Title The Student Voice: Supporting and Promoting Student-Staff Partnerships within the Faculty of Social Sciences at Ulster University.

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OVERVIEW

Overview, Aims and Context (the rationale including underpinning pedagogy)
Given the major shift across education and within Ulster, with regard to 'students as partners in the learning process, this project set out develop best practice guidelines for staff/student engagement, to promote a partnership approach between staff and students, developing students' capacity to more fully engage with their learning environment.

Description

The project built on feedback from Faculty Student Experience Forums, which indicated huge variation in students' experiences of contributing to course team decisions around learning and teaching. Student representatives were critical of formal Course Consultative Feedback mechanisms, which they viewed as intimidating and not conducive to participation. Several Schools have developed best practice guidelines for staff, with regard to Staff/Student Consultative Meetings. Whilst these are useful, the university is moving towards a partnership model of staff/student engagement, which includes but does not restrict staff/student engagement to the formal Staff/Student Consultative Meetings. The project drew on models of good practice that exist in other UK/RoI universities, as well as examples of best practice that currently exist across the Faculty of Social Sciences and across the university.

The project has been guided by the QAA (2013:3) definition of partnership working "… based on the values of: openness; trust and honesty; agreed shared goals and values". In addition, the work is situated within the NUS (2012:8) statement:
"…a partnership approach is the genuine, meaningful dispersal of power … Partnership means shared responsibility – for identifying the problem or opportunity for improvement, for devising a solution and – importantly – for co-delivery of that solution".

Design
The project drew upon the appreciative inquiry model (Chapman, 2008), which enabled the project team to engage in discussion around the direction of travel for the project. Drawing on feedback from the Faculty Student Experience Forums, the experiences of students, academic and UUSU staff, the team decided that the Guidelines should not be restricted to Staff/Student Consultation, but should rather provide staff and students with a set of guidelines, to inform decision-making in the broad learning and teaching

environment. Three student reps (Bethelhem, Taryn and Simana) were tasked with carrying out desk research, to examine the literature base within the UK and RoI, with regard to the area of student partnership models in HE and to provide information on exemplar models of practice currently in existence. The full team met to discuss and analyse the data, with student reps providing an oral and written report on their findings. Academic staff members (Rosemary, Amanda and Wendy) along with Mandy (UUSU) took responsibility for redrafting and finalising the research. The team agreed that a set of guidelines to be used by staff and students needed to be succinct and would preferably be a two page document. The main findings from the research were distilled into a set of underpinning values and principles to encourage staff to adopt a greater partnership approach to their engagement with students.

RESULTS

Findings and Conclusions:

The Student Voice: Supporting and Promoting Student-Staff Partnerships within the Faculty of Social Sciences at Ulster University[1].

The idea of a partnership approach between staff and students in Higher Education has been gaining increasing support and recognition in the past five years (BIS, 2011; DEL, 2012; Healey, Flint and Harrigan, 2014). The student union bodies NUS and USI, have been at the forefront of working with universities across the UK and RoI to develop institutional practices that can create meaningful rather than tokenistic partnerships between students and staff (e.g. NUS (2012) *A Manifesto for Partnership*). Partnership and promoting the student voice are recognized within a number of Ulster University strategies, e.g. Learning and Teaching Strategy, Student Experience Principles, representation of Student Representatives on Faculty and University committees, and revalidation and evaluation panels. However, one of the key risks identified in Strategic Aim 2 is the *Failure to adopt a partnership approach resulting in staff and students missing opportunities to work collaboratively in pursuit of transformative change*. The HEA *Development Model of Student Engagement* (Trowler & Trowler, 2010:3) "locates students as partners in a learning community, and is based on constructivist notions of learning such as the co-creation of knowledge by learners and teachers."

Evidence from the UK-wide 'What Works? Student Retention and Success' Project (2012) demonstrates that students do not always recognise the value of engagement, or have the ability to engage. This suggests that institutions should work with students to develop their capacity to engage effectively in their HE experience. This includes developing students' knowledge and understanding about the benefits of engaging across the different institutional spheres, and expanding their skills to do so. The QAA (2012) states that student engagement is about empowering students to have the voice to shape their own learning experience; by allowing all students the opportunity to have their voice heard, share their experience, and have meaningful dialogue with their institutions as part of a shared dynamic, inclusive and high-quality higher education experience.

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[1] This is a synopsis of the main findings of the research carried out. The full research report is attached as an appendix.

The importance of developing effective principles and practice of partnership working is against the backdrop of a much-changed context for UK higher education. Driven by neoliberal educational reform, this changing HE policy landscape is being sharply moulded by changes proposed in the Higher Education and Research Bill; and by the implementation of the Teaching Excellence Framework, with its metrics of retention, student satisfaction and leavers' destinations as proxies for teaching excellence. This point of this working paper is to suggest that, with a new focus on student-staff partnerships, and a mutually agreed, workable and effective set of guiding principles, the student engagement, experience and retention could be expected to improve.

