Students as Partners in the Curriculum (SAP) Change Programme
Reflective learners, responsive curricula: building communities of scholarship

University of Bristol Case Study

The Bristol Student Partnership Working Group

Introduction

The development of the Bristol Student Partnership originated from a desire from students and staff to develop stronger learning communities at the University of Bristol, where students are empowered to be active players in shaping their educational experience. Bristol has a large pool of engaged students involved with the shaping and enhancing their learning experience, but, much of that work was happening in silos, lacking visibility across the institution, and good practice was not being surfaced and shared.
Our first step was to improve the democratic course representative process, but this project is designed to be the next step – to improve communities within disciplines, by working with student academic societies as key players in the creation of disciplinary communities, and to build synergies across all the other pathways through which students are contributing to building our community of scholars. We started from a set of practical actions to create momentum, and then worked with students and staff to develop The Bristol Student Partnership Vision, to create synergies and ensure we make the most of the ways in which our students engage with the University; to promote and extend the large number of opportunities for engagement and partnership across Schools and Faculties in a consistent way; and to encourage best practice across all the activities.

Aspects of the student learning experience the initiative sought to enhance

The Bristol Student Partnership Project aims to be nothing less than transformative: it aims to revolutionise students’ University experience, from their engagement with their academic studies through to fostering a sense of belonging through effective community building. It is this desire for stronger communities that was a key priority; when students feel they belong within strong community structures, they are more empowered to take on a partnership role. Anecdotal evidence at the University of Bristol suggests that those schools which have traditionally benefited from a strong community spirit have already achieved high levels of partnership working; one of the objectives of our work is to make this common across all 28 schools so that all students can enjoy these benefits. The key aims of the HEA project can be encapsulated within the following bullet points:

- to build strong and sustainable disciplinary societies in all disciplines engaged in academic and community cohesion as a powerhouse of community identity and creativity;
- to ensure students as partners are embedded within a simpler more dynamic and responsive curriculum design process;
- to establish a Student Academic Advisory Group linking all strands of student action advising and supporting the Sabbatical Officers;
- to make visible the very wide range of opportunities for students to engage in fostering and enhancing the experience of all – to enable students to find the opportunities appropriate to them;
- to establish a network through which all those students who are engaged can share and build upon their experience;
- students and academics feeling positive about their ability to achieve change

“Students breathe life into a University, and their input into University life and learning is vital.”

Prof. Jan Noyes
Head of the School of Experimental Psychology
Alignment with the HEA Students as Partners framework

Our principles for the Bristol Student Partnership were developed through open workshops where staff and students worked together. The Bristol Partnership Vision reflects the same aims as the Framework, but it was important to us to use the language and structure that emerged from our workshops, which resonated with students and staff at Bristol. The Bristol Student Partnership Vision 2015-2020 draws upon the approach of the HEA Framework, and was significantly influenced by the fuller publication (see Healy, Flint and Harrington, 2014) but seeks to integrate learning and teaching, with participation in governance and monitoring, and engagement in the wider University community, because we see them as integrally linked.

Figure 1: Mapping pathways of student involvement, around the SAAG and Student Experience Forum.

Approaches and activities developed

The Bristol Student Partnership project forms a central part of a four year programme to change the student relationship with the governance of the University. The work started from representation, to ensure a democratic basis for the work, but has now extended into more complex community building, which is the bedrock of students feeling this is their University.

Prior to the starting of the HEA project, in 2013-14, the entire student representation system was overhauled. The strengthened system is now embedding well, with over 600 course reps elected, a structure of course, School, Faculty and specialist representatives and a full rep training
programme implemented. The work in 2014-15 concentrated on three main areas, aiming to address the more complex issue of community building and the way students can effectively become active agents in partnership.

1. Academic Societies – this work is based on vision of academic societies as the bedrock on which to build strong and vibrant communities of scholars as a home base for students. A student intern, Marta Skrzypinska, overseen by the Students’ Union and University jointly, has led a review of our Academic Societies, meeting with every school and society and for the first time mapping our provision. This provided the first comprehensive study of Academic Societies, and resulted in a 23 point action plan, with recommendations for the Students’ Union, Academic Societies and the University, which are now being implemented. Academic Society leaders, Students’ Union representatives and academics met for a workshop, hosted by the PVC Education, to launch this new focus on Academic Societies, and regular follow up events with the academic societies have been held to share good practice and to foster relations and share good practice between the societies. This is strengthening our academic societies, fostering their relationship with the Students’ Union and providing a strong voice to work with the course representative structure.

2. Curriculum Review and Development – a new University process for curriculum review and development has been agreed, and is being piloted in three schools in 2014/15. This places students at the heart of curriculum design and review, building upon their successful role in other quality assurance processes within the University.

