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Defining and supporting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL): A sector-wide study

Student engagement case studies

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Practice examples of involving students with SoTL work

Main issue

This case study provides a number of practice examples that illustrate the breadth of student engagement in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning work found across the six institutions contributing to interviews for this study. Issues arising highlight the affordances of formal and informal engagements, the embedded and *ad hoc nature* of the engagement, and the issue of opportunities for students who are paid versus those who volunteer.

Illustration

Drawn from the findings of six focus groups with 36 students, and three interviews with student engagement leaders, the following practice examples illustrate the growing number of ways higher education providers (HEPs) and individual staff are involving students as partners in SoTL.

Student positions in educational development teams

Enabling students to work in voluntary or paid positions within centres for learning and teaching offers students access to insider knowledge, and increased staff awareness of the student experience. One student engagement leader offered:

> …half of our team is made up of students, so it not only gives us that access in the student engagement work but we're part of a unit with academic development, technology-enhanced learning, teacher education and professional recognition; so it means that those colleagues who might not have had that access previously have this very immediate, critical kind of group of students…

Student observers of teaching practice

An emerging area for a small number of HEPs is the involvement of students in teaching observations. Participating staff volunteer to be observed and are in most cases enthusiasts. Students are trained and closely supervised to offer constructive and diplomatic feedback on the sessions, as one student engagement leader describes:

> …[students] go and observe teaching practice and then have to sit down face-to-face, one-to-one with the academic and give constructive but critical feedback on their teaching practice…

Student involvement in teacher education

There are a number of examples of student contributions to staff development opportunities, such as through PGCert schemes and one-off institution-wide workshops. A student engagement leader based in an Educational Enhancement Unit referred to their work with staff:

> We're working with our teacher education part of the department to run some workshops …entitled 'What is inspirational teaching?'; but given that what we're really trying to do is improve student satisfaction around teaching then it's important that the student perspective of inspirational teaching is a part of the conversation.

Student engagement 'champions' within academic staff role profiles

Formalising student engagement into specific role and grade descriptors is identifiable practice within some HEPs, and links with SoTL practices where the staff involved conduct SoTL work with students. An example of where this has become embedded:

The student engagement champion role is now listed as having its own tariff [grade] and so some consistency across the university as well... It's a case of getting it into objectives, into job descriptions... progressing to senior lecturer, principal lecturer stages is to embed the role of student engagement champions, but also the broader student engagement work and where you've done projects as an exemplar of the kind of development you would do to progress to a senior grade.

Research-engaged learning and teaching

Substantial curriculum change projects were cited across two of the HEPs, with one SoTL interpretation as 'research-engaged' teaching and student engagement:

...a series of principles around research-engaged teaching and students as producers of knowledge that we used to form the revalidation of all our programmes over three years.

Student involvement at programme level

High-level staff-student liaison and consultative panels provide some HEPs with an approach that leads to reflective partnership. One student engagement leader based within the senior management team outlined:

We've introduced students into our programme reviews so within our validation process we have students on the panel; we've introduced student submissions to our School audit so students are encouraged to write a submission about what it's like to be a student there, but critically they also have to discuss that with the staff before it goes to the panel.

Staff-student action planning

Using standard institutional action planning requirements as an opportunity to forge partnerships that can lead to effective relationship building and future SoTL enquiries. One student engagement leader described the *process* of partnership as being as important as the *outcome*:

We've brought staff and students together to create joint action plans around the national student survey and to be honest the actual action plan itself is the end point and is what is produced and is what is monitored throughout the year. For me that's not the most important thing about it, the most important thing is for them actually having the conversation to begin with, and actually drawing staff and students in to building relationships.

Implications for policy and practice

These examples illustrate many frequent opportunities for SoTL-based 'students as partners' practice that can be woven into existing institutional activities. These begin to highlight the contribution that students can make to educational development and scholarship, as they also have ideas and expertise about learning and teaching. There may be a need for sector-wide consideration to what constitutes 'evidence' and 'impact' from student engagements, in light of the traditional staff recognition schemes (REF, TEF, promotions and career development).

Student engagement in SoTL: Student engagement leaders' perspectives

Main issue

The thrust of this case study is that student engagement (SE) with SoTL through staff-student partnerships should be strategic, visible, and institutionally supported. Along with recognition of staff time and the resource involved, there needs to be inclusion of reward schemes through professional development and staff and students awards.

Illustration

Three SE leaders from three of the four UK nations took part in a structure one-to-one interviews, to discuss their institutional approach and implementation of student engagement in SoTL.

