

A cross-university initiative to enhance SOTL through a students as partners approach

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Introduction

The inspiration for this initiative emerged from reading a wonderful book. Werder and Otis (2010) co-edited a book about the student voice in learning and teaching in the US setting. This is very much about students and staff working in partnership (Cook-Sather *et al*, 2014) and exemplified by the point that several chapters were co-written by students and staff. Much of the book is about a project undertaken at Western Washington University – the Teaching-Learning Academyⁱ (TLA). This was set up by Carmen Werder and established in 2002. The Academy is based on the principles of ‘parlour talk’ and participatory action research. Parlour talk is a form of ‘conversational scholarship’: having relaxed dialogue in informal settings to surface issues and problems and then discussing ways of addressing them and seeking quality enhancement. The TLA was established to create a space for such conversation, with all staff, students, alumni and members of the local community welcome to participate. The TLA has regularly attracted around 100 members and is supported by the Director of Learning & Teaching (L&T) and student employees. It is still thriving and Carmen continues to be the Director, although it is now coordinated on a full-time basis by another colleague.

The TLA runs on an annual cycle. At the beginning of the academic year, a survey is undertaken in the first quarter (half semester), with potential participants asked to identify their interests in relation to a ‘big question’ – in 2014-15 this was: “*how can we reduce barriers to life-long learning across disciplines and communities?*” so there is an initial phase to determine and agree themes and sub-themes through dialogue. This is then focussed into around four emergent themes and groups formed around each, with participants meeting in small groups of 20-30 bi-weekly in the Teaching Commons Room (80 minute sessions over lunch). Students may participate on a voluntary basis, although a significant proportion receive academic credit (3rd year Communications majors; 1st year education, flexible ‘practicum’ credit). In the second quarter, the intention is that there is a shift to planning and implementing action. The project method utilised by the TLA is participatory action research (McIntyre, 2008). The notion here is to introduce initiatives that enhance quality and mitigate problematic issues, but to work *with*, not *on* the participants, thus drawing them into the project and giving them co-ownership from the outset and throughout the full cycle of action research, thus including evaluation too.

I found these ideas and practices very attractive as a way of promoting learning, teaching and student engagement in a setting where progress had been historically very slow. Newcastle University is very much a research-intensive university and research is privileged. Academic staff are under immense pressure to focus on, and deliver, strong research outcomes. Reward and recognition for learning and teaching lags considerably behind, whilst senior management rhetoric of parity of esteem has been slow to move towards reality. There has been a recent tendency to establish a second academic career path, ‘teaching and scholarship’. However, routes to promotion for those pursuing this are challenging, despite some attempt to develop pathways. ‘Not only is there some confusion about what ‘scholarship’ actually means, but also there are far fewer available opportunities on that path and little encouragement to partake in them

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Another incentive for such an initiative was how little cross-disciplinary interaction there has been in a university very much set up in disciplinary silos which include some formal structures. Each School has a Director of Excellence in Learning and Teaching and these come together in Faculty formal meetings on a monthly basis and, once a semester, in a university forum. There are occasional meeting opportunities for programme directors at undergraduate and postgraduate level. However, such meetings involve only a few staff and long and complicated agendas. In terms of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), one may bid to an Innovation Fund for small projects (very rarely are these cross-disciplinary), and there was a wider project called EQUATE that invited participation to write up and disseminate L&T work that ran for a couple of years. We also host an annual L&T Conference, but it is rather sparsely attended.

Additionally, there are a technology-enhanced learning (TEL) group and a staff group (Edubites); this latter meets three or four times a year and evolved from an interest group of those on Teaching and Scholarship contracts. In total, no more than thirty or forty staff and a handful of students, if any, are regularly involved in such scholarly groups. This falls far short of any sort of community of practice for the majority of those interested in teaching, scholarship and student engagement. Another feature of the underdevelopment of educational scholarship at Newcastle is that despite being awarded a number of National Teaching Fellowships (NTF), these NTFs have never been asked to contribute strategic leadership to the university or really invited to take any sort of role to promote L&T.

