

Student engagement and partnership approaches at University of Lincoln and Lincoln Students' Union

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The University of Lincoln has come a long way in the last ten years, from the 2009 introduction and adaptation of 'Student as Producer' (as the underpinning methodology for teaching and learning throughout the institution) to becoming known as a sector leader for innovation in 'student engagement'.

The sector has adopted student engagement as more than just a passing phase – indeed, it is now a founding principle for most Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) submissions across the United Kingdom. It is used to create 'career-ready graduates' who are articulate problem-solvers ready for the challenges that may face them in their careers. Since developing student engagement at Lincoln, we have seen consistency in the National Student Survey results and internal surveys, indicating that students value opportunities to build their portfolios and experience in and beyond their chosen specialisms.

Remaining at the forefront of innovative practice in student engagement is not easy and, to many colleagues in the sector, Lincoln may have looked comparatively sleepy in the past two years. However, behind this apparent quiet spell, Lincoln has been working to cement our student-engagement work into a coherent and collegiate approach – uniting engagement opportunities at Student Union and University level through a joint strategy and operational plan to give students a united platform of opportunity.

The joint 'Student Engagement Strategy' (SES) aims to continue the institution's work to create a culture where students are equipped to be producers of their education and their wider university experience.

Sector good practice, such as presenting at National Conferences (RAISE and The Student Engagement Partnership), shows the institution that engagement is most effective when it transcends mere consultation or participation and engenders a rich and active partnership between staff and students – the underpinning principle of the strategy. Working with the 'one community' concept, staff and students are partners and change agents for the positive development of that community and for the future development of all students as active citizens, confident graduates and successful future leaders in their professions.

This joint approach aims to:

- support a great University experience for all students by actively involving them in the development of the institution;
- enhance students' learning through active participation in developing their curriculum;
- maintain active dialogue in the academic community on engaging students in new and meaningful ways to impact positively on their academic experience;
- give students a platform to demonstrate the value of their input in enhancing the quality of their education;

Case Studies

- encourage students to develop themselves and their peers into highly engaged, employable and creative-thinking graduates who contribute to the development of society and the economy;
- provide students with a wealth of opportunities to participate as active members of their university community and gain valuable skills, through sports, societies, volunteering and campaigning;
- encourage students to be co-creators of knowledge-exchange;
- encourage engagement across the diversity of the student body;
- be a sector leader in engagement, innovation and opportunity;
- encourage cross-discipline knowledge-exchange and collaboration.

Designing academic opportunities

Designed to be flexible and easily accessible, the 'Academic Opportunities' portfolio – previously called 'Student Engagement Opportunities' – encourages staff and student partnership across the whole University experience. This ensures that the student voice is heard and that knowledge-exchange and collaboration between disciplines are ubiquitous. Owing to its effective mechanisms for communication with students (e.g. the 'Academic Representation' system), the University of Lincoln Students' Union acquired the Academic Opportunities portfolio in the summer of 2016.

The Union, in partnership with the Lincoln Academy of Learning and Teaching (LALT) work to facilitate an effective student-engagement structure, which reaffirms the strategic ethos of 'Student as Producer'.

This partnership has been integral to the success of the Academic Opportunities portfolio, which provides many levels of support – online and offline – according to need; its aim is strategic development of the portfolio and the establishment of a robust system to enable students to engage in, lead on and take ownership of their own learning, teaching and engagement opportunities, thereby allowing them to be true partners within and beyond their learning community.

As rightly stated by Bishop (2018), "*approaches to work with students-as-partners will require buy-in from both staff and students across the institution at all levels*". In addition, Bovill (2017) suggests that partnership approaches need to be flexible, for full partnership all the time may not be desirable: students and staff may be in respective control at different stages of work.

In keeping with a 'flexi-tunities' approach, the Union has opened the portfolio to all students, creating and developing opportunities in response to past students' feedback – such as by providing online training for participants in order to achieve flexibility and accessibility throughout the range of opportunities. For example, a student participating in the portfolio's 'Student Researchers' scheme presented findings from personal work concerning student engagement at the University. Stephenson (2018) says that "*moving activities online would also ensure commuters can be flexible in terms of when they are involved around them, and would also be able to work to the opportunities around a part time job, looking after children etc.*"

Case Studies

A significant tool facilitating this online system is the Students' Union Management System (SUMS)¹, an online system created by the 'Web Development' team and used across all departments within the Union to facilitate service delivery. It allows for regular contact with students through training, targeted emails, surveys and digital elections and thus successfully delivers an accessible network of opportunities, powerful insights to encourage change and an overall enhanced student experience.

