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"If you build it, they won't necessarily come!" Engaging student representatives beyond the course level

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Abstract

This project aimed to make more of the potentially valuable role of student representatives, through enhancing their own personal and professional development and the integral role they play as mediators between the wider student body and the institution. Within this, an underlying aim was to foster the development of autonomy within the student representative community and, hopefully, increase levels of engagement with the opportunities the University provides to incorporate student voices in enhancing the student experience. The original objectives and outcomes of the project were:

Objectives:

- Increase level of student representative participation in existing processes/mechanisms;
- Develop new mechanisms/processes in partnership with student representatives and the Hallam Union; and,
- Empower student representatives to set agendas and actively research and pursue solutions.

Outcomes:

- publications/conference presentations, some in partnership with students;
- 2 large faculty student/staff fora;
- research with student representatives into effective/engaging mechanisms;
- trial at least two new mechanisms; and,
- training and development events/workshops for student representatives.

Background

The Faculty of D&S has around 360 student course representatives in any one year, from courses across seven academic departments[1] and, in 2009/10, had 12 faculty student representatives working across these departments. The student representative community is a diverse body, including students on different modes and levels of study, and represents the diverse nature of the Faculty student body as a whole. For example, 40% of students in the faculty are 'commuter students', which reinforces the need to provide effective opportunities for these students to engage as student representatives alongside their studies and personal commitments (Kuh et al., 2001; HEFCE, 2009). Engaging this diverse body of students has been a challenge in the past and, in 2008, the last Faculty Forum of the year attracted only one student representative to attend, indicating that existing structures were both costly and ineffective. Preliminary efforts to change our approach yielded promising results: more than 40 student representatives attended the Faculty Forum in March 2009. This project aimed to build on this limited success by providing scholarly understanding of what makes partnership with student representatives engaging and how to effect change in practice.

The project is also set in the context of the priorities articulated in the institution's Corporate Plan (Sheffield Hallam University, 2008), specifically those relating to improving the student experience.

Rationale

Within UK universities, student representative systems play an essential role in accessing and articulating the concerns of the wider student population and contributing to the development of institutional policy and practice. A recent report commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) concluded that there is much variability in the approaches institutions use for working with student representatives, and their perceived effectiveness. In particular, these approaches were seen to function better at the 'institutional and operational (i.e. school / department / programme) level than at the intermediate (faculty) level' (Little et al., 2008: 56). Furthermore, there are growing calls for strategic approaches to enhancing the 'student voice' more generally (SPARQS, 2010) and the way in which institutions frame their relationships with student representatives and their approach to student engagement. Whilst the impetus for this project emerged from local practice, it drew on and addressed some of these broader issues. In particular, the National Union of Students have challenged the emphasis on consumerist models of relationships with students, and suggested, instead, that institutions develop approaches rooted in the scholarship of communities of practice (Streeting and Wise, 2009; Lea, 2005). In exploring the potential of this community of practice model in the context of this project, insights have been drawn from developments in the school and college sector (Fielding, 2001; 2008). Inherent in this is an assumption that, if it is possible to engage school pupils in collaborative development and authentic student voice activities then, the principles

[1] http://www.shu.ac.uk/faculties/ds/

underpinning these approaches should be easily transferable to working with undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The approach

To achieve the aims and objectives the project team developed a number of interventions, which are described in more detail below. The strengths and weaknesses of each these interventions are considered in the evaluation section.

Establishing a faculty student council

Drawing on experiences in the schools sector (e.g. Rudd et al., 2006), the project team decided to trial a faculty level student council. Council membership comprised the 12 Faculty student representatives and the faculty Head of Student Experience. The council met four times a year and meetings were scheduled to be the best fit with all students' timetables, to support student attendance. The aims of establishing the council were to provide a student-led forum for identifying and working collaboratively on issues of importance to students at the Faculty level and to co-direct efforts at engaging and supporting course representatives in the faculty. The emphasis was on empowering the council to jointly set agendas and enable them to influence the 'big' issues. To this end, the council were able to extend invitations to their meetings to key senior staff to discuss these 'big' issues face to face. This was well supported by the senior staff and key outcomes and recommendations were communicated to appropriate faculty groups and committees.

