

Growing from a Seed

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Introduction

“I began to realise how important it was to be an enthusiast in life. If you are interested in something, no matter what it is, go at it full speed. Embrace it with both arms, hug it, love it and above all become passionate about it. Lukewarm is no good”
(Roald Dahl)

Roald Dahl’s quote captures the essence of this paper. Opportunities presented to me whilst studying at University of Westminster highlighted one of the passions I have outside my academic study. The projects described here represent one of the passions I have for student engagement activities. Growing from a small seed into a big tree, I discovered my interest. I embraced the opportunities in which I never thought of being involved and quickly, these projects captured my heart of having a memorable recollection of what the University of Westminster chapter was all about. It was a chapter full of discoveries.

Learning new skills and seeing different things always intrigued my curious mind. I could remember my excitement when opportunities arose in school for extracurricular activities. Whether this was in sports and or music, like many other children, I tried to take in everything that we were exposed to. A few years before university, and I had the opportunity to explore outside my comfort zone. I was elected as a Member of UK Youth Parliament from my local borough and the role pushed me to develop my confidence and public speaking skills in front of large audiences. As a result, I was able to use these skills to develop the projects being described in this paper. A few years as an undergraduate at University of Westminster were like growing from a seed. Like every other ‘Fresher’, a few years at higher education in a specialised subject intrigued my mind. Thus, I took the opportunity to search my own identity.

“Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself”
(George Bernard Shaw)

Shaw’s quote pretty much sums up my time at University of Westminster. It was a new chapter in my life and a new chapter to define myself. Not by finding how I could fit into the culture at University, but by creating myself through my course, the encouragements from those around you and opportunities being provided. Starting university, I wanted to explore the opportunities outside my academic study. Taking up extra-curricula activities enhanced my personal and professional skills.

Projects

Whilst at university, a ‘Learning Future’ initiative was developed whilst the University of Westminster was reviewing its strategy and vision. This was a change programme which ran from 2012/13 to 2016 looking at the whole learning experience, including the curriculum, assessment, regulations in supporting and designing learning activities, with the aim to change the experience of students, graduates and staff. Within Learning Futures, one of the project strands was “Transforming Learning and Teaching” focusing on academic excellence and teaching skills.

In this strand, Students as Co-Creators (SCC) was created enhancing the learning, teaching and research aspects. This involved students in academic projects, co-creating ideas in partnership with academics identifying existing issues, carrying out a research project and disseminating the findings to the wider university community. Students involved are actively making changes and providing student voices helping to shape our learning experiences. Aligning with the university's learning and teaching strategy, the SCC projects were faculty sponsored and student-led research, aiming to improve learn and teaching.

In 2014/15, I took on a part-time role as a Student Engagement Lead (SEL) with my Faculty of Science and Technology (FST) having seen an advertisement on the University's Talent Bank. I advised Learning Futures, providing a student perspective. I also promoted and worked with other SELs on Learning Futures work, including Students as Co-Creators pilot projects. In addition, I ran student facing workshops, supporting developments of student engagement strategy, and organising meetings with students to collect student feedback. My role provided an opportunity to work with other departments in other faculties. It was a very exciting year and seeing how the university work in my early years was eye-opening.

To be involved with SCC pilot projects, I led a project in my faculty. At that time, an exciting project was being developed by the faculty titled "Mobile Learning Project". This aim was to provide mobile learning devices to the FST population, enabling students and lecturers to learn collaboratively with a greater connectivity using available mobile learning tools, and offering effective and dynamic ways of learning. Therefore, the idea of co-creating a project around this new initiative seemed very relevant and fitted well with the SCC visions and aims. As a result, my first project "Mobile Learning Device Project" was born. I was later invited to sit in the main "Mobile Learning Project Board" as a student representative with members of teaching and non-teaching staff. This role and experience was daunting at first, knowing that I was the only student on the board representing the voices of the student population. It was an exciting new chapter even though I did not know how it will evolve in this academic year.

