

HEA Students as Partners Change Programme

Design your own course? A new role for students in programme development and curriculum design

Manchester Metropolitan University

Case Study

May 2013

Introduction

Aim

To develop student/staff partnerships in curriculum design with particular focus on student participation in curriculum development and review.

Objectives

- To examine the ways in which students can contribute to curriculum design and development
- To specify the roles which student representatives can play in developing course specifications
- To encourage course representatives to act as ambassadors for innovation in the curriculum to both staff and students.

MMU staff and students have worked together very productively particularly in the last few years so that there are many areas of good practice: a student representatives conference was organised by the university in 2012 and 2013; a very successful staff awards scheme is in its fourth year of operation; students now have places on standing panels for programme review and approval processes; the student voice is heard in many ways in addition to routine module and course evaluations, such as via termly student union reports which are regularly received by all staff.

However, student voice in curriculum design itself remains an under-developed area. Our Students' Union would like us to move from a model of 'acquisition' to one of 'participation' (Streeting and Wise 2009). There are many elements to this approach, but one could be that course reps could take some responsibility for parts of the curriculum development process. We have already started moving along these lines - for instance, students are systematically represented on all course approval and review panels – but we recognise that we need to work towards more substantive cultural change to achieve real partnership in this area.

Confident student participation in meaningful dialogue around curriculum design is an objective that articulates well with one of the four cornerstones of MMU's Strategic Framework for Learning Teaching and Assessment:

Engaging with, and learning from, our learners – this provides the commitment that: 'We will develop our engagement with learners and their representatives to ensure effective partnership in providing the best conditions for student progression and success'

[\(Manchester Metropolitan University 2010\)](#)



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

The initiative sought to develop the concept of partnership in curriculum development. It was hoped that this would encourage students to become more engaged with the ways in which they were taught and to give them useful transferable skills in communication, negotiation and problem-solving, as well as enhancing the courses for future students.

Approaches and activities developed

The project team aimed to pilot a curriculum enhancement partnership with a large programme in the Business School. The plan was:

1. Identify area for change
2. Help students to propose ways to achieve the change
3. Help students to present their proposals to staff
4. Review implementation of the change

At the beginning of the project, meetings were held separately with members of staff involved with the selected programme, as well as with course reps who had expressed an interest. The staff members suggested that the spring term staff-student liaison committee would be a good opportunity for course reps to make some kind of presentation to staff.

At the beginning of the autumn term 2012, all registered course reps were contacted to explain about the project, and a further meeting was held, at which course reps worked with the SaP team to develop an approach for addressing a specific issue identified by course reps: lectures which could occasionally be a little dull.

The course reps indicated that they might be uncomfortable with giving a formal presentation to their tutors, and that pressures on their time would make preparation difficult. We therefore suggested that they could run a low key staff development activity about 'Livening Up Lectures' which could be carried out in a staff-student liaison committee meeting. They suggested a time and date in January to practise the activity in advance of the staff-student liaison committee in February, and the SaP project team developed some simple resources which the course reps could use in small groups. A further invitation to participate and a reminder about the January meeting were sent out to all course reps by the Students' Union.

The agenda of the staff-student liaison committee went out with the item 'Presentation from the Year 2 students' listed. We emailed all of the course representatives to clarify that this wasn't an accurate description, and that it was a collaborative activity that was planned, as we had previously discussed with those who had attended meetings.

At the staff-student liaison committee meeting, the SaP team explained the project to the meeting, and participants carried out the activity. The minutes of the meeting 'encourage programme teams to find ways of interacting with students and their representatives to enhance the learning experience.' – which is something for us to follow up at subsequent meetings.

The staff-student liaison meeting was much more formal than we had anticipated. However, the experience was useful, as it gave us some clear ideas about the need to propose slight changes to some of our processes for working with students. In particular, we have identified the need to recognise and support less formal approaches for involving students. The SaP team was able to feed this experience into the institutional student voice report which was completed in March 2013, and to make some subtle changes to official documentation, listed below, which we hope will facilitate a slightly different approach to partnership.

Following these activities, we held a development day with our project supporter, Derfel Owen, which helped us to review our approaches and develop a plan.