Within Academic Opportunities, SUMS is utilised in various ways: it supports a seamless transition from sign-up (to each opportunity) to recognition; skills and benefits can be easily accessed through a student's own personal 'Employability Dashboard', which explicitly displays the transferable skills to be gained from taking part in the portfolio.

Through the success of the established opportunities, the Union's rapport with the University has had a lasting and positive impact, encouraging retention and more collaborative work with members of staff. Such a relationship has allowed for influential decision-making with the University, shaping and developing the academic, social, and working life of students by providing all of them with services, advice, support and representation, as well as preparing them for future employment.

Employability approaches

Currently, employability is not just about getting that dream job. Equally, the fact that a student is on a vocational course does not necessarily guarantee that employability is part of the initial package. Employability is more than about developing techniques, experience or attributes just to enable a student to get a job or develop a career. Harvey (2003) says that it is about learning, with the emphasis less on 'employ' and more on 'ability'. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner. The Union (2016) states that its members most associate the idea of being employable with skills and experience relevant to a given role and with being able to identify these in the context of their own experiences. This ethos is highlighted throughout the portfolio and is the essence of the 'Student Recruiters Scheme' – allowing students to experience the other side of the table first hand, experiencing what makes a good interview.

Staff-student partnerships

The Union and the University's Human Resources Department work in partnership to place students on every interview panel for new University staff (Academic and Professional Services), to ensure that students are presented as key partners from the start of every staff member's journey at Lincoln. Students will be able to reflect on the skills they have gained from this opportunity:

- interview experience – viewing the whole recruitment process from a different perspective;
- professionalism – representing the University in a front-facing role and with a variety of members of staff;
- broader knowledge of potential career paths – learning first-hand about different job positions from across the whole University;

¹ <https://sums.su/>

Case Studies

- confidentiality – being trained to respect procedures and the internal processes within the University.

The Union and the University, in partnership, strive to ensure that the student voice is heard and acted upon to bring about valuable change. As a result of this, the 'Student Reviewers Scheme' was created to ensure that all courses at Lincoln are student-friendly and of high quality – the best they can be. In consequence, there is positive impact on the quality of the education of current students and of those who come after them.

The Union and the University's Office for Quality Standards & Partnerships work in partnership to place students on every review and revalidation panel across the University, to ensure that students are able to shape their education. Students are able to reflect on the skills they have gained from this opportunity, including:

- broader knowledge of different courses – learning first-hand about different courses from across the University, potentially creating inspiration for a future career path;
- reflection - making a real difference to the student body and taking the feedback loop back into their own course;
- confidence – creating a sense of pride for the student body; ensuring that the student voice is heard.

Acting upon the student voice has positive direct and indirect impact upon the student experience. Harnessing this on a larger scale is an opportunity the Union and the University have created within the 'School Action Days' initiative, in which these partners work collaboratively with each academic school in the University. All staff and students are invited to discuss issues and co-create resolutions and actions, thus building their ownership of their experience. This allows for honest and open conversations with peers and members of staff about ideas and solutions, so to strengthen their partnership, reaffirm the student voice feedback loop and ensure that the session is results-focused.

Staff-student partnership is widespread across the University; the 'Staff-Student Insight Scheme' was one of the first opportunities, created by Vice Chancellor Mary Stuart to shape the overall formation of the Academic Opportunities. Staff from the senior leadership team are paired with students to shadow one another throughout their daily lives and share each other's experiences. Feedback from each partnering is then developed, to shape future schemes and strategies within the University and the Union.

This highlights the benefits and importance of staff-student collaboration within a higher education setting, such as building:

- networking skills – meeting senior members of staff and seeing the inner workings of the University;
- broadening knowledge of a career – understanding the tasks and qualities needed to achieve the goals and ambitions of a senior member of staff;
- reflecting and sharing individual insights and aspirations – inspiring further work in partnership.

Developing peer mentoring

Part of our work – that which looks into transitional support mechanisms for students – has been to examine sector and institutional good practice in peer-mentoring schemes. LALT is currently leading a project to evaluate, from mentor and mentee perspectives, new and existing peer-mentoring models, so as to create recommendations for institutional roll-out across all academic schools.

As this evaluation project developed, it became clear that the types and aims of the different peer-mentoring schemes are very varied and wide-ranging.

With the support and advice of colleagues in the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute, the evaluation for this project has been based on the NERUPI framework developed by Annette Hayton, University of Bath, and Dr Andrew Bengry, Bath Spa University. This framework was originally designed to evaluate ‘widening participation’ and sets out defined aims and outcomes which are the key to effective evaluation.

