HEA Student and Staff Partnership Award 2013 – Highly commended

Transformative Partnerships: a case study of collaboration at Canterbury Christ Church University

Lucy Dearden, Student Engagement Officer lucy.dearden@canterbury.ac.uk
Tristi Brownett, Student Ambassador for Learning and Teaching (Health and Social Care) t.brownett1026@canterbury.ac.uk

Building on partnership
Forging transformative partnerships is integral to Canterbury Christ Church University’s mission. Building on our long-standing tradition of collaborative work within the local and international community and the public sector, this year we have taken an exciting step in our exploration of powerful partnerships: working directly with our own students to enhance and bring about positive change to the student experience.

As part of our University wide Change Programme the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit has launched a new scheme called Student Ambassadors for Learning and Teaching (SALT). This network of undergraduate and postgraduate students from across all four of the University faculties, have been working with the University to develop projects which address issues relating to their proactive participation and involvement in learning and teaching, the student experience and future employability. These initiatives are embedded within their departments, faculties and the institution as a whole.

The SALTs are encouraged to explore themes which interest them, creating their own unique projects or working with staff to develop projects in response to existing agendas. On all projects the SALTs are assigned a sponsor- a member of academic or professional service staff whose role is to advise and facilitate the development of projects

Projects that have emerged this year, both initiated by SALTs or with SALTs co-opted as student partners, include:

- Defining an Inclusive Curriculum at Canterbury Christ Church University
- Enhancing the Role of Student Rep
- Employability for Social Science and Arts Graduates
- Communication and Community in the Faculty of Education
- Student-led Induction: a guide and welcome
- Students as Reviewers of Learning and Teaching
- Listening Wall: a physical and virtual space for student ideas and feedback
- A Student Guide on Qualitative Research
- Staff Conference 2013 ‘Citizens, Community and Public Service’
- Partners in Learning space: a collaborative learning and teaching environment

Benefits of partnership
In its initial conception, it was envisioned that the SALT scheme would stimulate the development of faculty-based projects. By allowing the scheme to develop organically, along with students’ interests, an unforeseen benefit has been the way in which the SALTs have embraced cross-faculty working; several of the projects have developed from mixed faculty teams, in which SALTs have identified common issues and objectives and designed projects accordingly. This kind of authentic partnership benefits the student experience not only by building a sense of community but also by providing examples of good practice for others to learn from.
Since the scheme’s launch in February 2013, the SALTs have forged diverse partnerships across the University community, working with Employability and Careers; Equality and Diversity; the Students’ Union; Staff Development; Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit; academics and of course, with their fellow students. Each project provides opportunities for the wider student community to engage in a voluntary capacity – through focus groups, surveys or workshops – which additionally might then contribute towards a skills award on their Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR).

**Partnership in action**

One example of how the SALT scheme has already become rooted in the University is the SALTs part in the annual staff conference. This summer’s conference - Citizens, Community and Public Service- will explore how modern universities can contribute to community by: reinvigorating workforces with high quality graduates, raising aspirations and enriching communities with the offer of higher education and supporting economic regeneration in underprivileged communities. The conference will ask students and staff to work together to develop grassroots initiatives to realise these potentials.

Students are at the heart of this conference in a way that they have not been before, in the 14 or more years since the University first started organising staff conferences. Although the last 5 years have seen students welcomed as participants to the day, this year students have been invited in the spirit of genuine partnership. SALTs are central to the planning and delivery of this event, as members of the planning committee and acting as facilitators during the event.

As a SALT I feel that my early involvement took a great deal of trust on the part of my academic colleagues but highlighted their willingness to engage with the heart and soul of the ‘Students as Partners’ initiative. I believe that the SALTS involvement in this project will give students a unique voice that will resonate throughout the University and begin its assent into the psyche of the institution. The agenda is a shared agenda of getting it right for the community as a whole. To have an equal partnership in the decision making for the benefit of a diverse and sustainable future feels ethically right.

Personally, I have found the experience liberating in that I am taken seriously by senior academics in the organisation and that they embrace the partnership of shared learning experience. It is because of this acceptance of students as partners for change that I feel that I really can make a difference to the university that I love. Being a SALT is not hard work, it’s really good fun, very interesting and gives me the confidence that I can make a difference. Wherever I go, inside or outside the institution, people are really keen to know what it is I do and always indicate that they think that the SALT role is great idea!

This year’s planning committee, chaired by the Dean of Education, not only welcomed but actively sought the involvement of the SALTs at the staff conference. From the University’s perspective the SALTs provide an invaluable student perspective on the issues explored in the event and importantly their involvement will further feed into the outcomes of their on-going work to enhance the wider student experience.

This is a rare opportunity for students to be involved in the process of creating ground-breaking ideas that will map the future of the University in its engagement with citizens, the community and our public service. Engaging students as partners in this project highlights how important these partnerships are for successful and sustainable futures, and demonstrates this ethos of transformative partnerships across each business area of the university.

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