University-Guild partnership: Lifting our Laurels

“Our first priority must be meeting the expectations of students”

Professor Sir Steve Smith, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, University of Exeter

The University of Exeter and Exeter Students’ Guild enjoy a longstanding and hugely successful partnership. The partnership goes right to the top of the University, with Exeter being the first institution in the UK to invite students to help set spending priorities through the innovative Budget Scrutiny Group.

In the last year alone this culture of partnership and cooperation has lead to a number of significant outcomes for staff and students such as:

- The opening of the £48million Forum building, a student-led multi million investment into a ‘one stop shop’ for increasingly student-led and staffed central services, the library, and cutting-edge study space built around the student experience
- Launching 60 new ‘Students as Change Agents’ projects across the University, and embedding the Change Agents culture across all three of our campuses
- Appointment of a unique Student Engagement Manager post jointly funded by the university and the Guild.
- The first Student Engagement Conference to celebrate over 100 student led, staff supported projects across the University, and the coming launch of an e-database to share best practice
- FRUNI – a chance for students to vote for and replay their favourite lectures in an evening lecture series for the whole University community
- A 36% increase in undergraduate applications which we attribute to the University’s commitment to partnership with students, and the tangible benefits of this across the institution
- Launch of ‘Discipline-based volunteering’ where college staff and students are supported by the Students’ Guild to embark upon a community project with a real impact. One of the projects, ‘Community Care Homes’, has already received national recognition and a host of media attention.
- Exeter Grand Challenges. This is where leading academics work with first year students to expand their horizons across contemporary dilemmas to explore research and think about solutions

Our partnership is underpinned by mutual respect with both staff and students being recognised as experts in their own right, and the examples above hold testament to the development of a brilliant culture of mutual support alongside formal links between the Students’ Guild and the University.

These formal links are being constantly extended and strengthened across the University. Examples of the many student driven initiatives include: the development of college specific student-written ‘Visions for Education’; strategic visioning with student groups in the development of the new Education Strategy; a jointly funded post of Student Engagement Manager between the Guild and the University; and through innovative bodies such as the ‘budget scrutiny group’, where students this year were even empowered to freeze accommodation prices.
The results of these partnerships are also being celebrated through the renowned Annual Teaching Awards, this year for which students wrote an astounding 215,000 words in 2,415 nominations for 554 members of staff. The Awards ceremony was celebrated in an evening together with almost 200 staff and students. The Students’ Awards for hundreds of student volunteers and representatives is yet to come. Our ‘Free Range UNI’ (FRUNI) initiative saw students nominate their teachers to host an evening lecture series from across the University where over 900 staff and students attended.

The benefits of the partnership are evident in the high-impact, high-profile range of aforementioned projects, as well as through over 100 localised projects across the University, which serve to demonstrate the continual strengthening of connective tissue between staff and students at each level. Furthermore, the University will be jointly hosting a Student Engagement Conference with the Students’ Guild in June to celebrate our new model of Student Engagement.

Our model has emerged through our experience of a genuine two way partnership between staff and students and recognises that students “engage” in all kinds of ways and that there are many ways in which the University can support this. Building this relationship has meant collecting a large amount of data and managing extensive consultations, which has been undertaken by ex-student Graduate Business Partners (GBPs) and other committed staff across the six colleges.

In the next academic year we are planning to drastically transform our Quality Review system to really put students at the heart of it. We’re designing a new ‘Annual Student Experience’ review to replace Annual Programme Monitoring, to revolutionise the way in which we support staff and student dialogue throughout modules and programmes, not just at the end.

So much has been achieved this year by the partnerships between staff and students through the strong leadership and co-ordination of the University and Students’ Guild. We also have exciting plans for next year, and hope to work with the Higher Education Academy to host a sector-wide event focussed on Student Engagement. As well as this, we plan to continue our constant re-evaluation of everything we offer to ensure that students have the best experience possible, and feel fully part of our academic community before they go into the world as responsible, active and highly skilled citizens.

Exeter University and the Exeter Students Guild are, and will remain, leaders in delivering an excellent student experience, so long as we keep students at the heart of what we do. To be recognised by the HEA and NUS with this prestigious award would be a huge success for us, and something we would use to both build on our own journey through Student Engagement, and to further develop sector-wide good practice in partnership with our students and staff.

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