

## **A creative approach to engaging students as partners at faculty level of the institution**

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### **Introduction**

Following the rise in tuition fees in 2012 there has been a significant drive by Business, Innovation and Skills (2011), National Union of Students (2012) and the Quality Assurance Agency (2013) for Higher Education providers to enable, support and demonstrate student engagement at all levels of the institution so that students may be engaged as 'active participants in the learning process, rather than passive recipients of knowledge' (Wenstone, 2013). Following the publication of the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education Chapter B5 (2013), the NUS Manifesto for Partnership (2013) and other relevant guidance, some outstanding initiatives have been designed and implemented by institutions and Students' Unions to strengthen and develop a sustainable culture of partnership through the furthering of student engagement.

It has been found that engaging students as partners at the faculty level of institutions has proved challenging for many HE providers (Velden *et al*, 2013; NUS, 2012). At the University of Chester, student engagement at Faculty Boards of Studies has been moderate, with 38% of student members attending and a further 32% sending apologies since 2012. This suggests that 70% of the student representatives have been engaged with the process to some extent. However, owing to fixed agendas, the Board of Studies does not allow for the discussion of innovative ideas for enhancement between staff and students. Also, fixed times and dates can often exclude those students on placement or with existing commitments. As a result, the Faculty of Education and Children's Services (ECS) has developed a creative solution to embedding student engagement at the institution's faculty level.

The Student Engagement Officer (SEO) project is a new scheme, launched in October 2014. The project was developed and implemented by Wendy Garner, Senior University Teaching Fellow (FECS), Becky Lees, Student Engagement Officer (Academic Quality and Enhancement) and Professor Liz Fleet (Associate Dean, FECS). The structure was adapted from existing models including The University of Exeter University Change Agents Project and Birmingham City Student Advisory Board (Rowe, Cooper and Fulford, 2013).

Nine students were recruited across a number of courses, locations and levels of study within the Faculty of Education and Children's Services. Fundamentally, the project aimed for a staff-student working partnership that would bring about enhancements to the learning experience of students within a shared academic community (Indicator 2, B5, QAA, 2013).

The contrasts between the new approach to faculty-based student engagement through the SEOs and the traditional Board of Study may be summarised by the following table:

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<b>Faculty Board of Study</b>	<b>Student Engagement Officer Project</b>
Fixed meeting date and time	Meeting times adapted to availability of students
Fixed agenda	Agenda led by students
Student members are volunteers	SEOs are paid hourly
Students consulted on decisions made	SEOs are partners in the design, development and delivery of enhancement projects
The number of staff outweighs that of students	There are nine SEOs and three staff members
Students are chosen by the faculty	Students are recruited through UniJob and are adequately trained and supported

### Enhancement Projects and Outcomes

The SEOs have led a number of projects based upon feedback from the wider student body and have used the following data (Indicator 5, B5, QAA, 2013):

- The National Student Survey
- First Year Experience Survey
- Module evaluations
- Student Academic Representatives

The completed projects are currently being implemented across the faculty and rigorous evaluation continues. This means that some of the outcomes highlighted below are anticipated as we seek to evaluate impact not only in the short term but also longitudinally (Indicator 7, B5, QAA, 2013).

The roles adopted by the students and descriptions of the projects and outcomes are outlined below by the lead SEO(s):

#### **SEOs as Celebrators: Good Standards Framework, by Naomi Gradwell**

##### **Aim:**

To celebrate and disseminate best practice in learning and teaching in the Faculty of Education and Children's Services (Indicator 6, B5, QAA, 2013).

##### **Project:**

This project was first initiated in an SEO meeting in which we were discussing certain educational practices that had been particularly successful in engaging students. It was clear that some of the noted methods were common practice within the faculty, but others were exclusive to just one or two lecturers and many of the SEOs had never seen them in the learning environment before. As we shared experiences, we began to gain insight into what works towards positively engaging university students in their learning.

It was decided that some of the SEOs would outline five examples of good practice to be highlighted to staff members in the faculty. For two reasons, this was much simpler in theory than in reality: firstly, I had to cast my mind back across three years of lectures and teaching

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techniques; secondly, after recalling dozens of amazing educational approaches, I had to select the best five. I eventually selected:

1. examples of introductory guides to referencing;
2. examples of introductory guides for presenting;
- 3 & 4. two examples of non-traditional frameworks for summarising content learnt;
5. educational debate with politicians.

These examples made it into my top five because:

- they have continued to be helpful throughout my whole time at university and beyond;
- some of the approaches were specific to an upcoming task or assessment;
- the format of the session was unusual and therefore memorable;
- the practice has developed my interest in fields outside my academic course, such as politics.

Descriptions of the above practices were collated along with nominations for ECS staff from Chester Students' Union (CSU) Above And Beyond awards (AABs - student-led teaching awards) and this practice will now be shared with staff across the faculty.

