HEA and NUS joint Students’ Union and Institution Partnership Awards 2013 – Winning entry

Birmingham City Students’ Union and Birmingham City University

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Birmingham City – A Partnership Approach

Birmingham City Students’ Union (BCUSU) and Birmingham City University (BCU) have fostered an effective model of partnership, aspects of which have been adopted by other institutions within the sector. Over the last four years this relationship has embedded partnership as a key strategic driver for both organisations and helped establish a shift in culture, placing the values of student engagement at the heart of all activity on campus. Both organisations’ strategic documents now identify partnership working as a core directive. The University’s corporate plan states:

“To be an exemplar for student engagement, working in partnership with students to create and deliver an excellent university experience…”

“…we welcome the Students’ Union as a critical friend and partner of the University and we will particularly welcome the contribution it can make in encouraging student representation and feedback.”

Likewise, BCUSU has identified ‘Partnerships’ as being an enabler for achieving its most recent strategic vision. This follows several years of working together on projects; at the head of this is the secondment for 50% of the union’s Head of Engagement to the University’s Centre for Learning and Teaching (CELT).

This secondment is formalised in a written agreement outlining the scope of the role and the mutual benefits for both organisations and the student community. Whilst the funding of union staff by the institution is commonplace within the sector, the sharing of a senior position from the SU to the University is rare and demonstrates the investment from both parties into the relationship.

Since 2009, an ongoing output of the secondment is the development of the Student Academic Partners Scheme (SAPS). The joint collaboration between BCUSU and BCU not only exemplifies the relationship at a strategic and operational level but also integrates collaboration between students and staff instilling a sense of ownership and pride in the University.

This initiative has spawned a new student-focused culture at BCU placing students at the heart of designing and delivering new ways of working. Providing a basis for new activity such as Student Academic Mentoring (StAMP), Collaborative Projects (Co-Lab) and Opportunity Student Jobs on Campus, our partnership approach has involved over 2,000 new students. On top of this we have just launched an institution wide initiative called ‘Partners for Success’ led by the SU President and CELT looking to develop school based activity to improve student retention and success.

Our approach to student engagement has recently been documented in a new book ‘Student Engagement – Identity, Motivation and Community’, which contains 15 chapters collaboratively written by 43 students and staff. It was commissioned by LiHE (the International Academic Association for Learning in Higher Education) and we believe it to be the first of its kind. The forewords for the book are written by the HEA and the National Union of Students (NUS) and the chapters offer up inspirational case studies
showing how student engagement can impact and generate positive outcomes not only for those involved but for the wider University.

This book is reflective of our whole institutional approach to student engagement, an approach that places the concept of students working with staff, as partners in the improvement of the learning experience, at the centre of our institutional enhancement agendas.

Impact

These projects create new opportunities (paid and unpaid) to engage students and offer acquisition of skills and experiences to complement their academic experience. Many of these projects create positive impacts on those students they engage as well as providing new resources and motivation for staff to develop innovations. Our overarching intention was to create a greater sense of learning community and to support students becoming involved in the decision-making process within the institution and we have started to see this reflected in student feedback. Likewise, the role of students has started to change and develop through these initiatives moving on from the traditional, student only role through to students adopting the role of change agents, collaborators and as a fundamental part of decision making within the institution.

The Student Academic Partners Scheme (SAP) has supported over 200 projects and over 900 students and staff in learning development. In 2010 SAPs won the Times Higher Education Award for Outstanding support for Students and in 2012/13 our partnership approach was identified by the HEA as the inaugural theme for their ‘Students as Partners’ Change Academy.

The most recent survey undertaken with students involved in the third iteration of SAPs shows that nearly 90% of students had a positive response when asked if they felt part of a partnership with their staff counterparts and nearly 90% of students had a positive response in relation to feeling part of the learning community, with 60% of students saying they felt closer to the University.

The Student Academic Mentoring partnership (StAMP) has seen 40 projects over the last two years engaging 183 students mentoring over 1500 students through peer-to-peer support during individual and group sessions. The new Collaborative projects scheme which seeks to create cross-disciplinary live projects has, in its pilot year, engaged all faculties within 23 cross discipline teams and employed 97 students.

In April 2013, Opportunity Student Jobs on Campus filled its 1000th student job in its first 9 months of operation and this University HR function now houses itself within the SU offering a further example of integration, but now within the professional service area, not the academic.

In addition, BCUSU and BCU, together with its equivalents at Kingston University have bid to the HEA Collaborative Grants scheme for funding that would enable the SU in each institution to identify and fund academic projects. This bold ‘funding reversal’ seeks to offer students the power to identify initiatives that should be funded enabling the student perspective to come to the fore.

The HEA ‘Student Voice’ project from the ‘Students as Partners’ Change Academy has developed 19 pilot projects looking to revamp existing student representative functions into modern, flexible and informal processes that capture student opinion and feedback at all levels rather than confined to within prescribed
times and structures. One significant shift is the change of remit and membership to the Student Representative Coordination Group led by the university now becoming the Student Voice Group chaired by the SU and consisting of an equal 50:50 split between staff and students, adopting a much more dynamic approach to a broader range of student leadership within the institution.

**Conclusion**

At Birmingham City we have been explicit in the planning and involvement of students, adopting several different roles within strategic student engagement activity. The benefit of engaging students in a wider variety of educational roles and opportunities has both personal academic impacts on the individual as well as supporting the broader development of the learning community. The impact of this direction is beginning to gain momentum through the results within the National Student Survey in graph 1.

**Graph 1: BCU National Student Survey Results 2009 -2012 for the questions ‘Within my course I feel suggestions and ideas are valued’ and ‘I feel part of an academic community in my college or university’**

For further information on our activities please visit:

http://www.bcusu.com/learning/

http://www.bcu.ac.uk/about-us/celt/student engagement/publications