We have been slowly evolving our student representation system to permit more student ownership and responsibility; for example, there is now a School rep. system and a proportion of those representatives attends our formal L&T meetings. Peer mentoring has also started, but it is all based on local schemes at subject level. There are therefore very few opportunities for students to participate directly in change agency or partnership projects with staff, and almost none in a cross-disciplinary approach. There is a void of knowledge about or communication with so-called 'hard-to-reach' students. This links back to a goal of the TLA in Western Washington, to encourage participation by a broader group than just: "*the students who know how to connect...students who are already being heard*" (Werder and Otis, 2010:20).

These are all powerful motivators for creating at Newcastle our own Forum, based on the TLA - particularly to somebody like myself, who embraces a philosophy of 'students as partners' (Healey *et al*, 2014) and believes in the maxim that, "*while students have much to gain from teachers in a SOTL exchange, faculty and institutions have just as much to gain from the students about how learning works*" (Healey *et al*, 2014:29). It therefore struck me that something akin to the TLA might attract those who don't usually get invited or have little opportunity to participate. It is not that any or all staff and students are specifically 'hard to reach'; more, that they lack inclusive opportunities to share their voices and views. Such a forum might mitigate that. There is a separate issue about 'hard to reach', as applied to communicating in an organisation which is full of both hierarchies and silos (subject and professional), but that will be discussed later.

Implementation

I wrote a draft proposal and invited fellow NTFs to discuss this in the summer of 2015. One colleague from the Medical Faculty was highly supportive, as he had established a medical education group which regularly drew a good level of participation to discussions. We decided to seek support from the Pro-Vice Chancellor of L&T. She offered £5000 from her budget for 2015-16, as well as administrative support from the central Learning and Teaching Development

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Service. As is common at Newcastle, we considered it wise to invite another colleague to ensure that we represented all three Faculties (I represented Humanities and Social Sciences) and another NTF filled the role of convenor from Science and Engineering. We also co-ordinated with the Students' Union to form an alliance to pursue shared aims. It was key that we did not usurp its legitimate right to represent students and we very much wanted them as equal partners. One of the Union's permanent staff came forward as a fourth convenor. A serendipitous opportunity arose to bid to participate in REACT at this time and the Learning and Teaching Forum (L&TF) was the project we put forward for that, because of the focus of both on participation and opportunities for all students and staff.

The start of the new academic year is a very busy time, and it took longer than wished to organise the first meeting of what we christened the 'L&TF'. The first major challenge was to communicate an invitation to all students and staff. Our communication mechanisms at Newcastle are geared up to inviting the 'usual suspects', those staff who have been regular attenders of L&T events in the past. Similarly, the Students' Union had a stronger communication network with student representatives rather than with all students directly. Another challenge that we faced was what we were presenting the L&TF as. I had some difficulty in persuading colleagues that there should be no pre-set agenda, but that issues should emerge from the participants and that anything around SOTL or the student experience was appropriate.

We used all the networks we had at our disposal, both informal and formal. We suspect that this meant that some staff with previous involvement in L&T events and some student reps were rather more likely to have been invited, although I was able to persuade a colleague who had access to all student emails to send out a brief invitation. We emphasised that the Forum was an opportunity to raise issues that mattered to that individual, to engage in discussion and dialogue and consider ways to address such issues. We offered free lunch as an incentive and reward for attending.

Around thirty-five students and staff attended the first meeting in late November. Another fifteen registered interest but could not come at the time designated. Of those fifty, only seven were students (and six of these were international students). After a brief introduction to the Forum aims, we broke into four self-selecting groups with the broad themes (in order to provide some structure) of: enhancing teaching; supporting students and their learning; assessment and feedback; student engagement. The room then split into seven groups around these themes. I had – optimistically – provided a form to complete, to try to capture the focus of the discussion, the participants, decisions made and any plans going forward. Those completed forms proved to be too vague for me to make much sense of them. One small group did identify a more detailed project to work on together (although we never heard from them again). As there was now a hiatus (with the Christmas break and exam period) until February, we decided to conduct an online survey to identify participant interests. There were twenty-six replies and several identified multiple interests. Half of the respondents were interested in an action-research project. The problem that emerged from analysing these responses was the sheer diversity of the more specific interests identified, particularly amongst those who were willing to undertake a project, and thus there was little common ground. There were no obvious 'scholarship' foci to build a cross-disciplinary project around, as some respondents were interested only in addressing issues specific to their own context/department.

