guaranteed work at the institution, they are informed of the significant range of opportunities as part of the recruitment process and are encouraged to consider these roles above opportunities for employment externally as they are seen to be more compatible with academic timetables and to enhance the sense of community on campus. This inspired the group to consider student employment to embed students leading educational development.

Payment of students for work at institutions in the UK has traditionally been a contested subject. Student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms such as student representation, student surveys and other projects has traditionally been undertaken on a voluntary basis. We were aware of institutions that have chosen to recognise students with academic credit for these types of activities; however, the group felt that payment was important in our context for two reasons. Firstly, a large percentage of students at the university undertake paid work alongside their studies in order to support themselves financially during their time at the institution. We wanted to give all students the opportunity to develop learning and teaching at the university and as such felt that by offering payment any student would have the opportunity to engage in enhancement projects. Secondly, the group wanted to pay students in order to send a symbolic message to students and staff that students were valued as part of the learning development community of the university. We wanted people to experience a visible and significant investment in students and the culture of learning and teaching at the university and to challenge some of the power relationships that surround the student (producer) and staff (assessor) model.

The development of the scheme was undertaken in partnership with the students’ union and a students’ union manager was seconded to CELT to work on the initiative. This enabled students to be remunerated through a contract with the students’ union which reinforced the partnership with the distanced staff partners from the payment process. This was designed to reinforce the notion of project teams as opposed to that of manager and worker.

**Our solution**

The pilot scheme offered an opportunity for paid employment (payment up to £1750 for 175 h employment) for students to work in partnership with academic staff to strengthen the learning and teaching development of the university. Posters and emails were distributed directly to staff and students which asked ‘what have you always wanted to change about your course?’ Throughout all publicity and briefings, the equality of the relationship between staff and student was reinforced; projects would be funded where students were partners in development. The selection criteria for projects asked proposals to show real evidence of student ownership and alignment with the university’s learning and teaching strategy. A panel made up of academics, managers and student union officers from each faculty selected
projects in order to ensure buy-into the projects selected and awareness of the values behind the scheme (see Table 1).

In practice, the methods by which students and staff developed projects varied. Many projects were initiated by individual students and by groups of students who had an idea which they wished to develop. The group wanted to encourage students

<p>| Table 1. The number of applications and awards 2009/2011. |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of applications</th>
<th>Number of projects awarded</th>
<th>Number of students employed</th>
<th>Number of staff involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010/2011</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| Table 2. Examples of funded projects. |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project title</th>
<th>Focus of the project</th>
<th>Faculty engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The experience of British Asian students on the BA English programme</td>
<td>Focus groups led by students will gather views about key issues, both cultural and pedagogic, that may affect student performance to inform future course development</td>
<td>Faculty of Performance, Media and English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint development and evaluation of laboratory practical sessions to support bioscience teaching in pre-registration nursing curricula</td>
<td>The design and piloting of bioscience teaching activities with students on the pre registration Nursing programme</td>
<td>Faculty of Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The Digital Hack’ using modern technology and communication to solve challenges</td>
<td>A cross-faculty and industry approach to the utilisation of digital technology to solve real world academic based problems</td>
<td>Birmingham Institute of Art and Design; Faculty of Technology, Engineering and the Environment; Faculty of Performance, Media and English Birmingham Institute of Art and Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The organisation and management of the production of screen printed books</td>
<td>The employment of students to manage a student led book collective and prepare screen printed books for sale at nation artist book fairs</td>
<td>Birmingham City Business School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of a cross faculty Entrepreneurship Society</td>
<td>Bringing together students student entrepreneurs to develop ideas and learn from industry experts</td>
<td>Faculty of Technology, Engineering and the Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint development of laboratory teaching resources for Microelectronics</td>
<td>The design and creation of a microprocessor development system and associated lab exercises for Microelectronics teaching across the faculty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-agency working in schools</td>
<td>PGCE Drama students using drama techniques to engage the rest of the PGCE cohort in the Every Child Matters agenda</td>
<td>Faculty of Education, Law and Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to feel ownership of the projects and as such we focused initially on encouraging proposals led by students. Opportunities for projects were also advertised to all staff at the university, and a number of project proposals were received based on student feedback gained through module or programme evaluation processes. It was seen as important that students and staff submitted jointly worked up and agreed proposals prior to the selection process in order to demonstrate genuine evidence of partnership at a very early stage.