The institutional position of SE leaders varies between institutions. It was located in one instance within the Vice-Chancellor's office, another in an Educational Development Centre. Despite the location, the commonality within SE leadership is strategic prioritisation and visibility, projecting an institutional culture of engagement and partnership. There is perhaps over-reliance on the Students' Union to illustrate student engagement for institutions, which tends to promote consultation and representation. Institutions and individuals interpret and define student engagement in SoTL with a broad remit, which may cause uncertainty for staff wishing to become involved in this practice.

'Students as Partners' is a narrative well-used across institutions. It is acknowledged, however, that in order to embed this work at the micro level of individuals and departments, there is more work to do to recognise and reward academic staff for their partnership working with students. Acknowledgement within workload modelling of the time required to develop staff-student SoTL activities, as well as the incorporation of student partnership as a route within professional recognition and development schemes would better demonstrate institutional commitment to staff involved in, or thinking about engaging students with their SoTL practice.

Student partnership initiatives are cited in some cases to take place alongside or as part of other institutional strategic themes, such as 'internationalisation', 'technology-enhanced learning', and 'professionalisation'. Potentially this is an effective way to embed student active involvement, and offer staff an illustration of the ways in which they can work with students on mutual SoTL projects.

Implications for policy and practice

In many cases, effective student partnership in SoTL remains an exception, with those students and staff naturally inclined to partner and pursue innovative ideas together. The project's findings have illustrated several personal qualities that facilitate staff-student partnerships. These include participants' willingness to 'take risks', being 'opportune', 'creative', 'enterprising', 'flexible' or 'experimental'. Equally, qualities of effective partnership working emerge, such as attention to the power relationship, positions of authority, balance of responsibilities and shared values.

Student engagement and partnership presents opportunities and challenges for institutions and the individuals involved. Staff-student partnership confronts long established academic norms, and the traditional image of higher education. As a result, academic identities are shifting and there are competing priorities for staff in an increasingly performative environment. Students too need to be aware of the partnership agenda, and in some cases be prepared, trained, and carefully guided to develop their capacity as a contributor to higher education research on teaching and learning.

Student engagement in SoTL: students' perspectives

Main issues

This case study outlines issues related to the engagement and involvement of students in SoTL work and the need to ensure it is inclusive, accessible, and institutionally supported.

Thirty-six students across six higher education providers participated in one of six local focus groups in the context of the 'Defining and Supporting SoTL' Higher Education Academy (HEA) project, to share their experiences and perceptions of student engagement in SoTL. The student participants represented a diverse range of typically 'engaged' students, from course reps, ambassadors, to society organisers and mentors. Participants were representative of undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral level students, from across the four UK nations.

Illustration

The term 'scholarship' is problematic for students, as it is more commonly associated with financial awards such as bursaries. However, with support, students' interpretation and re-articulation of SoTL is to regard it as 'learning while teaching', placing value on their lecturer's attention to the practice of learning, teaching and students' active engagement in the classroom.

Students identify many advantages in being involved in partnership work with their lecturers, such as the opportunity to 'get to know, and be known by' staff that they would not usually work with. Gaining an insider-knowledge of departmental practices and institutional projects is of benefit to students, and can result in an increased sense of belonging and community. Critical skills, enquiry and reflection are also acquired in a 'live' project with application to the 'real world'.

Students identify the importance of having the appropriate physical space to collaborate with staff, and a neutral environment within which to meet and work together which potentially addresses the balance of power and promotes equal partnership relationships. This relates to the formality of opportunities for students to engage in SoTL work, which appears to vary both within and across institutions. Student engagement in SoTL can be mapped onto a spectrum spanning formal and informal practices. Often where informal practices are described, students cite one or two lecturers with whom they have a good working relationship and the partnership work emerges from the personal interests of those involved. In more formalised examples, engagement opportunities are strategically aligned to institutional priorities, and appeal to students who wish to gain employability skills and recognition.

The concept of student involvement and partnership is especially challenging for international students because of the cultural and educational norms and practices drawn from their prior experience. Similarly for home students, their affinity with volunteering, engaging, and co-working within higher education also depends on their active involvement in compulsory education, and their self-efficacy gained possibly from social and cultural capital.

Implications for policy and practice

These findings highlight the value students place on opportunities to work with their lecturers, and how influential both formal and informal partnerships are to the student experience. Barriers to student engagement are both intrinsic and extrinsic, perhaps most significantly arising from staff and students' interpretations and understandings of partnership working. SoTL projects that involve working with different stakeholders may benefit from establishing shared and individual values at the start, building in reflection on the process of partnership, and understanding the cultural perspectives each partner brings.

The HEA 'Defining and Supporting SoTL' project was a collaborative project involving the contribution of four main UK partners – the University of West London, the University of Brighton, the University of Bristol, and Keele University and a number of other national and international contributors.

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