Mentoring for all faculty representatives

Each of the faculty representatives had a responsibility for sitting on one of six Faculty level committees. Historically, Faculty representative attendance at, and active participation in, these meetings had been variable. The project team posited that one reason for this could be that students did not feel adequately informed or supported to actively participate. To address this, each faculty representative was assigned a staff mentor, who sat on the same committee, and who would meet with the student prior to committee meetings to go over the content, agenda and format of the meeting and how they could contribute.

Re-design of the Faculty Forum

In addition to regular staff-student meetings at the course level, the faculty run two meetings a year (Faculty Forum) where all course and faculty representatives are invited to raise and work on faculty wide issues concerning the student experience. In the past, these events had been poorly attended but some progress had been made through redesigning the format, to be more interactive, focussing on dialogue and co-constructing solutions, and less adversarial. In the 2009/10 academic year, two Faculty Fora were run in November 2009 and March 2010. The format of the November forum was developed by the project team and used a table-top discussion tool called a dialogue sheet (Oxley and Flint, 2008) to frame discussions between staff and student representatives. The room was laid out 'cabaret' style,

and a group discussion was facilitated by a member of staff on each table using the dialogue sheet. The content of the sheet was decided by the project team which included representation from the Hallam Union. Key issues were identified from the Faculty's National Student Survey and Sheffield Hallam's (internal) Student Engagement Survey results around two themed topics: student identity and student feedback. The format and content of the March forum were developed by the student council, who had identified a need for professional development around specific topics for course representatives. This forum took the form of a workshop and was facilitated by a member of staff from within the Faculty, who had specific expertise in this area. The outcomes and actions from both fora were communicated to the relevant staff groups, Faculty committees and all student representatives. However, the format of this communication was re-designed to improve accessibility and engagement.

Re-design of a Faculty student representative training day

To complement the excellent training events run by the students' union, the faculty offer a student representative away-day to provide personal and professional development. This was an annual opt-in event, held off-campus (to emphasise the notion that this was a high-profile development event), with places for between 12 and 15 representatives. This was a high-quality event, which used expert facilitation, and focussed on fostering the creativity and enthusiasm of the student representatives to deliver tangible products and outcomes. The focus of the 2009/10 event, facilitated by a professional poet, was for participants to develop their creative writing skills and create a series of poetic riddles, which reflected aspects of the student experience at Sheffield Hallam. These have been used in posters and postcards as part of a campaign across the faculty to encourage a better understanding of the student experience, and will be used in autumn 2010 as part of the campaign to recruit course representatives.

Alongside these interventions the project team also reviewed the Blackboard organisation, that was used to communicate with and support student representatives, and invested significant time in personalising communications with student representatives. For example, when inviting students to attend the faculty fora and the student representative away-day, staff responded individually to e-mails and followed up those students who were not able to attend, to explore what barriers existed to student engagement with these opportunities.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the project addressed each of the three over-arching objectives for the project, through a mixture of qualitative and quantitative indicators. This comprised:

- collation of attendance figures for faculty level interventions (the Faculty fora, student council, and away-day);
- a short online questionnaire administered through the student representative Blackboard organisation to all representatives, focusing on notions of ownership and empowerment within the student representative community (drawing on

Wilson-Grau and Nuňez, 2007). Students were invited to participate in this at the start and close of the project to compare perceptions over time;

- feedback from individual student representatives following the faculty fora and away-day;
- a reflection session with the project team exploring the strengths, weaknesses and future challenges of the specific interventions; and,
- one-to-one semi-structured interviews with faculty representatives.

Increased levels of student participation in existing mechanisms were evident through the attendance figures for the faculty fora: 49 individual students attended the Faculty fora (43 in November, 15 in March, with 9 students attending both). This represented a slight increase in attendance from the previous year. However, non-attendance does not necessarily indicate a lack of willingness to participate. Feedback from students unable to attend the fora indicated that the students' academic commitments precluded them engaging with the fora: in November it clashed with taught sessions or placements for many students, and in March the assessment workload meant students did not feel able to commit the time. This feedback was corroborated by comments from individual faculty reps in interviews. An unanticipated positive outcome of the project was that, in contrast to the previous year where no faculty reps were recruited before the summer break, all but one of the faculty reps were in place (June 2010) for the 2010/11 academic year.