The nature of the projects undertaken through the scheme was varied (see Table 2). The scheme aimed to promote change in areas that would have a direct impact on the experience of students and staff at the university and as such it was important to allow projects to shape their work to the particular needs of a course. Despite the niche nature of some of the projects, transferable lessons were learnt and considerable exchange of practice across disciplines took place throughout the duration of the scheme. Projects took place over a 7-month period in the first year a time frame which was lengthened during the second iteration in order to allow projects to run throughout the academic year.

Support and evaluation

We provided a series of cross-faculty briefings, workshops and events at which students and staff involved in the scheme met to share ideas and practice. Through these sessions, we were able to facilitate discussions between projects and to collate evaluation around perceptions of the impact of the scheme. We also sought to establish the impact of the scheme on the individuals involved and the department or environment in which they worked. A case study methodology was chosen for the evaluation of the scheme (Robson, 2002, p. 178). The method was selected in order to enable the collection of multiple sources of empirical data based on the ‘lived experience’ of those involved in the scheme as it played out in their particular context. Every student and staff partner received an evaluation visit from a member of the CELT team during which a short semi-structured evaluation interview took place. This process enabled the collection of a large quantity of data relating to participants experiences of collaborative working. Overall 38 interviews took place individually with student and staff partners as part of the evaluation of the pilot scheme.

Whilst the data collected through the evaluation provides a rich source, we are aware that the data may be seen by some as problematic due the employment of the students. We took time to encourage students and staff to provide open and honest feedback and emphasised their anonymity and the importance of critical evaluation in order to improve the scheme for current and future participants both within correspondence in the lead up to the visit and in person at the start of each interview.

Data from the series of open questions were organised into themes in order to consider the impact of the scheme. During the visit, we also looked at the tangible outcomes which projects had produced. 21 of the 25 projects that were funded in the first year completed by the end of July 2010 and could identify tangible ways that their projects would have a positive impact on the experience of students. Of the remaining projects, two did not complete within the timescale but requested an extension of funding into the next academic year and two projects did not complete.
During the interviews with student partners, 57% reported feeling empowered to make a difference to the experience of their peers and to conduct work in the areas that mattered to them through the scheme. Fifty percentage of students reported that partnership and dialogue with staff had provided a greater insight and understanding of provision at the university and 50% of students reported a sense of autonomy which led to greater confidence about their work and learning. One student remarked:

“I’ve really enjoyed working with my staff partner, I mean, it’s a partnership but at the same time there is that independence. We will have a list of objectives and we will discuss how we are going to achieve those objectives. We then delegate tasks to each other and then bring it all together. Student Partner Academic Skills Centre

Sixty-eight percentage of staff partners also talked about valuing the opportunity to work on a more equal level with students. Forty-seven percentage of staff felt that the scheme provided an opportunity to engage in the development of provision as by working in partnership with students they increased their capacity to undertake work in a particular area. Significantly for us 73% of staff partners reported feeling inspired and motivated by the opportunity to work with students with a passion for learning and teaching. Working in a reciprocal way with students provided an avenue for the development of shared enthusiasms.

“I wanted it to be her piece of work and me just to be there as a support mechanism really so … have I gained anything? It’s just her enthusiasm; it’s been like a breath of fresh air so that’s been quite uplifting for me really. Staff Partner Health

It is clear from the data that many students and staff found the experience empowering. The permission that the scheme provided for staff and students to work together in different ways enabled them to achieve developments that were more embedded, owned and understood by peers and colleagues. Projects also facilitated alternative relationships between staff and students underpinned by shared roles and responsibilities that for many broke down hierarchical student–teacher relationships changing the landscape for educational development within the institution.

