

# Editors' introduction

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### Guest Editors

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Being invited to host to the Fourth Annual Conference of the Change Agents' Network (CAN) at the University of Lincoln in May 2016 came at a perfect time, coinciding as it did with the conclusion of the University's 2012-2016 Student Engagement (SE) Strategy.

What better way of sharing ideas and projects than to invite 200 fellow enthusiasts, researchers, practitioners and pioneers to Lincoln, with the aim of helping the wider community to reflect and plan ahead for the future! The conference theme focused on the culture of engagement; the same theme now inspires this journal issue.

At the event, practice, research, experiences and new thinking on student engagement were shared, with particular focus on understanding what works and how to grow institutions' commitment to engaging students as partners. There, bringing together a community of student engagement across a day of excellent practice, were posters, workshops, conversations and the traditional student panel session.

And from that event, here we now are. The editors and guest editors are proud to publish this issue of the Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change.

The Change Agents Network (CAN) was established through work undertaken by Jisc and the University of Greenwich and continues to be supported by Jisc. It links with the range of activities undertaken at the University of Lincoln, which established a culture of partnership through a 2010 Higher Education Academy (HEA) National Teacher Fellowship Scheme project led by Professor Mike Neary and called 'Student as producer: research-engaged teaching and learning – an institutional strategy' (Neary *et al*, 2014).

'Student as Producer', as an ethos and culture of research-informed learning and teaching, laid the foundation for much of Lincoln's student-engagement work through to the development of a five-year strategy in 2011.

Over recent years, the incidence of students' taking an active role as producers in shaping their university experience has steadily increased across the Higher Education (HE) sector and, at Lincoln, became embedded in all practices across the institution. Now Lincoln's 'students-as-producers' culture, which supports producers and partners beyond the curriculum, the institution and the community, has by default become institutionally holistic, an intrinsic part of the practice of senior managers, academics, professional service staff and the student body. Since this issue focuses on 'Changing culture and Embedding Partnership', we might usefully examine how this was achieved at Lincoln.

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Within the first two years of the five-year strategy, a network of local 'Student Engagement Champions' was introduced into academic schools and professional services departments across the institution, thus ensuring that the strategy and culture were integral to the work of all. The champions themselves found their role proportionately more and more significant and many of them received internal funding to research and develop student engagement in their respective areas. The Student Engagement Team similarly expanded, working in partnership with the SU Student Voice Team.

The present support network allows for critical appraisal ('testing the norm') of everyday academic and professional service practice across the institution, taking account of everything from incoming staff to outgoing students. This challenging of practice has provided opportunities for students to join these conversations and contribute to the shaping of the university that they belong to.

Within the Human Resources department at Lincoln, students have been supported to join interview panels for appointments to academic posts at all levels and now nearly eighty per cent of those panels have an active student voice. Additionally, since internal quality assurance processes complement the representation system, each validation, revalidation and periodic academic review has a full student member to provide expertise about the student experience. A supportive, co-creative culture has fostered a 'student-led, staff-controlled' and self-questioning community, an environment in which students may confidently use their experiences to contribute to the shaping of learning and teaching and where traditional power dynamics may be challenged and new knowledge and approaches to learning created.

Within the University of Lincoln, 'Student as Producer' activity now falls under the broader student engagement banner, whilst the theoretical ethos continues to determine institutional culture. With due consideration to the principles underlining student-engagement practices, the key aim is to support, on a local level, the development of student-engagement initiatives appropriate to each member of staff and student involved. Such practice should be **meaningful**; it should be **true partnership**.