Resources

- 'Livening up your lectures' resources produced for students to use with staff
- Web page for staff, produced by the SU

Impact

Whilst the project did not achieve all of its intended outcomes in the specific programme which was selected for a pilot study, it has had a noticeable impact on the planning for the future. We recognise the need to work with staff and students to change cultures before trying to make the ambitious leap from consultation to full partnership.

- Contribution to the Student Voice review which sets out plans for future partnership (February 2013 and ongoing)
- Presentation to Governors about the project and future plans for partnership (April 2013)
- Embedding a commitment to student partnership, rather than simply consultation, into the new Institutional Code of Practice for Teaching and Learning, and in new Programme Specification documents which will be in use for all programmes being approved or reviewed from September 2013
- Inclusion of curriculum development training for Course Reps in the MMU Futures programme, which gives students an opportunity to gain 'points' for extra-curricular activities (September 2013)
- Inclusion of student partnership training for Programme Leaders in regular staff development activity (April 2013 and ongoing)
- Resources for staff on the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching website (May 2013)
- Resources for course reps on the MMUSU Course rep training area (September 2013)

Lessons learned

Our principal finding has been that our current quality assurance systems tend to entrench familiar roles and conversations; some slight changes may be needed to enable staff and students to feel confident in making changes.

We needed, and still need, to talk a lot about partnership and discuss how it differs from the familiar pattern of student complaint-staff response-student thanks. We still need to move away

from a more formal language of responsibility, obligation and rights to talk more about partnership, trust, and sharing expertise. The complex nature of assessment in Higher Education, with the same staff developing, delivering and assessing courses, can lead to a perceived power differential which may inhibit some students from contributing effectively to course development. Staff may feel anxious about potentially opening themselves up to criticism, or even to spurious suggestions for change. Staff and students seem to need ‘permission’ within university structures to have open conversations about curriculum development.

Next steps

We still need to develop more effective ways to make the most of students’ expertise in being learners to enhance the curriculum.

Students: we need to	Staff: we need to	University structures need to	Leadership needs to
Understand reticence and boundaries Develop confidence Give permission to contribute Trust judgements Recognise contributions	Understand reticence and boundaries Develop confidence Recognise contributions	Encourage and enable partnership Provide training and support	Live the rhetoric

We can develop students’ confidence and provide them with recognition through the MMU Futures scheme, which gives ‘points’ for participation. We have devised a scheme which offers bronze points for attendance at training sessions on curriculum development, silver for recordable engagement with curriculum development, and gold for successful achievement of change in partnership with academic staff.

For staff, we have already begun to include consideration of partnership in academic staff development activity, both accredited and non-accredited. The proposals were presented at an awayday for Governors and members of Academic Board in April 2013. Changes to policies and documentation have been made as a result of the project, with the intention of making subtle changes to culture:

1. The new Institutional Code of Practice on Learning and Teaching has as one of its aims: “to create a culture of partnership, promoting situations where the student voice is fully integrated into learning and teaching”
2. New programme specification documentation, requires programme teams to explain how the programme team works with students and uses information about students to enhance and enrich the programme (March 2013).

In 2013/14, we plan to offer a mentoring scheme to programme teams (including course representatives). Teams will be able to bid to participate in the scheme, and will be partnered with

SU/CELT staff who will help them to take through a small, student-led enhancement to the curriculum. These changes will be written up as case studies in our in-house peer-reviewed journal, Learning and Teaching in Action, and will be highlighted at the annual Students' Union awards ceremony, as well as at the annual CELT conference on learning and teaching. These case studies will be used to encourage other courses and departments to get involved in new approaches to working together.

In the medium term, we would like to look at other ways to develop the partnership culture, such as the election of one student representative per course to co-chair programme committee meetings and to be responsible for actions following meetings.

Longer term, we hope to embed a more open and participatory culture of curriculum development in our continuous improvement processes.

Key messages

There is a need to be clear about definitions and expectations – 'partnership' can be a slippery concept.

Both staff and students seem to need 'permission' to step outside familiar roles to become partners in curriculum enhancement; there is a need for both partners to develop confidence.

Small changes to regulatory documentation can help to support a developing culture of partnership

References

[Manchester Metropolitan University \(2010\). Strategic Framework for Learning, Teaching and Assessment.](#)

[Streeting, W. and Wise, G. \(2009\). Rethinking the Values of Higher Education - consumption, partnership, community? Gloucester, QAA](#)