Where projects struggled it was often due to organisational issues such as student and staff engagement with assessment processes during certain times in the year or through a breakdown in communication early on in the project. Whilst students and staff were encouraged to work flexibly in order to focus on ‘learning first’, some projects struggled to negotiate this kind of working. Projects selected in the second year of the scheme were encouraged to develop project plans which took into account busy times in both student and staff diaries.

We also found that whilst most projects developed their own understanding of partnership within their context a number of projects struggled to develop these relationships. Some staff, for example, struggled to negotiate the new relationships wondering whether they had a ‘right’ to talk to a student if they were consistently late for meetings. This has led to an increased emphasis on the meaning of partnership within the project induction process with an emphasis on setting joint ground rules and expectations at the start of a project. Students will be offered training in
project management in future years in order to encourage them to take charge of project plans.

The group spent some time evaluating the way that the scheme had influenced the perspectives of those involved in projects asking whether they felt that their engagement had influenced the peers, colleagues and the wider university. The scheme was seen as valuable to the wider institution as it sent out a message about the value which students bring to the organisation. Through the workshops and other activities, the scheme was seen to build a greater sense of community across faculties which enabled students and staff to make productive links between projects and other streams of work. Whilst there was a recognition that the financial benefit was often limited to a few students per project, many projects sought to engage a much wider pool of peers.

One of the unexpected outcomes of the scheme was the significant impact the projects had on the perception which students had about their employability. Whilst a number of student partners continued to hold down additional employment outside of the institution, many reported that they were able to cut down on their hours and 77% of students felt that they had gained professional and academic experience through the scheme. As one student stated:

I have just been offered a job for next year and I truly believe my role in the scheme played a big part in that. My interviewer was very interested in discussing the project and could see that I could utilise the research undertaken for the role. Not only has this been an impressive experience to list on my CV, I feel that I have developed a whole bunch of new skills and it gave me the confidence to go out into employment.

Student Partner Law

This outcome mirrors that experienced by Northwest where student employment is seen as an opportunity to provide an ‘educational employment experience’ which will prepare students to go out into the workplace (McLain, 2003). The scheme enables students to take responsibility for managing a project and see tangible benefits for themselves and others. Continued feedback from student partners suggests that the gain from the student academic partners projects have extended beyond the financial benefits.

What is missing from the evaluation are the opinions of those students and staff who were not directly involved with the scheme in the first year. Anecdotal reports and the rise in applications in the second year suggest that students and staff who become aware of projects were often inspired to develop their own ideas for development. The integration of presentations from the projects into the institutional learning and teaching conference has enabled other staff and students to become involved. Most initiatives have had tangible outcomes for other students as one student described:

Before [the project] you’d have to have a member of staff around in the [screen printing] room or in the vicinity so you could only print on certain days so staff would be supervising you and it would be a bit stressful because screen printing can be a bit stressful anyway, but now it’s relaxing and students come in and play music and talk and get involved in each other’s work and ask about different techniques and there is more of a community in the print room. A lot of the second years have become really interested in it because of that and we’ve been helping them out. Student Partner BIAD
Lessons learnt – supporting conditions for the development of meaningful staff–student collaboration

Through the evaluation of the scheme, we collaboratively identified with student and staff partners four conditions for facilitating meaningful staff–student relationships for educational development. Whilst this is not an exhaustive list, these conditions were felt to underpin an environment which valued, supported and enabled collaborative working across the institution. We offer these conditions which we believe to be useful for others with a desire to change the nature of student and staff relationships at their own institution.