Student engagement at Lincoln has been supported strategically and financially. Professor Mary Stuart, Vice Chancellor, states (2015:1):

*"At Lincoln we are one community. There are no differences; staff and students are all scholars, just at different stages. When you come to Lincoln you become a citizen of this community with equal rights and responsibilities."*

Other institutions have developed similar cultures and put aside resources, but many student-engagement projects are low-level, under-the-radar and relatively unsupported. The sector continues to grapple with challenging questions concerning the concept of student engagement, some of which are explored in this issue. For example, the idea of 'equal partnership' remains a contested term (Dunne, 2013). It is sometimes difficult to understand how students can be 'equal partners' when staff generally hold the expertise. Moreover, how best may students be offered opportunities to lead as experts in the student experience? At Lincoln, there is a firmly-held belief that, while students are living the experience, they should be given the opportunity to create their own experiences, particularly if they have ideas on

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how it could be improved. This is where the principles of trust and respect resonate (Cook-Sather *et al*, 2002).

The other side of partnership relates to the staff. Even in situations where students are leading projects and driving ideas, there should always be a member of staff there to provide advice and support as and when needed. In this relationship, it is important that the staff involved identify as partners themselves, for a true, meaningful partnership may be difficult to achieve if one party sees her/his role as facilitator rather than partner. Staff awareness of privileges (including power and insider knowledge) and continuous reflection on these from the start can help to bring the relationship into balance.

Working with students as partners would be impossible without the institution's passionate concern about understanding what they think. Representation schemes depend on placing the student voice at the heart of the system and student representatives are fundamental to partnership work. Furthermore, whether aiming for the improvement of a first-year module, avoiding the negative impact of a particular assignment on module evaluations or understanding the lack of student engagement with an apparently well-planned seminar, staff do need to acquire a sense of trust that students *do* have the relevant experience – and the expertise deriving from it – that can transform practice. Additional questions spring to mind: Can a non-representative student from outside the discipline be a lens for enabling new insights? Do students have to be representative in order to contribute to curriculum development? Time will tell.

In addition to opinion pieces, case studies, research articles and technology reviews, we celebrate an innovation in the journal: for the first time, this issue publishes novel video articles that support written articles and bring to life some aspects of student engagement and ideas.

Our editorial concludes with a summary of this issue's articles, which arguably make a significant collective contribution to the body of literature on student engagement.

### Opinion pieces

Greater emphasis on a student-engagement and partnership agenda in the context of significant investment in the student experience and re-organisation of higher-education (HE) funding structures may be positive developments, yet the newly-created Office for Students has limited student representation. The authors of one opinion piece question the value of the central-government-driven HE agenda: current measurements of institutional 'excellence' and 'success' promote competition rather than collaboration and take little real account of students as stakeholders in their own learning; little value is placed upon student engagement in the improvement of HE or upon the rich diversity of institutions. The authors argue for productive conversation with students about their needs, suggesting that true partnership may be the means of meeting those needs. Only thus will real transparency, enabling students to make informed decisions about the right course and the right institution for them individually, be achieved.

A further opinion piece on this very theme points out that politically-engaged students have boycotted the National Student Survey (NSS), questioning the mechanism through which they are being asked to engage; their mode of participation in this debate may, ironically,

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serve to undermine the public profile of institutions at a time when optimum recruitment of students underpins institutional sustainability. However, the author notes, student engagement is not solely characterised by NSS response rates and it manifests itself in forms that have little to do with NSS and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF): in his own institution, the University of London, students partner staff and “bring their life experiences to bear on University processes”. His conclusion is that the student voice, whether assenting or dissenting, should be foregrounded, as the meaningful progress of the TEF may be possible “only with the engagement of satisfied *and* dissatisfied students *equally*.”

### Case studies

One case study focuses on how the University of Kent and the Kent Union have collaborated to develop high-level, strategic governance and operational links, thereby enhancing capture of the student voice and enabling it to influence change in institutional culture, policy and practice. Having created the Kent Union Education and Student Representation Board, for regular discussion of institutional academic issues, and deployed an online platform for gathering student feedback, Kent Union aims to provide an annual report on key student-experience issues; the University, meanwhile, has sought to improve its mechanisms for listening and to align its strategic priorities with those of the Union. The authors here evaluate, from both student and staff perspectives, the initial impact of these changes. They outline the student representation review's formidable scope, drawing on a huge range of desktop, qualitative and quantitative research, and indicate that the fifty-one recommendations were expected to have been addressed/implemented by the end of the 2016/17 academic year. They also helpfully provide three key areas for the sector to consider in improving student/staff partnerships.