Thus the next meeting still had a focus-setting agenda, with the mechanism of using Post-it notes to cluster and match up interests. We extended wider invitations, but rather more selectively than on the first occasion; I made a particular effort to invite students from my own

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UG programme to participate. Some forty people signed up and around thirty came, with around ten students (five from my own programme). We had twenty-four suggestions for thematic projects, but, once again, there was little common ground. It was time to change tactics.

I recalled the excellent project at Exeter University on Students as Change Agents (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011). We decided to invest a large part of the Forum funding into creating six internships for students, where they would propose, through a competition, ideas for a project that would enhance student learning and/or engagement. This was implemented and these roles were advertised widely across the university in time for selection and appointment before the next Forum meeting. The six successful projects were:

1. Short exchange visits for students between UK universities. Initiating partnerships between potential partner universities to offer students such an opportunity and overcoming any practical barriers. (International Undergraduate UG);
2. Enhancing transitions and induction into university communities, with a focus on master's degree students and particularly on international students. (International Post Graduate Taught - PGT);
3. Enhancing support for student wellbeing through workshops and peer-led approaches. Scoping how other universities do this. (UG);
4. Enhancing academic skills, particularly in scholarship and referencing, for international students. (International UG);
5. Creating social and academic integration opportunities for mature students - scoping project with the aim to develop a handbook for mature students. (Post Graduate Research (PGR));
6. Making the curriculum be more authentic to becoming a graduate. Building bridges between the theoretical content of subject modules and the professional knowledge that will underpin graduate careers in that discipline. (International UG).

These projects were supervised by myself and by a research associate who was already working with me on other partnership projects. We met regularly with the interns individually to help them get their project started and to form a centrepiece and agenda for the next meeting in March. We hoped that other participants would join the interns to support their projects. However, only twenty-five attended this Forum and although some participants offered advice to the interns, they did not offer to work with them.

The convenors discussed how to proceed, as we recognised that the Forum was not progressing towards the original aims. We decided to hold a final meeting for the year to take stock and to consult on how we should move forward. A particular issue was incentivising participation and recognising contribution to the work and aims of the Forum.

In the meantime, the progress made by the interns was mixed. The first three projects made significant advancement, gathering useful evidence and trialling new ideas; all of these created legacy in the form of project reports and resource guides. Two others started but stalled and the final one never really started. All three of these students were distracted by other issues and the students, despite advice received to review existing good practice in Newcastle or elsewhere, never really did that.

We invited the seventy-five colleagues who had shown interest over the year to the final meeting in mid-May but only around twenty came (and the meeting included only four students). The three pro-active student interns presented on their work and the rest of the meeting was a review and consultation. We drew on our 'consultancy day' offered by the REACT team to invite

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them to Newcastle to help us review the Forum. It was very valuable to have independent and more impartial colleagues to consult our participants and to talk through all the issues.

Positive outcomes

- Staff found participating in the forum beneficial for these reasons: its inter-disciplinary, informal and collaborative nature; the opportunity to work with students; relationship-building, community and networking; finding it a source of inspiration; headspace to reflect on L&T;
- The student interns valued: being paid; getting an opportunity to investigate issues they cared about; working together; participating in external events and visits.

Barriers and challenges

- Communications - not enough notice or promotion, to reach everyone;
- Lacking confidence to move beyond discussion to an active phase;
- Lacking time to invest in such activity and competing priorities;
- Timetabling of meetings - finding a mutually-convenient date;
- The name was not inclusive - professional staff and students both thought that 'Learning and Teaching' implied that the Forum was for academic staff only.

We identified a number of constructive ways forward to seek to address the barriers to enabling the Forum to deliver the intended aims. These are outlined in Table 1, together with a commentary on actions we have subsequently been able to implement in the second year of operation. We received similar resourcing from the university (another £5000).