### **Anticipated outcomes:**

- the production of a good practice framework, to be disseminated across the faculty in due course;
- Staff Conference, scheduled for September 2015, with a focus on sharing practice and celebrating what works;
- innovative approaches to teaching adopted, recognised and celebrated, through quality assurance mechanisms and CSU AAB awards.

### **SEOs as influencers: Feedback on academic work, by Matthew Fletcher**

#### **Aim:**

To work with staff to enhance feedback on assessed work within the Faculty of Education and Children's Services.

#### **Project:**

One of the first projects that the student engagement team undertook arose after a group discussion in response to the 2013/14 NSS data. We realised that, following assessment of assignments, there were often marker feedback inconsistencies and we therefore proposed that standard criteria be established for all markers to use. We set out to complete this project by gathering as many different assignment feedback examples as we could. In groups, we then discussed and highlighted what type of feedback was more beneficial and why, identifying the most useful examples of feedback as those from which students could learn and thus be able apply the advice to future assignments. With this in mind, it was time to construct guidelines in a professional format, appropriate for both staff and students.

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We achieved this by using the NUS Assessment and Feedback Benchmarking Toolkit (2013) and adapting it to suit the realistic aims and expectations of staff and students within the faculty. The benchmarking tool provides a scale against which staff can measure the quality of their assessment feedback, in relation to the following principles: marking consistency, feedback quality, feed forward and self-reflection.

We worked with programme leaders to develop this tool and presented the final version at a Faculty staff development day, receiving positive feedback from the staff, including the Deputy Dean of ECS, as follows; *“I was very impressed with the team's confidence and professionalism as you addressed the faculty [...] This is likewise, never an easy task, but you acquitted yourselves incredibly well. Your enthusiasm and engagement bodes well for the future of the profession.”*

The tool will be disseminated to all staff and students and implemented across the faculty for 2015/16.

### **Anticipated outcomes:**

- provide staff and students with a clear understanding of the minimum requirements expected from assessment feedback;
- provide markers with a clear tool against which to benchmark their practice, in order to improve practice;
- provide other faculties and departments with a tool to initiate dialogue with students relating to the enhancement of assessment feedback;
- improvement of the overall student experience, to be reflected accordingly through module evaluations and the National Student Survey.

### **SEOs as Educators: Study Skills, by Kerry Lawrence**

#### **Aim:**

To identify and develop enhancements to the academic study skills provision.

#### **Project:**

As a student and a study skills officer for a local further educational college, I wanted to identify any areas within the study skills support service which could be developed/improved upon. I also wanted to highlight any areas of good practice which could be applied and expanded. Kizlik states: “Effective study skills must be practised to improve... practice doesn't make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect” (2010). This statement reinforces my view that to conduct this project was imperative and would be beneficial for students and staff because it highlights the importance of a current, operational, valid and successful study skills service.

The methodology taken to complete this project consisted of visiting the study skills team within the University Student Support and Guidance department, meeting with staff and students, attending study skill sessions and reviewing the marketing material and strategies used by the department.

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Three key areas of the service were identified as potential areas of development:

- **Accessibility:** Accessibility to the service was restricted to certain timeframes and allocated drop-in sessions and the online booking form was both onerous and complicated.

**Recommendation:** It was suggested that this service needed to be more readily accessible and that workshops should be reinstated.

- **Marketing:** The service was using several duplicated social media accounts, confusing for both staff and students and resulting in the dissemination through these channels of inaccurate, conflicting and outdated information.

**Recommendation:** It was suggested that the service was marketed through one social media account per channel to ensure both consistency and accuracy.

- **Availability of resources:** It was also recognised that the service should have a designated study skills area where relevant resources and literature could be accessed by both staff and students.

**Recommendation:** Subject- and faculty-specific resources should be readily available and accessible to those with such specific learning needs as Irlen syndrome.

## **Outcomes:**

- the reintroduction of the 'Workshop Wednesdays', a drop-in session for all students studying at the Riverside Campus;
- clearer online accessibility to the resources;
- the development of a designated study skills area with visual IPTV boards within the student common room.

## **SEOs as Translators: Project Camera, by Bethan Medlock and Mike Heathcote**

### **Aim:**

To provide Education students with 'how-to' videos to support student success whilst on placement.

### **Project:**

Since the introduction of the new teaching standards in 2012, some students have at times found confusing the administration of compulsory paperwork (in order to quality for NQT). So that associate teachers might have evidence to meet the teaching standards, the university produced new lesson-planning pro forma and a weekly review form, including a section for setting SMART targets, to be completed by the AT and her/his professional mentor. When this new paperwork was released and ATs began to use it on a regular basis, concerns about high work-load and queries as to what to put in each box arose. In response, three

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SEOs identified the need to translate the requirements and existing guidance into a series of student-friendly 'how-to' videos.