To assist with this – and for the purposes of the project – a working group consisting of academic and professional services staff agreed a definition of peer mentoring: “*Students (mentors) supporting other students (mentees) by sharing their knowledge and experience, to the mutual growth of both.*”

The adapted framework relates to the three themes identified for mentor support – curricular, transitional and professional development. This principle underpins all ten peer-mentoring models under the project. They fit under three over-arching categories:

- *Curricular Peer Mentoring* - Students (mentors) providing peer-appropriate advice and facilitating academic learning for other students, to support the curriculum, course tutor and teaching assistants. (Taking place with the School of History and Heritage and the School of Fine & Performing Arts).
- *Transitional Peer Mentoring* - Students (mentors) sharing their knowledge and experience with other students (mentees) to support transition, both into and during University life. (Taking place within the School of Computer Science, School of Psychology, School of Pharmacy, School of Chemistry and School of Mathematics and Physics.)
- *Professional Development Mentoring* - Students (mentors) sharing their knowledge and experience with other students (mentees) to support professional career development. (Taking place within the School of Pharmacy, School of Architecture and the Built Environment and School of Computer Science.)

Over the coming academic year, each of the identified peer-mentoring schemes will be observed and the process recorded. In addition to this, an audit will also take place, to try to record and map as many peer-mentoring schemes running across the institution as possible.

The mentors and mentees of the pilot and observation schemes will also be asked to complete a questionnaire at the start of the year to gauge their expectations and, at the end of the scheme, to collate their reflections and evaluate the impact. To enhance the data, support for the questionnaires will be offered in the form of student-led focus groups, one for each of the peer-mentoring themes.

Case Studies

In addition to the data collated in the areas identified as part of this project, the Union will promote the questionnaire to all students, so that this can also draw observations and make comparisons with students who have not been part of a peer-mentoring scheme as either a mentee or a mentor.

Data will be collated throughout the year and analysed from May 2019 and we look forward to sharing these findings with colleagues in the sector.

Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme

The LALT 'Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme' (UROS) is a unique bursary scheme designed to encourage undergraduates to become actively involved in the research work of the University. UROS embodies the principle of 'Student as Producer', which underpins the Lincoln approach to teaching, learning and student engagement.

The competitive bursary scheme is designed to encourage undergraduate students to gain hands-on research experience on projects covering all disciplines across the University. Applications are invited from both academic schools and professional services departments, either for stand-alone projects or for activities forming a subsidiary part of larger-scale research work that could be completed by an undergraduate student working under the supervision of a member of academic staff.

Successful projects are awarded a student bursary of up to £1,000, enabling students to work collaboratively on their research during the summer break. Students taking part in the scheme are required to produce a blog report and a poster – containing the research findings – to present at the annual UROS Exhibition Showcase Event held during Freshers' Week.

LALT ensures students have development opportunities throughout the scheme, connecting the programme to wider research agendas. Students can take part in presentation and communications skills workshops and poster design (Photoshop); they are encouraged to apply, through the Union, for additional bursaries to pay the fees for conferences at which they may communicate further their research findings.

BSc Mathematics and Physics student Jago Whale (whose research focused on *Simulating Quantum Mechanics: The Ring Polymer Method*) said: "*The UROS scheme has been hugely enriching. The knowledge I have acquired will aid me in my final year of university and perhaps provide me with a great platform from which to plunge into scientific academia should I so choose*"

BSc Psychology student Ben Handysides (whose research focused on *The Acquisition of Pitch Identification Abilities in Autism Spectrum Conditions*) said: "*In such a short space of time I have gained new skills and developed existing ones. I have learned the importance of networking and self-reflection.*"

Abbie Edwards (who is studying BSc Biology and whose research was *Will Ash Dieback Alter the Future Direction of an Ancient Woodland?*) said: "*Taking part in a summer research project had given me the experience I needed to decide whether a career in field research is for me; and it definitely is.*"

What is next for Student Engagement at Lincoln?

A key element of student engagement activity at the University of Lincoln is the 'Student Engagement Network'. All academic schools and service departments are invited to nominate a local representative to work closely with student representatives and colleagues in their school/department, to promote, encourage, enable and support student participation within their area. The network will continue to thrive, capitalising on the strong relationship between student engagement leads and the University of Lincoln Students' Union and targeting cross-discipline working and sharing best practice on a quarterly basis.

The University, in partnership with the Students' Union, is looking forward to the future and the possibility of hosting a student engagement conference in the new year. This will give the institution the chance to share practice with other universities, create networking opportunities and open the conversation with other students' unions with the scope of cross-organisational partnerships.

This partnership aims to grow and develop student engagement at the University of Lincoln, continuing to build on current activities and develop new ideas and opportunities for student involvement.

Should you wish to find out more about the current programmes and student engagement initiatives run by the University of Lincoln and the Students' Union, then please feel free to contact either team or view the initiatives online via the details below.

Reference list

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Case Studies

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