To redress the balance in the literature relating to flipped learning, which under-represents sports-specific research, a case study from Northumbria University describes a project that “placed students as collaborative partners, co-creators and co-constructors to explore expectations, experiences and reflections of flipped learning”, as part of a talent-identification and high-performance coaching module. The author, the module leader, is able to confirm the very positive benefits of this approach to in-class engagement (historically poor), attendance (previously erratic) and achievement. With staff/student partnership from the outset, group members agreed on their each producing a series of three personalised audio blogs about the flipped-learning strategy: 1) prior knowledge/expectations of it; 2) initial experiences of using it; 3) critical reflections on their twelve-week experience of it during the whole module. Data deriving from the blogs indicate that at first the participants were overwhelmed by greater workload, responsibility and autonomy, but soon acclimatised, with real engagement and excitement; the partnership subsequently co-created a range of new learning resources for future delivery of the module. The paper finally shares the implications for future curriculum reform, together with associated academic and support staff professional development needs.

Transforming the delivery, from blended-learning to online, of Queen Margaret University's PGCert in Professional and Higher Education perhaps understandably posed considerable challenge. The case study presenting a project designed to gauge both staff and student reactions to the new 'e-PGCert' is thorough and balanced, the work of a collaborative partnership which involved students in the re-design of the programme and its evaluation,

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which includes staff reflections (facilitated by an application of de Bono's 'Six Thinking Hats'), an online survey and thematic analysis of data. Two student representatives on the programme agreed to become co-researchers. Co-creation of the curriculum has proved to be resource-effective and students continue to be regularly invited to engage in review; however, the authors say, without adequate funding, students may not, in addition to their roles as student representatives, come forward to offer up time for collection and analysis of data and the writing-up of project findings.

Partnership between a third-year nursing undergraduate and two academics at the University of Chester sought to address an identified problem: student nurses didn't value practice placements in nursing homes. The case study charting the journey of this pedagogical research project makes clear that the three partners involved were equal and had an expectation of mutual learning – both core features of the critical philosophy underpinning nurse education. It is unusual for a student nurse to conduct research (ethical and practical barriers militate against this), but, when one does, s/he offers an insider perspective which can only enrich and corroborate findings and analysis. Another less common feature of this mixed qualitative research was its incorporation of visual methods (in particular, drawings) to elicit from participants concepts sometimes difficult to articulate in words. The paper provides some thought-provoking insights into the partnership, whose research findings have been widely well-received, and, as reasons for the unalloyed success of the collaboration, the authors single out effective communication, equality, consideration of each researcher's unique perspective, thorough methodology (with clear identification of each researcher's needs) and, finally, the willingness and motivation of the student partner.

Another illustration of this issue's focus on productive partnership comes from a case study on a University of Warwick Medical School lecture-feedback model, which aimed to replace a system whose time lapse precluded specific and constructive commentary, unhelpful both to the institution and to the staff. A collaborative team of four medical students and one faculty member designed both a training event to turn a dozen or so students from each year group into 'mystery shoppers' – who could observe and then offer very useful feedback to lecturers – and an online form for them to use for each lecture seen. This anonymous method was then quality-controlled by the faculty member before comments were passed on to the lecturer. That the lecturers felt unthreatened by the process and that most of them found the feedback helpful are testament to the careful planning and execution of the project, which capitalised on the skills of the student members of the team to work with their peers and achieve worthwhile outcomes. Thus, the student experience and the quality of teaching have simultaneously been enhanced, with even greater improvements expected in the future.