Students were very positive about the *new mechanisms* trialled by the Faculty. When asked to provide three words that described their experience of the away-day, students said it was: inspiring; enjoyable; constructive; fantastic; useful; effective; engaging; valuable; and, rewarding. Staff felt that the risk-taking, in terms of using creative approaches at the away-day, had paid off and valued the tangible product of the event (in 2009/10 the riddle postcards and posters). Faculty representatives and staff reported that the mentoring arrangements had helped reduce anxiety around contributing to their Faculty committee, and had contributed to a sense of feeling involved, informed and supported. In addition, Faculty representatives said their experiences as a whole had provided them with a better understanding of how the institution worked, greater empathy with staff, and more confidence in mediating between the university and the wider student body. The feedback from faculty fora indicated that students appreciated the changes that had been made, and found the interactive format and student-led focus engaging.

> *"The training was insightful; I really enjoyed the tasks on advocacy as this reinforced my understanding,"* (Student feedback on the March Faculty Forum).

> *"Useful to have a group work and discussions as it allows for the opportunity to hear the views and ideas of others,"* (Student feedback on the March Faculty Forum).

Staff felt the fora was 'slicker' and better organised than previous Faculty forum meetings, that there was a good balance between staff and student contributions, a high level of discussion, and were proud of the fact they fed back the 'notes' to students within 5 working days of the forum.

The student council was well thought of by staff and students. It was felt to be genuinely student led (though well chaired by the Head of Student Experience), the attendance of senior staff was felt to add profile and value to the meetings and, although students may not have been actually *researching* solutions, they did feel they were able to make suggestions that led to tangible actions.

The online questionnaire results suggest that over the course of the project student representatives did gain a better understanding of the purpose and aims of their role (from 83 to 95% agree), felt more able to participate as much as they wanted in course/faculty decision making processes (from 71 to 90% agree) and use their initiative to influence the development of the student rep community (from 73 to 85% agree). A greater number of students also agreed (from 63 to 75% agree) that it was clear how the faculty responds to and/or acts on the issues they raised. Many of the other questions indicated students maintained already positive perceptions of their role. For example, over 90% agreed in both iterations of the survey that they felt able to express their opinions and raise issues. However, there were some anomalies in the results that provide potential foci for future work. In both iterations of the survey, only 50% of students agreed student representatives felt a sense of ownership over the student rep community. Whilst the results indicate that student representatives did feel part of a community, and felt able to express their opinions and participate in decision making processes, they did not necessarily feel that they *owned* that community. Similarly, although students indicate they could raise issues and see how the Faculty responded, they were less confident at the end of the year that this had made a difference to the wider student experience in the Faculty (a drop from 85 to 60% agree).

Overall, the strongest theme emerging from the evaluation was that the interventions introduced as part of this project led to a deepening of the relationship between staff and student representatives in the faculty and, for the students, a sense that their contribution was genuinely valued. From the staff perspective this meant they felt they had persuaded at least some of the students that "we are serious about this". From the student perspective this led to a greater sense of inclusion, partnership, feeling well supported and, ultimately, engagement. Chickering and Gamson (1987) describe the staff and student relationship as one of the key principles in engaging undergraduate learning experiences. Our findings indicate that these principles may hold true beyond the students' learning experiences, and have the potential to be utilised to provide greater student engagement with issues across the broader student experience.

Further development

The evaluation raised a number of areas where there is potential to build on the strength of the project and further improve the engagement of student representatives.

- Attendance at meetings and fora was still an issue and staff are exploring possibilities for scheduling these to obtain a better fit with the majority of student timetables, and placing these meetings in students' electronic timetables. In response to student feedback the student council, and possibly the faculty fora will

be 'front loaded', with meetings more frequently earlier in the year when students are better able to attend and to help them develop a sense of their role. As the Faculty committee meetings are already in the calendar there is potential to match faculty representatives with committees based on their availability as well as interest.

- Recognising the contribution Faculty representatives are making to the faculty, exploring links to the careers service, the Hallam Award and possible certification. This is a topic already discussed by the student council in the 2009/10 academic year.
- Extending successes from working with Faculty representatives to Course representatives.
- Ask the student council to collaborate in the design of the 2010/11 away-day.

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