The second year

Issue	Implementation
Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Creation of an organising committee to include equal numbers of staff and students ○ Change the name 	Set up with 5 staff and 5 students Students decided it should become: The Students & Staff Partnership Forum
Enhancing Participation through regular and better timetabling of events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Consult LTF members to identify regular meeting time (best fit) ○ Run induction meetings twice – Mid Oct and Early Nov: to identify participant interests in order to identify mutual projects ○ Create meeting of schedules over the year – room booked at a regular time available to use. NB a possible way forward is to have sub-group meetings i.e. where groups with a particular focus/topic meet on their own ○ Remind members and new people with 4 weeks' notice 	Created schedule with two induction meetings in late Oct/early Nov – Followed by 4 further meetings every 3 weeks or so with a plan to move agenda on at each Did identify member interests - but sought to group into 'big issues' common to at least 8 participants Managed at least two weeks' notice for each meeting.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Monthly meetings (and more for project groups if desired) ○ Feb plenary meeting to note progress and set up agenda for semester 2 	<p>Only two such meetings held</p> <p>Not held - did survey instead</p>
<p>Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 2-strand approach – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students: Less formal and clearly identify benefits of participation. Communicate through reps, and led by Student Union for validation ▪ Staff: Use existing networks; bring a friend ○ Website - WordPress based, stand-alone from university website including blogging opportunities, discussion boards, news updates, database of members' interests in order to match up into team projects 	<p>Undertaken, although also used email to all students</p> <p>Undertaken</p> <p>Delayed and not implemented until end of year</p>
<p>Dissemination of projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Via roadshows to schools and departments, L&T seminars, L&T Conference, external events 	<p>Not done</p>
<p>Relationships with other L&T bodies at NU</p> <p>Need to be clear where LTF fits into this and to ensure network and collaborate with these other bodies – in particular to avoid repetition of same projects, share lessons learnt (through project audits across NU)</p>	<p>Tried to do this but other groups not very responsive to attempts to collaborate</p>
<p>Incentives and rewards for participation</p> <p>Student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Academic Credit via modules based on bespoke version of career development module ○ NCL+ (our Award scheme for students) ○ Paid internships – need to decide eligibility: student projects only (as this year) or roles to support organisation of LTF? <p>Staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The role of being a representative for unit or section ○ Participation should count for reward and recognition of scholarship and/or continuous professional development ○ Built appropriately into workload model 	<p>Rejected by module leaders</p> <p>Not proceeded with</p> <p>Eventually recruited 2 in second semester (one in support role)</p> <p>Did not manage to progress this</p>

Table 1: Taking the Forum Forward in 2016-17

We started on a stronger footing than the previous year, being better organised from the start. Five students came forward for the new Organising Committee and three of them were highly proactive and really contributed to the work of the Forum. The contribution of the five staff was

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more inconsistent as they seemed to be busy, leaving most of the burden to fall on myself and the students.

We also had the advantage of existing members – around sixty-five were on our contact list at the start of the year. We created posters to promote the opening ‘induction’ meetings, offering two as alternatives. We publicised them to staff through the same email networks as the previous year. This time, we asked participants to identify, in advance, topics they were interested in. We also added to the agenda some of the successful intern project themes from the previous year.

A rather interesting phenomenon emerged when we sent an email invitation to all students in the university. We had ninety responses, at least 80% of which were international students. In promoting this, we had promised that *“paid internships would be offered and preference would be given to those who attended the Forum”*. Therefore, we then took the precaution of explaining, to all respondents, rather more about what the Forum’s aims were and making clear that there was only a limited number of internships. This halved the number of interested students! This time, we also asked them why they wished to participate. Typical responses included:

- *“Being able to be involved in creating an even better environment for students and staff in which to work and study”;*
- *“Working on ‘hot topics’ with staff and students from different faculties”;*
- *“The key attraction for me is the opportunity to create change with likeminded people. I am excited about the possibility to work collaboratively and be part of something that has a positive impact on people.”*

In the event, fifteen participated (two students) in the first induction meeting and twenty-seven participated (fifteen students) in the second – far fewer than the number who had promised to come. There were a further thirty-six potential members who could not attend at these times. Three big themes emerged, which seemed to offer much possibility to progress and develop projects: supporting student wellbeing; assessment and feedback; issues impacting on international students. Indeed, there was an animated discussion among the international students’ group about their sense of being excluded from opportunities such as internships, teaching and other developmental roles. In addition, they thought that induction and transition into their (mainly postgraduate) courses was weak. Two staff brought a ready-made project to the Forum about an online platform crowd design for workshops, where students could propose and vote for topics in advance of a workshop’s being created and run.

