Developing a Student Academic Facilitator Role at the University of Portsmouth

Introduction:

The University of Portsmouth (UoP), Academic Developers (ADs) in the Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement (DCQE), Student Representatives (SRs) and the UoP Students’ Union (UPSU) have developed a collaborative partnership to enhance student learning. This is our story so far and our strategic aims for the future.

The First Steps to Partnership: Introduction of Students and Sabbatical Officers to APEX:

The Academic Professional Excellence Programme (APEX) at the UoP provides a range of flexible initial and continuing development opportunities for staff. This partnership supports new inexperienced staff working towards being awarded an APEX fellowship, which is accredited by the HEA Academy.

The APEX programme has been a great platform for nurturing this partnership from the early stages. In 2012/2013 ADs in DCQE, working in partnership with Sabbatical Officers (SOs), arranged for students to attend two workshops. This was very successful (high feedback scores from both staff and students) and generated much discussion about the nature of student learning and how best to enhance it. It had such a positive impact that we then trialled a session with more student volunteers. This demonstrated that students can have a fundamental impact on the shape and direction of teaching practice and thereby the student learning experience, if they work as facilitators in APEX workshops.

As a result this academic year we introduced an open door policy for SRs to take part in APEX workshops. Their remit has been to facilitate discussion to support staff in enhancing the student learning experience.
Students as Partners

learning experience. Students were involved in over 20 workshops on enhancing student learning, small group, large group learning, inclusion and diversity, independent learning, assessment and giving feedback. It has been a very successful initiative and very well received by both staff and students. This is evidence by the very high impact and satisfaction scores on the feedback sheets. They have supported new academic staff in designing teaching and learning activities and in their reflective analysis of their teaching practice in the case studies they submit for their APEX fellowship.

Recognising and valuing excellence in teaching and learning

The student-led Teaching Awards, started by UPSU three years ago, have led to an appreciation and understanding of innovative teaching practice, whilst also communicating to UPSU and the UoP what students believe to be best practice and how it enhances their learning.

Some best practice case studies have been developed by students collaborating with these award winning lecturers in a pilot website. We intend to include an edited Blog inviting positive, constructive discussion about innovation and enhancement in teaching and learning. In addition winners of the Teaching Awards 2013 were invited by students to participate in workshops.

We are currently exploring the way we can utilise, transform, innovate and extend existing structures at the UoP. We propose to design and implement a new pathway in the APEX programme, namely a Student Academic Facilitators’ (SAF) pathway, which has had positive feedback from senior management. This would offer an opportunity for a more formalised and acknowledged professional development opportunity for students at the heart of APEX. We are developing a SAF Moodle site where they will submit a reflective account of their own professional practice as facilitators, enhancing employability skills. This proposed new APEX pathway
incorporates the evolving website project that we hope will become an additional platform for training, reference and reflection for both staff and students.

In terms of the university decision making structure we are developing existing participatory roles, for example, SR roles and Student Voice policy to continue to enhance student-led participation across the UoP. We are also working on establishing a UoP Enhancement Partnership Committee. It is proposed that this structure could ultimately be reflected in degree programs. This Committee would be the SAFs first point of contact within the University Committee Structure via their Faculty Representative.

"As a student facilitator this experience has enhanced my own learning both academically and otherwise. It has allowed me to be reflective on my learning and teaching environment and better informed my understanding of my needs and those of the lecturers." (Student perspective from the Staff APEX D2 Route A, Peer Learning session 5)

(An example of one of the students filming the group discussion at one of the Staff APEX training session)

Conclusion

This partnership has had a positive impact on student learning at the UoP. Staff attending workshops with SAFs continue to rate this professional development opportunity very highly. In over 20 APEX workshops this year a statistical analysis of the impact on student learning is consistently over 90% as rated by staff (nearly 40). Likewise the SAFs (10) involved have rated the experience similarly in terms of their own development. Both staff and students frequently remark on the openness, dialogue, debate and laughter and how this engagement with SAFs enhances both staff and students’ understanding of the student learning experience.
This is an exciting and innovative development; it has proved to be an important professional development tool for both staff and students in their co-construction of knowledge about enhancing student learning.

“I have taken part in the APEX training sessions as a Student Rep. I thought it was really interesting and insightful for what lecturers have to go through. If I was to take part more often I think I would be able to help directly improve my experience at university because the lectures would be learning from student experiences” (Danielle, a Student Rep who participated in the Staff APEX training sessions)

(An example of some of the student-led work from one of the Staff APEX training sessions)
"The key strength of this event was talking to students, debating key learning/teaching perceptions from both sides." (Staff perspective from the Staff APEX D2 Route A, Peer Learning session 2)