'Understanding the gap' to participate or not? - Evaluating student engagement and active participation.

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Summary

This case study discusses the student engagement project, taking place over a 6 month period between January and July 2016, within the School of Social and Political Sciences, at the University of Lincoln. This school covers five disciplines within the Social Sciences, including Criminology, Social Policy, International Relations, Politics and Sociology. The project gained internal funding from SEED (Student Engagement in Educational Development). The project worked with four students as facilitators, and three academics, as part of a collective research team, to evaluate student and staff perceptions of student engagement opportunities from the wider student cohort within the School. This 'Student as Producer' (SAP) project enabled a co-producing role for both students and staff (Neary, Saunders, Hagyard, & Derricott, 2014). The engagement of students was integral to the project with them being both researchers and participants. Student facilitators were involved in project dissemination, through a joint presentation at the 2016 Raise Conference and a number of internal university events.

Project Description

The project was designed to understand active student participation in extra-curricular activities within the School, and to develop and embed a greater culture of student engagement within and beyond the curriculum. This is important as employers now expect graduates to develop experience beyond their degree. Further, it endeavoured to gain staff and student perceptions of opportunities available outside of the curriculum, such as participation in the Peer Assisted Study Skills Scheme (PASS), Student Representation, Employer Mentoring, Open Days, Lincoln Award, Societies and Volunteer Projects. In addition, anecdotally it was believed that staff embracement of opportunities, as well as students seeing the value of specific opportunities, made a difference in student take-up and engagement.

The rationale for conducting this project was to elicit reasons why some opportunities suffered from a lack of student take-up and engagement. Such observations appeared to be

contrary to historical trends, whereby as a School we have had noted illustrations of best practice on teaching, learning and student engagement, embedding employability, skills and SAP projects.

A core aim was to evaluate whether there were any differences between those students who actively participate in student engagement opportunities beyond the curriculum, and those who do not. This allowed us to evaluate any obstacles that students have in engaging in opportunities and thus encouraging wider participation. We appreciated that student engagement was likely to be complex, and that whilst we aimed to understand these differences, and overcome them by evaluating ways to encourage greater active participation of students outside of the curriculum, there were problems in what constituted 'student engagement' in the first instance, and how students and staff defined and applied this concept.

Although we were interested in the view of academic staff on student engagement, we were particularly interested in the student perspective on this issue. Utilising the concept of SAP we made the decision to enable students to define the working parameters of 'student engagement' for the research. The project adopted a qualitative methodological design. Placing students as partners (selected via internal publicising on the University Blackboard site) we gained four student volunteers that represented all three years and were from different disciplines from across the School. The students, independently of staff, collaboratively designed the research questions, sourced the sample and facilitated the focus groups. The staff supported the students in organising the research and made limited suggestions, but tried to maintain the authenticity of student independence in order to gain data that was from their perspective. Therefore, embracing the SAP concept, students were actively engaged in the production of knowledge and the creation of a 'collaborative community' across disciplines and cohorts.

To measure participation in 'student engagement opportunities' the student researchers categorised 'engagement' into three 'zones'. The first zone was academic activities, including Academic Representation, PASS Leader, Student Reviewer, Students Consultation of Teaching, Insight Scheme, Student Advisory Group, Student Digital Leads, Research/projects and Mentoring. The second zone was Sports and Societies, including Sports, Societies and Liberation groups. The third zone was Volunteering, including Charity work, Community volunteering, Police volunteers and Faith based volunteering. The zones were disseminated to the participants prior to the focus group and the student subjects focused on one or more zones.

Facilitators gained access to students that identified themselves as 'Engaged' (8 students) and those who saw themselves as 'Non-engaged' (6 students) (For discussion of 'engagement' terminology see below). The students generated a convenience sample via Blackboard and Facebook and the focus group participants included all three year cohorts and disciplines within the School.

In order to gain further views on barriers and perceived constraints to student engagement, academic staff conducted 12 unstructured interviews with colleagues and students. Interviews enabled reflections on the seen 'value' of collaborative student engagement, the

challenges facing both staff and students and, importantly, created 'suggestions' on consolidating the engagement culture and ethos within our School. To address potential ethical considerations, the confidentiality and anonymity of participants were assured. Given the short term nature of this research, and the limited data collected, the results are not presented as being representative of the University because of sampling limitations it is not possible to statistically generalise these findings. However, the project aimed to enhance student engagement through the dissemination of the results, internally and externally through symposia and presentations, alongside a publishable case study identifying lessons learned. This would then act as a basis for further research and develop more effective practice in encouraging wider and more inclusive student engagement.

