HEA Students as Partners Change Programme

Student Academic Development Research Associates Scheme (SADRAS)
Kingston University

Case Study  May 2013

Introduction

Aims

This scheme aims to encourage staff and students to undertake educational and pedagogic research with the purpose of improving the academic experience of students at the university. This work will encourage collaboration between staff and students, enabling students to both provide a perspective on how the student experience might be improved but also to undertake paid research in an academic environment.

The scheme is a joint venture between the university’s Academic Development Centre and the Student Union. The Students’ Union believes that by engaging students and staff together in research, a better educational experience can be provided to the student body.

This scheme is designed to develop a culture of collaboration between students and staff at a grassroots level, giving individual students and staff an opportunity to make a positive change to the learning experience at Kingston.

The design of the scheme owes much to the Student Academic Partners project at Birmingham City University but it is envisaged that this scheme will have a particular focus of its own, emanating as it does from a long tradition at Kingston of staff student partnership working.

Nature and scope

Both staff and students will be invited to initiate and consider particular issues which they would like to be the subject of the research. These ideas may have arisen from Staff Student Consultative Committees or other formal student consultations but may also be provoked by individual thoughts, ideas and experiences. Projects will be in line with the university’s new strategic plan: “Led by Learning”, and will aim to enhance the student experience by active student engagement and impact positively on progression, retention and attainment. Successful proposals will clearly show how the student will be an active partner in the project and preference will be given to those proposals that have been developed collaboratively.
27 projects are being funded in Year 1

How can space be improved to encourage collaboration between disciplines?
Measuring student sustainability literacy;
Evaluating E-books as a learning tool;
Collaboration across the 1992 divide: the PG research student experience;
An investigation into the provision of course feedback and how it can be enhanced to suit students' needs using personal tutors.

Align with mission and strategic plan

A new strategic plan “Led by Learning” has just been approved by the university Governors and this scheme has been explicitly designed to be informed by and contribute to the implementation of this plan.

The university is also implementing a new Academic Framework which has also been informed by “Led by Learning”. This framework encompasses a number of Curriculum Design Framework Principles which all UG and PG programmes will be required to reflect. Consequently, all validation panels will ask questions including: “Are there opportunities for students to engage with the development of aspects of their course as part of a learning community?”

The university has a tradition of widening participation and has a strong access record. However we are concerned about the attainment gap between our BME and white students and believe this scheme may provide student insights into a number of pertinent issues.

How it will enhance quality of student experience

Our main aim is that the projects themselves will directly impact positively on the student experience. We also expect the student partners involved to benefit from their engagement but we will look to validate this claim. We will also systematically disseminate the findings from these projects and encourage their implementation across the university and its partners.

Aspect(s) of the student learning experience the initiative sought to enhance

The project aims to enhance:

- The students’ experience of undertaking educational research
- Staff and student relationships through collaborative working
- Sharing knowledge and experiences of staff and students
- The provision of student perspectives to enhancements in learning and teaching
- Improved self-confidence in students
- A greater sense of belonging to the institution by the student
Approaches and activities developed

Panel
A Steering group was convened at the start of the project. It consisted of staff from the Academic Development Centre and student representatives from the Student Union. The remit of the group is to:

- Be responsible for the monitoring, evaluation and development of the scheme;
- Make decisions regarding the launch of the scheme;
- Attend and support the selection panel;
- Attend and contribute to the scheme induction event;
- Act as mentors for scheme participants;
- Attend and participate in the year 1 dissemination event.

Launch
The scheme was launched at the start of the academic year, a week after Induction. The Academic Development Centre and the Student’s Union had websites to publicise the scheme and posted announcements on relevant intranet sites and to key staff/students. The deadline for proposals was tight which may have prevented some people from applying but this was due to the fact that approval for the scheme was granted at the start of the summer vacation so nothing could realistically be done until September. Publicity will commence much earlier for year 2 to maximise applications.

Decisions panel
A panel was convened to sift through the applications and decide which would be funded. Staff and students worked to a number of criteria to determine successful applicants.

Induction
A successful induction event was held for all scheme participants. This was extremely well received and almost all 110 staff and students were in attendance.

Workshops
A number of workshops were provided for students participating in SADRAS projects. These were based on the project timeline and focussed on: Getting started, Time Management, Collecting feedback, and Poster preparation.

Dissemination event
A dissemination event is due to be held on the evening of 29th April (publicity attached). It will take form of poster presentations by all the projects. Additionally, further dissemination of the projects is being planned within the university in June and July to coincide with the launch of the 2013/14 projects.

Resources
Kingston University Student Union SADRAS website click here
Impact

An independent evaluation has been put in place from the beginning of the project. A draft interim report is attached, the evaluation framework aimed to:

- Collect and analyse the perceptions and experiences of both students and staff in project teams, before, during and on its completion.
- Identify any impact the scheme has on the development of a community of learning and a culture of student/staff collaboration.
- Determine whether the projects impacted on the student experience (satisfaction, progression and retention.

We have information and insights as to: the level of previous educational research experience of staff and students; how staff and students became aware of SADRAS; the perceived level of support; the reasons cited by staff and students for engaging in SADRAS; the self-reported research and generic knowledge and skills gained by staff and students through working on a SADRAS project and the perceived benefits for staff and student partners. The final category included:

- Facilitating change / improvement
- Getting the student voice heard
- Improving staff/student relationships
- Sharing experience and knowledge
- Evidence informed teaching

A final evaluation will be produced in June and will draw further evidence from:

- Students
  - Questionnaire
  - Focus groups
- Staff
  - Questionnaire
  - Focus groups or interviews
- Steering Group
  - Focus group or interviews
Lessons learned

A great deal has been learned about the process of managing the project and the support provided for staff and students. The following summarise the main issues:

- More explicit links to the university’s Revised academic framework (RAF) and the university’s Strategic plan Led by Learning
- Less focus on skills and more on community and partnership
- More support for project over application to Ethics committees and guidance for students on undertaking focus groups
- Steering group to take greater ownership for the managing of the project
- Project manager to have ultimate responsibility for the project and report to the steering group
- More systematic selection process for applications
- Use of Year one projects to enhance awareness of SADRAS
- More clarification around student and staff partner roles / responsibilities
- Application form to include:
  - Agreement for both students and staff partners to attend workshops and dissemination events
  - Raising awareness about ethics? block book at session with Faculty Ethics Committees (we do this in health for the SW post grad students for example)
- Further consideration of how student payment is managed (issues with tax / burdensome to coordinate)

Next steps

Funds have been allocated (through the university’s Access Agreement) to support SADRAS in 2013/14 and 2014/15. The Steering Group will be planning the launch of the 2013/14 round which will occur three months earlier than in the first year. The launch and the subsequent application process, selection and support will be further informed by the final evaluation report in June 2013.

Key messages

- The relationship between the university Academic Development Centre and the Student Union worked very well but required commitment on both sides and all decisions to be taken by mutual agreement.
- We were extremely fortunate to have secured the support of Professor Stuart Brand from Birmingham City University who provided invaluable insight and practical advice.
- We learned a great deal about the appropriate support to give the projects in terms of addressing the ethical aspects of their research.
- It was vital to have a dedicated project manager and external evaluator.