An exploration of the various approaches taken by Leeds Beckett University to support new students to become active participants in their own learning is presented in a fascinating case study whose author makes very clear that it is the institution's responsibility not to enforce participation, but, amongst other things, to provide opportunities for all students to contribute in ways that align with their personal goals. The paper's systematic appraisal of data about the institution's current practice addresses key characteristics that underpin student engagement: practical and course orientation – pre-arrival, induction event, longitudinal process – in the context respectively of a responsive learning environment and a well-organised, tightly-constructed course; rapid responses to students' queries and

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proactive seeking of student feedback; targeting of specific groups; demonstration to students of the value and relevance of learning experiences and tasks. The author's logic leads ineluctably to the concept of the person-focused service model: an orientation of the institution to the student, not of the student to the institution.

Against the starkly horrific background of a Sri Lankan student-led national insurrection, in which thousands of students died, traditional teaching merely to impart subject knowledge appears clearly inadequate and student/staff partnership takes on a much sharper profile. A case study from the Staff Development Centre of the University of Colombo highlights just how profoundly a change in teacher attitudes and perceptions about students can transform the learning experience. The author describes how, at this institution, tutors of the mandatory (for all new lecturers) postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education changed the culture, enabling and sustaining a learning-teaching partnership which, in turn, improved students' skills and learning. At the heart of the transformation was the realisation that it was not enough just to give students precise guidance and a clear definition of expectations and that, to be really motivated to participate, learners would respond much better to an additional and motivational explanation of the potential benefits (such as skills' acquisition) of the activity. The author concludes with a trenchant comment on the need for students in Sri Lanka to be helped to assert their voice *in positive ways* to influence university policy and practice in teaching and learning, thus avoiding counter-productive protests which serve only to alienate the establishment.

The Student Digital Ambassador Programme at City and Islington College, from its launch in October 2016, set out to improve the student experience with learning technology, to develop digital literacies and to drive change and innovation; the case study charting its course describes the partnership of the Digital Learning Team and student volunteers who enjoyed helping others, were keen to learn about new technologies and wanted valuable work experience. This paper is a joyful celebration of a remarkable range of ambassador activities and achievements. The author comments: "Once the ambassadors could see the relevance of the skills they were developing and the positive contribution they could make, they seemed motivated to carry on. Working in partnership with teachers and support staff and taking part in meetings to discuss, plan and evaluate initiatives have a real impact on student engagement." Perhaps the most wonderful thing about this programme is the obvious energy of the partnership, which in 2017/18 looks set to make more exciting and stimulating contributions to the institution and to continue to motivate its student ambassadors.

The University of Nottingham has campuses in the UK, China and Malaysia; it set out to "develop a model of student engagement that would be distinctive to its own culture and sustainable over time and across all campuses." The development of its 'Students as Change Agents' (SACA) scheme is explored in a case study which includes both the challenges faced in ensuring consistency and the effectiveness of partnership work. In this flexible scheme, students as well as staff may propose projects – though student needs and preferences take priority. Students are paired with a staff partner/mentor who may be a proactive contributor or simply respond if support is needed. SACA is run by students for students; they lead, evaluate and recommend and, in consequence, such improvements as interactive online training have made the scheme equitable across and accessible to all campuses. The authors of this paper state that the effort expended to establish the scheme

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in all the countries has resulted in a highly-collaborative and collegiate cross-campus team, sharing common values, but also respecting local differences. It is made perfectly clear that SACA is generating more and more projects and has a bright future.

### Research articles

Complex social and professional challenges face contemporary working scientists, but, traditionally, their intensive training – comprising lectures, laboratory sessions, workshops and tutorials – has precluded more formal inclusion of opportunities for science students to engage with these issues and develop their own views on such matters as gender representation in their discipline, environmental concerns and the relationship between the media and science. A research article (accompanied by a video presentation – see below, in Video Articles) explores the efficacy of a University College London discussion-class initiative for physics students, using YouTube videos as stimuli. The authors suggest that discussion of this kind, conducted perhaps monthly and with regard to the creation of a safe and secure environment, allows for the expression of nuanced personal opinions by all participants and prepares them well for what they will face in the working world.