The Organising Committee decided to offer two formats for the next Forum – one general meeting and a set of sub-group meetings themed around the aforementioned topics. These meetings went ahead three weeks later, but were a comparative failure in terms of participation. Only 60% of those invited even replied with their availability for the complex timetabling exercise that went into arranging these five meetings. Attendance was weak: student wellbeing (nine participants), assessment and feedback (eight), crowd design (three), international students (four), general (eight).

We decided not to continue with the crowd design project and to pass on the issues concerning international students to a separate forum that the staff member responsible for international integration wished to set up (although this has so far not occurred). Consequently, we ran a final meeting for the semester at the scheduled time in December and focused on the two most popular topics. This attracted much the same people on these topics as the previous time,

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although we also invited particular colleagues who were active in student wellbeing support (both staff and student). Of the twenty people who participated, only five were students and only four were academic staff, and there were no SU staff/officers.

After much delay, we also appointed a student intern with the particular role of supporting the Forum. We deliberately selected a student (doing Computer Science and an international UG) with highly-developed web skills. She was tasked with designing and supporting a Forum website.

The Organising Committee took stock in late January 2017. We decided on one final push to try to develop project work related to the two big themes that had emerged and invited the Forum membership to indicate, via a survey, if they wished to work on specific tasks and themes that had emerged from previous meetings. The response was woeful. Only fifteen replied from the eighty surveyed and few showed any enthusiasm to work together. The decision was taken to suspend the work of the Forum for 2016-17. As lead organiser, I did not believe there was any purpose at this point in investing further time and effort in rather forlorn attempts to persuade staff and students to work together when it was obvious that only a handful wished to do so.

Rays of light have emerged subsequently. We have proceeded to create an interactive website and this work will underpin a potential relaunch of the Forum in 2017-18. Two of the interns from 2015-16 have become available again to carry on their thematic projects (after study abroad). One intern returned in February and was really enthusiastic to progress work on her short-term student exchange scheme. She has christened the scheme as PICNIC (Partnership, Innovation, Collaboration, Networking, Improvement, Co-Creation) and is forging ahead with four external university partners. The plan is to begin with student rep. exchanges; they are now arranged. A second intern returns in July to continue her project on Wellbeing workshops. Therefore, the funding resource can be put to good use to support these innovative projects. The future of the Forum still hangs in the balance. Table 2 collates attendance at Forums across the three semesters it has run.

Category	Attended in year 1	Attended in year 2	Attended both years	Attended at least 3 meetings	Total attended any meeting
Undergraduate	8	12	0	3	20
Postgraduate	13	11	0	3	24
Academic Staff	26	18	5	8	39
Professional staff	13	12	5	7	20
Student union staff	3	4	2	2	5
TOTAL	63	57	12	23	108

Table 2: Participation in the Forum by category

Reflections, themes and conclusions

This initiative has had rather mixed success. We have not been able to surmount some major challenges and deliver the intended aims of the Forum. Some problematic, overlapping themes and issues contribute to such challenges.

Communications

Our ability to invite the intended constituency of all students and staff at the university has been hampered by a lack of access to distribution lists and by over-reliance on email. In common with

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the rest of the HE sector, email traffic has grown exponentially, resulting in the reflex of 'delete without looking'. A second communications issue is our inability to facilitate well in the meetings. It is no coincidence that Carmen Werder is an expert in communication! All too often, the academic staff convenors (including myself) did not facilitate dialogue but tried to dominate with their own opinions (Is that because we are conditioned to do so in the cut and thrust of the academic world?) - the student convenors are rather better 'natural' listeners and facilitators.

Busy lives, pressures on time and competing priorities

We never seem to be able to organise meetings at the right time. We selected lunch-times, but, too often, possible participants cited a clashing activity. At the root of this are competing priorities and the considerable pressure everyone is under to deliver high workloads. Indubitably, attendance at the Forum was seen as a bit of a luxury and not a priority in our culture where even a conversation about L&T, particularly a cross-disciplinary SOTL discussion, is seen as an indulgence for staff and students alike.