Christie et al (2016) illustrate the importance of getting to know students and the nature of their transitions across the 'undergraduate journey' in their longitudinal study of widening access students' experiences of engagement and participation at a Scottish research-intensive university. The importance of a shared communicative space, and mutual understanding, are also central to effective engagement and participation in any student-staff partnership. Brooman and Darwent (2014) in their quantitative study to measure certain factors known to influence the success of first-year students' transition to higher education; namely, self-efficacy, autonomous learning and social integration were surprised that their expected findings regarding the importance of self-efficacy were not met. Instead, a 'sense of belonging' and 'relationship with staff' (two subsets of the social integration scale) were more strongly associated with a positive transition outcome. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2015) present a useful examination of how the concept of 'student voice' has developed since the 1990s in educational action research, alongside issues of power, authority, process and ownership; particularly in the current age of accountability. Importantly, they observe "something of a shift from earlier conceptualisations of students as 'data source' to a more active involvement as co-researchers and joint constructors of knowledge, progressing towards more active student-teacher partnerships." Again, importantly, what has changed is the move towards principles that are more democratic and practice, 'flatter' structures, and a more engaged, shared model of student as partner.

The Irish HEA (2016) produced 10 guiding principles to underpin the development of a policy for student engagement in all HEIs across Ireland. The form of a "student voice" - where students can offer an opinion, but rely on others to take on board their views - is discussed alongside a (preferable) model where students are directly involved as change agents and partners within the systems. Their report indicates that both forms of engagement, formal and informal, can be useful, with one or the other at certain times being considered more appropriate.

EVALUATION

Reflective Commentary
The project team, comprising academic staff, student representatives and UUSU staff have worked well, modelling the collaborative partnership approach that we espouse in practice. This has meant ensuring mutual respect was given for staff and students' availability to attend meetings outside term time and at times that did not clash with class timetables (for both academic staff and students). This did result in some time slippage, due to rescheduling meetings. Long-term illness at the start of Semester 1 negatively

impacted the completion of the final report and the roll-out of the guidelines. In addition, uncertainties around restructuring of Schools, Faculties and the university operating environment (including professional services) in the current academic year, took its toll on administration of the project, resulting in a delay on Course Directors being provided with the Guidelines on Best Practice. The project team are mindful of the low morale of staff to cope with any additional changes to practice, regardless of how beneficial these may be. On the whole, the process of engaging in a joint project team with academic and UUSU staff and students was an extremely beneficial and rewarding experience for everyone concerned. The research carried out and guidelines established are a useful tool for embedding staff-student partnership models across the university.

Student Engagement (to be completed by the student partner):

"Student engagement is a very important part of student life. Having being part of this working group has enlightened me on the different aspects of student life within the university, from physical to virtual space. Throughout the research, we have managed to highlight the ways we can enhance student life by building a good relationship between students and the teaching staff. The main point emphasised from the findings was the importance of a shared communicative space where both the students and the staff can come together for a mutual understanding" (Simana Ale).

"Working on staff and students' partnership and developing best practice to do so has been great, as it allowed me and my colleagues to engage with the stuff in our faculty as well as promote and voice ideas from student's perspective. The research aspect of it has increased my knowledge of staff and student engagement and how important it is for a better outcome of learning and teaching experience" (Bethelhem Negash).

Learning Environment and Engagement:

This project focused on methods for promoting greater staff-student engagement, rather than specifically examining the types of learning spaces to enhance learning. However, findings from the Faculty Student Experience Forums, which are supported by the research carried out, indicate the importance of creating informal spaces where students and staff can engage in meaningful dialogue to enhance the learning and teaching experiences of both students and staff.

Impact

The impact of this project on the project team has been immense. For the majority of the team this has been the first experience of directly working as a joint student/staff team. It has proved a very worthwhile experience, for a number of reasons. Firstly, it has allowed the different perspectives to be articulated throughout the research design, implementation and evaluation. Secondly, it demonstrates that student/staff partnerships are viable and produce valuable and relevant outcomes. Finally, the development of the students' capacity, in being able to articulate their own perspectives has been tangible. A key measure of this is the fact that two students, alongside one member of academic staff will participate in the RAISE conference in September, on 'Perspectives on student engagement'. This will afford students and staff to promote the findings and results from the current research to a wider audience but indeed, to discuss the issue of student engagement in a wider arena and forge alliances at a UK event.

It is too early at this stage to measure the impact of the research and Guidelines developed from this, on wider Faculty staff and students. A survey is currently underway with Faculty staff and the results from this will be analysed in September. We anticipate

following this up with focus groups with students and staff across the Faculty to gauge the extent to which the Guidelines have impacted upon the practice of student/staff engagement.

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT

Transferability

The research and resulting Guidelines are completely applicable and relevant to staff across all discipline areas of the University. There is excellent scope for a further Faculty interdisciplinary learning project.

Dissemination (internal and external

The Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee (formerly FCAA) has been briefed and updated throughout the year on the findings and outcomes of this project. The Guidelines which have been developed have been circulated to all Course Directors across the Faculty of Social Science. Members of the project team attending the RAISE conference in Sept. will have an opportunity to informally disseminate information on this project. The project team believe there is scope, when we have evaluated the outcomes of implementing the guidelines, to submit a research paper to an academic journal. We are also willing to share the findings and outcomes of this project with staff across the university, e.g. through workshops, School/Faculty away days.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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Additional Resources

In terms of good practice, templates, frameworks, toolkits and discussion papers, the following resources may be useful:

Sparqs (2011) A student engagement framework for Scotland (Edinburgh, 2011), available at: http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/SEFScotland.pdf
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_____ Staff workshop: 'Engaging students in the quality of learning and teaching' handbook (nd), http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/Staff%20workshop%20-%20handbook.pdf
_____ Strategic Plan 2013-2018
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Attachments List and attach relevant documents/images in support of project activities
The Student Voice: Supporting and Promoting Student-Staff Partnerships within the Faculty of Social Sciences at Ulster University.
Promoting the Student Voice – Summary Guidelines