The challenges to staff and students when participating in co-creation of the curriculum – changed roles and responsibilities, time and effort, institutional inertia – have failed to deter some innovators in the Scottish higher education sector from seeking to overcome them and thereby gaining the many benefits of working in partnership. Another research article, drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with a broad range of staff with co-creation experience in a variety of disciplines and with students from similarly diverse subjects within the sciences, clearly demonstrates what the benefits are when collaborative approaches are embedded. The author emphasises that co-creative activities – as wide-ranging in focus as development of educational resources, planning for a new introductory course, peer teaching, course content creation, pedagogy, assessment or student feedback to staff – engender shared ownership and engagement in the learning community, as well as both student and staff satisfaction and acquisition of skills.

The 'Culturocity Project' at Canterbury Christ Church University is an induction activity, co-created – by both current students and recent graduates of Drama and the Performing Arts – and student-led, with equality and diversity training as its focus. With stimulating and thought-provoking drama games, it engages participating students in curriculum-related matters and proactively instigates a partnership learning community. The authors of the research article describing this project confirm its capacity to nurture belonging and mutual support, to foster engagement and to involve staff and students in partnership. Thus, by provoking questions about inclusivity and sharpening sensitivity and awareness, it has much to offer students, staff and the institution, where mutual respect can only support personal satisfaction, retention and collaboration.

The fourth research article in this issue explains that completion of an elective project at the University of Glasgow Dental School is a progression requirement entailing a period of self-directed and enquiry-led learning. A study with a participatory methodology, and involving three student co-researchers and a staff researcher, explored students' expectations and perspectives of their elective experience, with a view to enhancing this significant element of their curriculum. The paper's authors recognised that students must be at the heart of any investigation into an elective programme and there was a clear intention to engage the

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student co-researchers in an authentic research experience and for them to feel part of their institution's research culture; there was also an established and trusting relationship between them and those students who participated in the study's focus group. Not only did the study's findings provide evidence of current good practice and identify aspects for beneficial change (as part of its strategic plan, the Dental School will be enacting the recommendations), but the student co-researchers were also able to confirm a rich experience and the acquisition of relevant skills.

### Video articles

This new section in the journal supports video submission. Here, three video pieces exemplify the potential for enrichment that this medium brings to the predominantly written genre of scholarship.

Using an innovative animated graphic, a collaborative team at Teesside University explores ideas of student-staff partnership and co-creation of learning. The resulting scholarly video piece throws light on how the team achieved this, starting with modules on Psychology and Business programmes.

The Learning Development Centre (LDC) in the School of Health and Life Sciences at Glasgow Caledonian University is dedicated to the provision of high-quality online support materials for the seventy per cent of students who have off-campus placement requirements. To assist them, the LDC team partnered 'Student Learning Developers', who played a pivotal role in the co-creation and evaluation of resources. By this means, a culture of student collaboration is now integral to the LDC. An innovative mixed-media case study highlights the value of the 'Think Aloud Method', which provides authentic, real-time evaluation data and has potential for student partnership work to enhance user engagement with learning materials. The video perfectly captures the steps taken by the LCD and provides deeper understanding of the process.

The third video, from University College London, accompanies a research article (see above) and captures staff-student conversations, stimulated by carefully-selected YouTube videos that address issues affecting early career scientists as they move into their chosen careers. The video provides insights into their opinions, as well as illustrating the pedagogical approach adopted, and provides the reader with greater understanding of the written article and its analysis.

### Technology reviews

The introduction of *CareerHub's* automated workflow has transformed two student-engagement schemes at the University of Exeter. A technology review paper examines how this digital solution, an online career management system, has drawn student recruitment and skills development, tracking and learner development together, with all engagement records and knowledge of interactions in one place. Students in both schemes can thus access appropriate guidance when needed, track their own progress and more effectively manage their involvement in projects; they are therefore able to develop independent learning and acquire employability skills. The authors acknowledge some limitations, especially in terms of the time required of staff to learn how to use the workflows, but significant savings in administrative time and more reliable data more than outweigh them.



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