3. Student Academic Advisory Group – this development addresses two issues: Sabbatical Officers’ desire for a sounding board to consult that is wider than just the Sabbatical team, and the desire to make visible and foster the expertise and insight students develop through undertaking various student roles. The Student Academic Advisory Group is being piloted this year by the UG Education Officer and Faculty reps. Figure 1 above shows the diverse and rich ways in which students participate in shaping the educational provision of the University; much of this is not visible outside of the individual area of work. The University is working on developing a way to make this massive student contribution more visible and to ensure the expertise developed by students in these roles is recognised and built upon, represented in Figure 1 by the working title of ‘Student Experience Forum’. The model is attracting national attention as an innovative approach.

4. Mapping student involvement and contribution to the University - in a novel piece of work, all the different ways students interact with their University was mapped out at displayed graphically in Figure 1, above. This revealed a number of interactions that we hadn’t initially considered, and revealed the huge amount of different contributions that happen all the time at the University of Bristol.
**Resources**

A number of resources have been developed as part of our involvement in the HEA project. These include:

- Academic Societies report;
- Mapping student pathways of engagement in University life;
- The Bristol Student Partnership Vision;
- Code of Practice for the Representation of Taught Students;
- Training resources for student representatives on the Bristol SU website.

“Everything they’re asking is what we were thinking three years ago, so it creates a safer environment for them to ask those questions.” (Lizzi Tobin, Medical Imaging)

**Impact**

All of the work detailed has had the common aim of mobilising students as change agents, and encouraging them to take an active role in partnership. We had planned for the 2014-15 academic year to be the implementation year for the new course rep structure (having been developed in the 2013-14 academic year), and the development year for our work around academic societies, curriculum review and mapping of student involvement with the University. However, we have been fortunate to have had a number of early successes, meaning that we have already managed to start the implementation of our 2014-15 initiatives. This has been extremely positive for the project and has helped quicken the overall timescales.

The creation of the Student Academic Advisory Group has helped to join up the dots in student representation, and has enabled Faculty reps to have more of an oversight of issues across the entire University.

The work with academic societies has been enlightening and positive. The action plan developed has helped the Students’ Union and schools within the University to better support society leaders and continually enhance the support they receive. This has culminated in a programme of workshops and activities for academic societies to help them develop skills in areas they have previously lacked, as well as information sessions for University staff.

Other major changes that have arisen from the Students as Partners project include the inclusion of student representatives on all major University committees, giving them a core decision-making
role; a changed role for the Students’ Union and academic societies in Peer Assisted Learning schemes; and also, the redevelopment of the curriculum review process to embed students at its core.

There have also been several windfall gains. Once the momentum of student partnership had been established through the project, it has spread outside of the project work. The fact this has led to new areas of engagement which were not planned as part of the project is a welcome and positive indicator of the embedding of change. Four such examples to illustrate are: the reestablishment of the Best of Bristol lectures giving academic societies an excellent opportunity to showcase themselves to large audiences, and play an active role in leading education-focused extracurricular activity. Seven academic societies took part by nominating an academic viewed as outstanding by their members, to give a talk to the University and general public. It is hoped that the series will become an annual event, with continual involvement from academic societies. The funding of a full-time Student Communities Co-ordinator has meant that we have also been exploring and promoting partnership working within University residences through targeted work with JCRs (elected student committees) and hall staff.

Furthermore, the HEFCE Green Capital fund grant that the University obtained has given students more opportunities to be partners in change in more areas, such as sustainability initiatives. For example, part of Bristol SU’s Student Green Fund work is to work with students to identify curriculum change opportunities for sustainability and then skilling and supporting the students to seek to secure the change. This has led to the development and the successful set-up of a student-led conference to showcase student work and research in any area to do with sustainability in April 2015.

Another initiative recently set-up by students, in partnership with the University, is the Higher Education Community of Inquiry1. This forum is directed by students, in which students and academics reflect on the future of HE and key issues in the national landscape - this coming-together of staff and students as equals and co-producers of insight is a physical manifestation of a culture of partnership spreading throughout the institution, and is another example of the success of this initiative.

We are measuring the success of the work through a set of key performance indicators (KPIs); more students are involved in representation and are progressively moving up through the structure – in March 2015, for the second consecutive year, an Undergraduate Education Sabbatical Officer was elected who had previously acted as a course rep and Faculty rep. Additionally, two of the other candidates for the role had extensive experience as course reps and academic society presidents. Students are now more able to chart their own journeys through the engagement opportunities to develop their own voice within the partnership.

“As a member of academic staff, I really enjoy working in partnership with our students. They have such a refreshing take on knowledge acquisition and a real grasp for how technology can aid learning and their input into our teaching is very much valued.”