Counter-culture, confidence about SOTL and motivation

It is also counter to the prevailing culture for students and staff to be invited to suggest their own agenda. There seems to be a distinct apprehension or lack of confidence about taking ownership and responsibility for issues and this provides some explanation as to why discussion never seemed to evolve into projects, far less participatory action research. We have so few exemplars for that and this did initially seem to establish fertile ground for this aim to flourish. Perhaps we need to think more about induction and transition to such practices. Our current culture does not reward or recognise SOTL as a legitimate activity. Thus, it is very hard to incentivise staff or students. Our inability to offer, at this stage, neither academic credit to student participants, nor any sort of tangible reward to staff is problematic. We hardly want to encourage transactional behaviour, but we do need to have more to offer than just lunch.

Organisation

We have also not been very well organised. In the first year, the convenors were trying to fit organising this Forum into already very busy schedules. Creating an Organising Committee in the second year drew in some very enthusiastic students, but their enthusiasm was not enough to deliver better organisation, because they did not have the institutional knowledge or expertise to overcome our organisational challenges. We need a core of equally enthusiastic staff to drive this forward. We never established this and I, too, with much on my plate, struggled. It was hard to sustain my own enthusiasm when I felt so little progress was being made.

New models of partnership

A major aim for the Forum was to seek to deliver a new model of partnership working between staff and students. The intention was to move beyond *selective* partnership to a more *universal* model of partnership (what Bryson *et al*, 2015, have described as Models A and B and, subsequently, *selective* and *universal* partnership). The former involves small numbers of students, frequently those that volunteer, to work closely with (usually academic) staff. Although the benefits of this sort of partnership are indubitable (Cook-Sather *et al*, 2014) it is more often those who have existing social and academic capital who gain these benefits. The universal model is intended to be more inclusive and to encourage more 'hard-to-reach' students to participate in partnership mode.

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At the end of the day, our failure to establish a partnership learning community (Flint, 2015), as is evidenced by the point that only 10% of the participants were continuously active participants in the Forum over the three semesters it ran, undermines any model of partnership, where trust relations and partnership working need time to develop. The decision to appoint student interns, although some of them have delivered genuine enhancement to SOTL practice, more resonates with selective partnership and benefits to the few rather than the many, at least in the short-term.

Giving voice to the so-called 'hard to reach'

Lest we be too harsh on ourselves, there are some successes. The Forum has created an opportunity for students who would normally appear to have little voice, to come forward and express their views. This is evidenced by the attraction of this approach to international students. Such students are not well represented in the formal student representation system at Newcastle, nor in the gaining of paid internships. That a majority of student participants and interns have been International students is a huge positive – and their very reason for taking part, in some cases, has been to ensure that important issues for this group are raised and addressed. In addition, that the Forum is allied with the Students' Union - and that both their staff, sabbatical officers and other formal representatives are also participants - ensures that this is not an alternative but a supplement to the student voice at Newcastle. Thus, we have addressed in some measure the 'hard to reach' agenda.

Staff have also expressed their appreciation for the value of meeting with students and the SU in an informal setting to discuss mutual issues in ways not usually possible in the formal structures. Another positive feature has been to give a voice and a 'safe space' for staff to talk about learning and teaching and related issues. Many of the staff participants have expressed the view that this is very beneficial and unprecedented. Thus, the Forum has given voice to the 'hard-to-reach' staff too (defining 'hard to reach' as those who do not get much opportunity to participate in consultation and shape agendas).

These positive outcomes do encourage persevering with the concept of a Forum with a participant-generated and -led agenda. My final reflection is that we were too ambitious and innovative in our aims, although the principles were sound. In an environment where learning, teaching and scholarship have been peripheralised and undervalued for such a long time, it might have been wiser to proceed more incrementally, rather than trying to take five steps at once. Those who take this forward next year might well consider that, at this stage, it may be sufficient just to create an opportunity to have regular conversations with others drawn from *all* groups across the university. The culture and values of the university are changing and we are moving forwards, slowly but surely.

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ⁱ see https://library.wvu.edu/tla_contact