Institutional support

As a scheme which had at its heart a desire for culture change, it was seen as essential to seek the support of key individuals at the institution from the outset. The inclusion of senior managers from the centre of the institution and from faculties at the philosophy development and design stage secured a high level of understanding. This support proved crucial for persuading and enabling staff at the institution to take part and for securing the continuation of the scheme beyond the pilot. Gaining institutional support served to legitimise collaboration for learning and teaching development activity, giving students and staff ‘permission’ to work in new ways and in the long term will, it is hoped, ensure the sustainability of the scheme.

Making sense of collaboration

From the outset, we were aware that for partnerships which were genuinely collaborative to take place it would be necessary to openly acknowledge the hierarchical relationships between students and staff at the institution. In practice, this was undertaken through the articulation of values within all promotional material and a focus on developing relationships in the initial briefing session. By openly addressing and facilitating discussion about power relationships and acknowledging the responsibility of all team members for project management, students and staff were encouraged to engage with each other differently.

Ownership and autonomy

Students and staff were encouraged to identify projects which would be valuable within the context of their own specific programme, discipline or faculty in order to enable teams to make a difference in the areas that mattered to them most. There was recognition that student and staff partners were the experts in the development needs within their chosen area and best placed to develop approaches to enhancing the learning experience with those affected. Teams set their own objectives, managed their project and were responsible for structuring the work in their own timeframe. This enabled projects to take a leading role and to negotiate their timetable for work around other commitments and priorities.
Support and encouragement

Through an initial briefing meeting and a number of workshops, the CELT support team provided space for teams to set expectations, plan their projects and to engage with other project teams. These workshops created an environment in which projects were able to support each other and share practice across the university. In order to reinforce the idea of project, autonomy support and evaluation visits were arranged for the CELT team to meet with teams on location so that projects could be discussed in their own context. On an institutional level projects were encouraged to share findings through the annual learning and teaching festival which enabled engagement with the wider university and the celebration of project successes. Together these activities positioned collaborative engagement between students and staff for educational development as a prestigious activity reinforcing the principles of the scheme.

Reflections for the sector

Financially, the employment of students is a relatively small amount of money for institutions to invest for a high level of impact in the areas which students and staff see as most valuable. Employment of students makes financial sense in a higher education which recognises students as co-producers.

Culturally employment of students to work in partnership with staff for learning and teaching development has injected new life into the community of the university. For staff partners, it has led to a greater ownership and increased capacity to engage in educational development in collaboration with students. For students, it has provided a genuine opportunity to make real, fundamental change for the benefit of their peers, their course and themselves in a way that is recognised and valued by the institution. For the university as a whole, the investment has symbolised the institution visibly investing in students and staff as the owners of educational enhancement. It has taken the first steps in the creation of an environment in which enhancement is an activity engaged in by the many rather than the few as part of the normal activity of the community.

Whilst not all universities may have the financial backing to employ students, (and we believe the supporting conditions to be relevant to anyone seeking to engender collaboration between students and staff whether payment is available or not) the potential of this type of investment in learning and teaching, particularly in the current financial climate, cannot be overestimated.

Notes on contributors

Rebecca Freeman was a researcher at the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching at Birmingham City University until August 2011. She developed the pilot Student Academic Partners scheme and coordinated support and evaluation of the projects. She is currently completing her PhD ‘Student voice in higher education: an analysis on competing discourses and ideologies’ at the University of Birmingham and has published on the theme of student engagement and student governance. She now works in the School of Life Sciences at the University of Warwick as an Educational Strategy Officer.

Luke Millard is head of Learning Partnerships at BCU and co-ordinates the Student Academic Partners scheme. He was formally project manager of the University’s CETL and now leads on initiatives around student engagement and student transition to the University.
Stuart Brand is director of Learning and Teaching at BCU and was the originator of the Student Academic Partners scheme. His main drive is to improve student engagement across the University and is presently exploring how student employment can be best devised to enhance engagement.

Paul Chapman is the membership engagement manager at Birmingham City Students’ Union. He is seconded to the University for 50% of his time, and helps coordinate student engagement activity and supports the student role in the Student Academic Partners scheme.

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