Prof. Kate Nobes
Head of the School of Biochemistry
Lessons learned

There have been a number of challenges to the successful implementation of the Bristol Student Partnership project. Due to the highly devolved nature of the institution, using an experimentalist governance approach, we have encountered highly differential practice in different Schools and Faculties; some Schools are already far more advanced than our Vision projects, while some require more targeted support. Linked with this is a difficulty in mapping what is already happening – many of the richest interactions happen informally on an ad-hoc basis, meaning that it is difficult to assess the current state of affairs in the round. The devolved nature of the institution also presents challenges in terms of communication. However it also facilitates innovation and experimentation, enables change to be tailored to particular groups of students and leads to deep change. We have seen partnership become part of the zeitgeist of the institution, at which point, the role of institutional leadership becomes the sharing of good practice and affording value and recognition to these examples.

Another challenge, which is a sector-wide issue, is the difficulty in engaging postgraduate students in representative structures and partnership working. Students enrolled on postgraduate taught programmed are usually only present for a year and spend much of their time working intensively. Consequently, their focus is not necessarily on engagement. Postgraduate research students have a very different University experience in comparison to taught students and often identify more with staff or interdisciplinary research teams. To ensure the partnership work is tailored to their needs, a student intern has been employed to map postgraduate representation as it currently stands, and to work with current research students to develop recommendations to address this issue.

Equality and diversity considerations have been prominent in our work. This year, we have developed ways to ensure the work of the Bristol SU’s Liberation Fora are mapped into the course representative structures and academic community building work, to ensure all voices are heard.

Finally, another key lesson that we have learned is the importance of identifying and sharing best practice, and showing that the leadership of the institution values this work. Additionally, by showing students and staff the benefits that can arise from working in partnership, we are finding more innovation across our Schools and Faculties.
Next steps

Although the HEA project lasts for only one year, we have used it as part of a four year project. The Bristol Student Partnership project is ongoing as we are currently only part way through; the project can be roughly split into 4 phases, where phase 4 is our next step.

1. Summer 2013: overhauling student representation, student membership on central committees and a new system for course representation agreed.

2. 2013/2014: implementation of the new course rep system, with continual training and development. Targeted work with Faculty reps. Bid to be part of the HEA Students as Partners project.

3. 2014/15: developing the Partnership Vision, embedding the representation system and developing communities.

4. 2015/16: turning the Vision into actions and implementing the recommendations and outcomes of the HEA project.

In order for the work that we have done so far to be durable and effective, it needs to be embedded over time and continually refined, with targeted support to areas where change is harder to affect. Representation, developing academic societies and the successful operation of the Student Academic Advisory Group will all require further support and planning to ensure their continued success. Furthermore, as the project continues to widen in scope, by incorporating more community-building aspects, more KPIs will need to be developed to reflect this; by keeping the Bristol Student Vision as a living, continual, iterative document, it enables us to take advantage of other opportunities and continually learn.

In terms of actions, future key steps will involve exploring how opportunities which are presently limited to only some students, could be more broadly provided to all students; for example, the Faculty of Engineering employs student research assistants over the summer vacation, and some parts of the University employ student interns (but not others). Investigating the feasibility of developing opportunities, such as a Student Fellows scheme, similar to the University of Winchester model, are also areas to be explored in terms of maximising student involvement in their educational experience.

“As an academic society, we see ourselves a body which exists to link up students, staff, academic studies and extracurricular activities within our School.”

Ellie Pelych
President of GeogSoc
2nd year BSc (Hons) Geography student
Key messages

This is highly ambitious project, but we have achieved all of our targets for the HEA phase of our project. One of the key aspects that has allowed us to do this has been the effective representative structures in place. Although postgraduate representation continues to be a challenge, we have been able to establish a solid framework for implementing more change by having a cogent network of over 600 course reps, all democratically and transparently elected and trained to be effective; it was crucial to have representation working well before embarking on the more ambitious parts of this project. The importance of academic societies in fostering communities within their schools is also notable. This was encapsulated effectively by Ellie Pelych, President of the Geography Society, when introducing the Best of Bristol lecture her society helped organise – see the adjacent box. By giving academic societies the tools to do more and be more effective, without encroaching on their autonomy and differences in approach, the University and the Students’ Union helps these communities to develop further in both academic and extracurricular contexts, which helps students feel more empowered and gives them a better University experience.

Finally, the importance of recognising all the other ways students get involved in shaping their University experience is critical in developing an effective partnership strategy. Often, student engagement is equated to being a course rep; our Vision aims to change this perception. The contribution of students in all their various ways is highly valuable for the institution and is an important aspect of partnership – whether this is being an outreach widening participation ambassador, or being a student intern, as shown in Figure 1. Involving other groups where students feel a sense of ‘belonging’ is similarly important for this same reason, hence the targeted work with JCRs in University residences.

To conclude, the ongoing work on the Bristol Student Partnership project has been rewarding and highly positive. There is much discourse within the Higher Education sector claiming that students are apathetic, consumerist and unwilling to engage; however our work on this project, combined with the highly positive reception from students and staff alike, refutes these notions, and shows a clear appetite for this work to succeed. We truly believe that the future is bright for student partnership at the University of Bristol, and that the University community will be better off as a result.
References

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References