It was hoped that by placing students at the centre of the project, in its design, application and evaluation, that this would expand levels of awareness and understanding of *what,* from their perspective, appeals to students, the differences between levels of participation and the impact of these on both students and academics. Further aims were to identify more strategies to enhance levels of student engagement in the future. Thus the results would enable us to establish aspects of best practice to understand and encourage students engaging at significant times, places or sites within and outwith the curriculum, where institutional intervention may have some influence on widening participation in such engagement. This could include changes of practice in employability modules such as 'Criminology in the Professions' (level 2, 15 CATS points), our alumni evenings, employer mentoring schemes, The Lincoln Award (an extra curricula qualification to enhance generic skills and knowledges), and other extra curricula opportunities. Further to this, we would hope to improve the take-up of those activities with low engagement patterns or participation, such as PASS and student representation.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts

Within the University, SAP ethos has been institutionally embedded and aligned with Students as Partners (See Crawford, Horsley, Hagyard, & Derricott, 2015).

This involves providing students with opportunities to be actively engaged in research, where… *"Engagement is created through active collaboration amongst and between students and academics"* (Neary et al, 2014, p.9).

This project is an illustration of how such collaborations develop, with the formation of partnerships between academics and students, and which Trowler (2013, p.32) refers to as a 'climate of engagement' (See Healy, Flint, & Harrington, 2014 for more discussion on partnership processes).

Data from this research suggests that both students and staff identified the value of engagement, for the students who gain skills and knowledges beyond their degree, and also for staff as they are able to tailor teaching more effectively for optimum student learning, but also benefit from understanding student perspectives on their experiences. Even students who were defined as 'non engaged' (or perhaps more accurately 'less engaged'), saw the value of extracurricular activities, although they were more likely to be anxious about the process of application and meeting the criteria. 'Less engaged' students were also more likely, than 'engaged students', to highlight concerns about balancing workloads and their own commitment, as well as worrying about not understanding the role requirements. Data suggested they were less likely to make the connection as to how apparently 'unrelated' activities could benefit their future careers.

Thomas (2012) contends that common themes of support, meanings, and student /staff interactions helped to develop knowledge and confidence in student engagement. This appears to be working for some students in the focus groups who were seen to be engaged in a significant number of different opportunities, but more communication and reassurance might be needed to improve the take-up of opportunities for apparently 'less engaged' students.

Although differences between levels of engagement and years of study were similar for the participants in this project, there was a general belief that the best time for engagement was in the second year of study, before the stress of curriculum work became more pressured in the students' final year.

It appears that the 'less engaged' group were less likely to know what they wanted to do in future, compared to those who reported to be more 'engaged'. This added to their lack of clarity about how transferable skills, from engaging in extracurricular activities, could benefit them in the future. These findings seem to suggest that enabling students to recognise this 'added value' might be significant as to whether or not they engage with available opportunities.

For those who were 'more engaged', participation in student engagement initiatives was primarily seen as achieving '*extra sets of skills, knowledge and experience'* often seen as emerging from being part of a collaborative partnership.

The role of staff in encouraging collaboration and engagement was identified by students as fundamental to their participation, even in extracurricular activities, and both 'engaged' and 'less engaged' students thought that they would be influenced by being approached by a member of academic staff to participate in a project. This personal approach enabled them to find out more about what was involved, which was one of the things that encouraged students to have the confidence to engage in activities. However, staff were concerned about how personal approaches may bring in bias, and also what universities need to do to engage the more difficult to reach students. Other concerns related to students being put under too much pressure to do work beyond the curriculum, which may compromise their study and those who are unable to engage due to issues such as commuting, paid work or dealing with care issues feeling a sense of 'failure'. Whilst this case study does not claim to be representative of student views on engagement across the whole of the University, it is interesting how a number of the themes stated above were consistently repeated in the focus groups and the interviews with staff and students alike.