The "Mobile Learning Device" project had interesting feedback gathered from the FST undergraduate population. My role on the board provided opportunities to share my SCC project results, which helped influenced some of the decisions made (e.g. types of mobile applications used) and provided students' perspectives on mobile learning devices.

My role was a fantastic learning curve and engaged with a diverse range of people. I could remember I got nervous in engaging with people around university. It was a frightening task to learn how to speak in an effective way. The major hurdle was approaching members of staff, especially those who I did not know and or taught me. It was scary at first but that "scariness" soon faded away when I realised that they are just like us! Reflecting back, I have learnt and developed my confidence and communication skills.

My time as a SEL soon ended and I wanted to continue my work with the SCC seeing the successes and impacts. With the experience, I applied again carrying out another SCC project. Developing from my first year, I looked at the "iPad Engagement" in a classroom setting following the deployment of iPads to FST's undergraduates and staff. I am proud to say I was part of the development of the faculty's project, and University of Westminster launched one of the largest Apple iPad deployments in UK higher education in September 2015. Seeing the development of the Mobile Learning Project gave me insights into running a university project. It was a very valuable experience.

Fast forward to my final year of the undergraduate degree, I again wanted to develop what I learnt from my past two projects one last time, and I made another proposal to the project. Continuing with the theme of student engagement, I was delighted that my project proposal on “Feedback to Feed Forward” got accepted. Over the years, I have seen the changes and developments for student experiences in learning and teaching. Therefore, my final project explored students’ feedback from National Student Survey and Student Engagement Surveys comparing results between Faculties of Science and Technology with Social Sciences and Humanities. One important aspect raised was the student feedback and the fact that staff expectations of students are not necessarily the same as a student’s expectations of themselves and of the staff. This emphasises the need for communications to be consistent and transparent between staff and students, ensuring expectation levels are understood between the two parties. An example of this is when students are completing assessments and not necessarily understanding expectations from academics. Consequently, the project’s recommendations include adopting and promoting inclusiveness and active learning approaches and moving from students as evaluators to students as co-creators and change agents.

My role in all three projects was Project Manager, working in partnership with staff and different departments co-creating ideas. From designing the research project, managing the project’s finance, recruiting participants for consultative forums, data collection and analysis, and dissemination of findings provided skills adding to my graduate attributes.

A few years studying at University of Westminster had a big impact on me. Graduating in BSc (Hons) Human Nutrition was what I initially set out to achieve. But departing from Westminster with a whole package of other experiences, personal and professional skills was not expected. Impacts of project findings have provided experiences in presenting posters and presentations in Learning and Teaching Symposiums, Jisc’s Change Agents’ Network Conference and at the RAISE Network.

Lessons Learnt

*“Tell me and I’ll forget, show me and I may remember; involve me and I’ll understand”
(Chinese Proverb)*

This Chinese Proverb highlighted the importance of involving students in enhancing learning and teaching activities. Ultimately, the university experience enhances students’ personal and professional skills and is part of growing and identifying themselves. There have been many lessons I have learnt being part of SCC projects.

I learnt that student voices are a powerful tool. From the odd feedback we give in black and white and or verbally, students sometimes underestimate the power of their feedback. We do not realise how much of student feedback can affect the way modules are being run. And my perception of student voices has developed over the years; students need to know that no matter who they are, their feedback and opinions do matter. After all, a few years at university is more than just receiving a degree. The skills and experiences learnt will stay with you long term. It is part of creating a chapter of memories and defining who you are. Students are not just numbers but are the voices of the next generation of professionals. Thus, I believe that a better understanding in students would help with the co-creation, not just only in the SCC projects but in classroom settings also between the lecturers and students. Therefore, projects conducted represented the voice of student population together as one, and every student in the faculty had opportunities to be part of that impact.