A script created by the SEOs prior to the filming was then used as part of the filming process. The videos included explanations of the requirements of each section of the forms as well as simple examples for some sections. After the filming, the videos were edited and made available to students through social media and on the faculty hub so that it is now accessible online at all times.

### Outcomes:

- the production of three 'how-to' videos available at: <http://www.chestereducation.co.uk/> ;
- positive student feedback through module evaluations;
- improved quality of paperwork whilst on placement.

### Reflections from the SEOs

#### Naomi Gradwell (Education Studies, Level 6)

From the first day of being an SEO, I have felt a real sense of partnership. It is satisfying to be part of a team all pushing towards the same goal: enhancing the education faculty. As much as I love my studies at the University of Chester, doing practical work which actually makes a difference has been even more rewarding. And so, even when my study schedule has been hectic, my work as an SEO has always been something I've enjoyed and even used as relief from essay-writing. How many people can say that about their part-time student job?

But most of all, it reminded me of why I chose the University of Chester and why I love it, because staff and students alike are committed to making the amazing experience of being a student here even better.

#### Matthew Fletcher (BAQTS, Level 5)

In the short time since the creation of this role, we have achieved so much. This role has shown me that none of this would have been possible without the cooperation between staff and students. It has helped me to realise that the university can succeed and develop successfully only through the mutual contributions of staff and students working together.

#### Emily Wright (BAQTS, Level 5)

I have really enjoyed being an SEO, as it has allowed me the opportunity to work with a range of people, both staff and peers, which has been very interesting. Being part of this role has allowed me to see more about how the university works and what goes on behind the scenes to make it that way. I feel that getting students involved in working with staff to develop aspects of the university means that everyone's views and opinions are considered and compromises are made, which makes sure that changes work for everyone.

#### Kerry Lawrence (Education Studies with English Language, Level 6)

I have sincerely enjoyed my time as an SEO and I feel very honoured to have been selected to partake in such a new, innovative experiment. The process of students and staff working in partnership to identify and deliver change has proved to be an integral part of the review, implementation and success of university processes and services.

### **Bethan Medlock (B.Ed, Level 6)**

Being an SEO has developed my confidence: having been given the opportunity to speak in a faculty meeting and having been filmed for the 'how-to' videos, I have become more confident when speaking in front of peers and those above me. Through having this role and spending time with the team, I have learnt that my experiences can influence change and improve the student experience for the better. Working alongside staff is what makes these changes possible as their experience working with students is invaluable.

### **Megan Harris (B.Ed, Level 6)**

Becoming an SEO has completely impacted on my self-confidence especially through Project Camera, in which I feel I had a key role, in producing, writing the scripts and presenting in front of the camera. The role has given me the opportunity to communicate my thoughts and feelings on the course, positive and constructive, in a mature and productive way. I feel that this role, although new, is extremely important, not only for current students and staff but also for those attending the university in many years' time. The role has given me a purpose, in supporting current and future students.

### **Lessons Learned**

The lessons we have learned through the model applied are:

- **Treat students as equals:** To expect education students to volunteer and be committed to an educational enhancement role in addition to their placements, part-time work, extra-curricular activities and existing commitments would be unreasonable. We have therefore paid the students for the time they have committed and the faculty has benefited from being able to treat the SEO as employees. For instance, the staff have been able to apply deadlines to projects, expect a certain standard of work from the SEOs and review their effectiveness as employees as well as change makers.
- **Turn problems into solutions:** Together we identified areas of development in an open, transparent manner, in order that the SEOs might develop solutions that would work for staff and students.
- **Regular communication:** The SEOs were supported by the members of staff to ensure communication between all parties was consistent, open and clear.
- **Think outside the box:** Engaging students with quality assurance and quality enhancement can sometimes lend itself to token student membership of decision-making boards and perfunctory consultation. In order to activate the rich source of innovation students provide, an environment that fosters collaboration, openness and a shared understanding should be adopted.
- **Celebrate success:** The initiative has been a success for the SEOs, the faculty and the university; as a result, the team has won the Student Employee of the Year Award and consequently been entered into the regional awards.

- **Monitor and review:** Though the full evaluation of the project is not yet complete, we have reflected upon the projects completed, staff feedback, SEO feedback, personal development of the SEOs and feedback from the lead staff. The initial feedback has prompted us complete the recruitment of a further six SEOs for 2015-16, with four existing SEOs continuing in their role.

### Summary

The drive to develop student engagement in the Faculty of Education and Children's Services has led to the implementation of a successful scheme, enabling staff and students to work in partnership to achieve a shared goal: to improve the student experience. The project has been a welcome addition to progressing student engagement beyond the Board of Studies: from consulting with students to working in true partnership.

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