Reflections on the project
There are challenges to expanding active participation in student engagement opportunities, especially outwith the curriculum, and barriers to embedding a culture, regardless of our commitment to SAP principles. Student engagement has become a 'fundamental' element of student learning for many higher education institutions in recent years, and will continue to do so given recent reforms. Student engagement has been extensively researched (e.g. Zepke, 2015; Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2013; Baron & Corbin, 2012). The complexity of the concept of student engagement resulted in an acknowledged need to have greater clarification about associated terminology and definitions. Critically addressing

such complexities was seen to offer both support and guidance in managing expectations of both students and staff.

Our attempts to understand the lack of student participation in engagement opportunities identified some possible explanations as to why some students actively participate, and some do not. Notably variations resulted from different expectations of roles, individual choices and priorities, a lack of awareness of opportunities or of the rewards or positive gain for students, and a concern focusing upon time constraints. Suggestions on how to address these barriers included the need for greater attention to strategies to manage expectations and recruitment processes for extra curricular activities.

The utility of offering pastoral support to students who choose to participate, or are thinking of participating, in relation to helping them to prioritise their time, may be valuable in encouraging wider participation. It is particularly important that communication about opportunities is ongoing, accurate in describing the expectations, and regularly available as many of the 'less engaged' students said that they intended to participate more in the future, so they need to be able to find out about activities when it is timely for them to do so.

Some students identified the need to move beyond relying on publicising opportunities via blackboard and email, with one student noting: *"That's part of the problem, students not knowing, not reading blackboard".* Increased awareness of initiatives, both for students and academics, could potentially be improved by using different modes of communication, such as lecture shout outs and student presentations in lectures. Offering information to cohorts during teaching time was seen as one of the most effective ways of increasing awareness, plus making overt connections between skills and benefits associated with specific initiatives, may also increase participation by 'less engaged' students

There was a recognition that the inclusion of other experienced, or actively participating, students in such communications could be beneficial , thus' using real experiences' and the benefits of 'word of mouth' were cited as having potential in encouraging greater engagement. The acknowledgment of their involvements, by the use of extracurricular awards such as the Lincoln Award, and the value identified in the 'student voice' within the context of SAP, was also seen as beneficial to enable students to gain recognition and take greater ownership of their university experience. However, this only holds true for students if they are aware of opportunities, are encouraged to feel confident in participating, have an understanding of the personal value of the opportunity, and are able to do so without compromising their study or other responsibilities. It is also fundamentally important that students who are unable to participate are not made to feel somehow inadequate.

Follow up and future plans
This project made significant gains in furthering our understanding about *what* 'student engagement' opportunities are of interest to students, *why* there is differential participation and *why* some students participate in engagement opportunities outside of the curriculum within our School. The dissemination of project findings, both internally and externally, aided this process by creating further discussion. Despite the project being short term, the

importance of researching student engagement and participation, the value of embedding the SAP ethos, and benefits of creating and supporting a collaborative culture of partnership between students and academics, continues to be fundamental on a School and Institutional level.

Subsequently, a follow up project has been accepted for internal funding. This focuses more on understanding the use of terminology and definitions of 'engaged' and 'non engaged', as applied by the project student facilitators in the focus groups, and whether students see different types of opportunity in different ways related to the initial zone categories defined by the students. Indeed, there are criticisms that have emerged following analysis, that question the appropriateness and value of the use of the term 'non engaged'. To assert that students are 'not engaged' because they do not participate in some opportunities, misinterprets the complexity of student engagement. In addition, it further fails to appreciate the differing levels of interest that some opportunities may have, as opposed to others, often resulting from individual choice, employability and time constraints. These criticisms were identified in disseminating this project, and have been acted upon as an agenda for change, to impact upon future planning and implementation of developments within student engagement.

Future plans will focus on the continued dissemination, on an institutional level, of examples of best practice emerging from this project. Following feedback from internal dissemination at symposia, there will be greater emphasis on increasing awareness of employability and transferable skills via our new system of Personal Tutor Groups. Greater pastoral support for those students who actively participate in student engagement opportunities will be provided through workshops on methods, ethics and the 'practicalities' of the research process. The future for student engagement, and the importance of the 'student voice', looks positive with the University aiming to continue its acknowledged role for implementing SAP.

Related publications and resources

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