Conversely, it is typical to say that not all student feedback is always positive. This however highlights the importance of students' perspective, and the need to involve students when developing learning and teaching activities.

Experiences of disseminating project findings initiated more discussions amongst academics. It was interesting how intrigued they were with students' projects. Presenting in front of academics always makes you feel anxious as if you were being assessed, however, those apprehensive moments soon faded away when I immersed myself into the projects. The opportunity to participate in Students as Co-Creators projects also impacted on lecturers also. It is a way for staff to work with students and their perspectives, improving and developing the "learning and teaching" enhancing university experiences and quality of teaching. Hence, involving students in the process can further enrich that understanding on how best to meet the needs and requirements for all.

Another lesson learnt was the many departments and or services that I did not know existed at the university. This provided a further understanding of how the university was structured which assisted me during my projects of reaching the relevant contacts in data collection, providing feedbacks to facilitate changes in university experiences.

"We are all stories in the end; just make it a good one"
(Stephen Moffat)

A few years at University of Westminster have been an eye-opener. When I first arrived into the Westminster community, I was a seed to be planted. Yet my personal and professional skills since then have blossomed and have provided the vast amount of opportunities for me to create my memories and experiences. As Moffat's quote sums up my Westminster journey, studying at University of Westminster is just another chapter in my story. It has been a memorable few years and aside from an academic course, Student as Co-Creators Projects has helped enhance skills that I never thought of learning such as project management and working with academics to see how they carry out research projects. With an aspiration to be involved in research one way and or another, the SCC projects has provided a good insight into the research field and the necessary skills as a solid foundation to progress in the future.

'Student Engagement' demonstrates the importance for bridging students and staff, collaborating on ideas to generate higher feedback response rate and in return better satisfaction scores. Response rate is not all about the competitions between courses and or students. But this highlights the importance of tackling the barriers and challenges that staff and students are facing. This is not the only option for student engagement. Other alternatives maybe of just simple conversations to create and develop activities in class, and or encouraging students in outreach and student-led activities in societies. The list is endless and is all about what the staff and student feel most comfortable in working together to generate changes, no matter how small they are. It is the 'co-creating' and the partnership between students and staff to increase the quality of learning and teaching, ensuring everyone has a sense of belonging. It is of acceptance and building that trust with one another in the society, generating ideas and building connections.

The Future

As I write these few pages a few days before from walking the stage to become an alumnus of the University, it has made me realise how much Westminster and Student as Co-

Creators projects has become part of me. Yet there are no one simple answers on how to have effective 'Student Engagement', as this final year has been an emotional rollercoaster. It is with great sadness that I now have to say farewell to student engagement projects and many other involvements I have been in. But nevertheless, I look forward to joining the alumni community and hopefully help inspire and motivate the next sets of students. I started off as a small seed amongst many others, yet Westminster has "watered me" through journeys where I explored what I could do and where I can set roots and build my foundation. Today, I can say I have become a big "nutritious" tree absorbing all the possible knowledge radiated by those who taught and or worked with me. The continuous support and encouragement from academics especially have enthused me my capabilities and aspirations. My projects' experiences provided insights working in partnerships with professionals, capturing the views of a range of students we have at such a diverse London based university. No matter what shapes, sizes and background we are from, students are all in it together and working collaboratively, students' voices are strong. We, students, are also being valued as individuals whilst studying at Westminster.

"I see my path, but I don't know where it leads. Not knowing where I'm going is what inspires me to travel it"
(Rosalia De Castro)

This has been an inspiring journey and my involvements in projects continue to ignite my passion for research. A very emotional end, but a very memorable chapter. The excitement for the future continues as I embark on a new journey. I look on as I wait to see where the branches on my tree will grip onto, and hopefully, flowers will blossom as I find my identity into a more specialised subject in my BSc (Hons) Human Nutrition. It is finding that identity that Westminster has provided. University of Westminster will forever have a place in my heart.

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