Clear and collaborative communication: how Cardiff Metropolitan University embeds the practice of working in true partnership

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Abstract

To enable the student voice to be heard, a strong partnership is required between the Students' Union and the institution, ensuring that the Union remains independent enough to continue to challenge the institution while also working collaboratively with it. At Cardiff Metropolitan University, the institution and the Union have been working towards the same aim: enhancing the student experience and making sure that the student voice is heard, valued and acted upon. In order to encompass all aspects of student experience, voice and engagement, much collaboration between the University and the Union has been required. This case study will identify the issues faced, which led to the need for clear and collaborative communication and for solutions to be put in place as a result. This study addresses how the student partnership model proposed by Matthews (2017) has been used to inform both the intra-institution approaches to working in partnership and collaborations between students and staff.

Introduction

This case study will outline the approach taken in Cardiff Metropolitan University (Cardiff Met) to embed student partnership within the institution. In order to do so, the University first needed to address continuing difficulties and duplication of effort in relation to student partnership, leading to a clear and robust foundation on which to develop the University's approach to student partnership.

Context

The University

Cardiff Met strives to ensure that students are provided with the opportunity to share their voice, work in partnership with the institution and close the feedback loop with staff and students. The University has a strong track record of enhancement-led initiatives, but these have previously been undertaken parallel to similar or duplicate initiatives led by the Students' Union.

The Students' Union

That the Cardiff Met Students' Union is an independent union, not affiliated to the National Union of Students, has enabled its development to suit our diverse student body, the better to reflect the type of institution Cardiff Met is. The Union had historically been seen as a key source of student voice, with responsibility for promotion of the National Student Survey (NSS) and as the key means of liaison between the University and the students. It had also been involved in and responsible for its own enhancement initiatives, training and support for students, often in competition with those offered by the institution.

The duplication and overlapping of objectives and resources was a clear issue within the University, often leading to confusion for both staff and students as to who was leading on specific areas. A lack of engagement and trust between the two was frequently the consequence.

The overlap between the University and the Students' Union has often been a source of friction for both parties, including academic schools and professional units from across the University. It was felt that a strong partnership between the University and the Union would first be needed before student/staff partnership could be embedded within the institution. In recent years, a number of partnership-building initiatives between the two parties have been implemented, on the basis of agreed objectives and outcomes, as well as a clear understanding about communication channels.

The approach

The University and Union were keen to introduce true 'Students as Partners' (SaP) working practices at Cardiff Met, moving from a transactional approach – with the university reliant on student voice via surveys and reactive to their feedback – towards a true model of student partnership embedded within all elements of the institution's methodology and processes.

As outlined by Mercer-Mapstone *et al.* (2017, p.2):

> "*…SaP (Students as Partners) is inherently process-orientated rather than outcomes-driven. Matthews (2016) distinguishes between student engagement, which emphasizes what students do at university, and SaP, which is focused on what students and staff do together to further common educational goals*".

To provide the best support possible for our students and staff in embedding partnership, the University and the Union reflected on previous practice and discovered a shared gap in communication in relation to partnership provision. However, purely by sharing more information, the two parties would not be able to bring about transformational change within the University. A more structured approach was therefore sought and, after research within the sector on student partnership, the following model was outlined as a possible way forward. It is hoped that this model can also be used to continue to embed student/staff partnership in the institution.

The model

Matthews (2017) discusses the nature of true student partnership, outlining the key elements which it requires to be effective. Via this model, the University and the Union were able to identify current weaknesses and areas of success, as well as key areas for development within each of the elements.

Matthews (*op.cit.*) outlines the following essential actions for true student partnership:

1. Foster inclusive partnerships;

2. Nurture power-sharing relationships through dialogue and reflection;

3. Accept partnership as a process with uncertain outcomes;

4. Engage in ethical partnerships;

5. Enact partnership for transformation.

The next section of this case study will outline: how these principles have shaped our collaborative working practices; the student partnership initiatives that have been introduced in Cardiff Met.

1. Foster inclusive partnerships

The Union and the University

Our first step in building a partnership between the University and the Students' Union was to provide open and clear communication channels, by which both parties would be able to share their experiences, challenges and successes. A monthly meeting was thus set up between the Quality Enhancement Directorate (QED) and the Union to ensure that a mutually aligned and open means of communication about projects and initiatives would prevent either duplication or conflicts of agenda. A strong, inclusive and fair means of communication, allowing each to listen to, acknowledge and understand the other, was therefore established.

The staff and students

Clear outcomes of the monthly meetings have been the development of a strong partnership and, more tangibly, a Student Voice Module. This is located within the University's virtual learning environment, to provide all students and staff with information and resources relating to the student-voice opportunities provided by both parties, who take responsibility for their areas of expertise within the module – a sense of equity and power-sharing is the consequence.

2. Nurture power-sharing relationships through dialogue and reflection

The Union and the University

According to Healey et al. (2014, p.7), "partnership is essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself". In order to embed a true model for working in partnership within the institution, the current provision of student-voice opportunities needed to be reviewed. This allowed for those opportunities offered by both the Union and the University to be aligned, to limit confusion and address such problems as survey fatigue for students.

A number of different feedback/suggestion mechanisms offered students greater choice and reduced reliance on survey data as the means of instigating change. Three feedback campaigns over a two-year period aimed to capture a more robust and effective student voice:

1. 'Have Your Say' - to highlight all avenues for student voice in quality assurance and enhancement processes, including committees, validation, 'Student Representation' and surveys.
2. 'You Said, We Did' - a key tool in closing the feedback loop, ensuring student awareness of how their feedback is being acted upon.

3. 'Tell Us' - the opportunity for students to share their voice with the Union on issues, successes, initiatives and improvements, leading to student-led projects and enhancements for future students.

The Staff and Students

As outlined by Dunne and Zandstra (2011), the aim is to move from emphasis upon student voice to emphasis upon student action. Whilst the student voice is powerful, we aim to move from regarding students as mere 'evaluators of their HE experience' to seeing them as active agents with a positive impact upon their own learning experience.

Over the years, student partnership work had been sporadic, with small numbers of students often engaging in short-term projects, which were unsustainable. Students were provided with opportunities to engage with quality processes, but these frequently resulted in poor engagement and relied on basic student-voice mechanisms rather than true student partnerships. The opportunity to review existing processes for student engagement in quality assurance has resulted in additional colleague attendance at the monthly meeting, clearer opportunities for students to engage in the processes and, finally, the involvement of QED in the training of student reps and part-time officers, the better to support them within these mechanisms.

3. Accept partnership as a process with uncertain outcomes

The Union and the University

Within the new power-sharing relationship between the Union and the University, the University first truly needed to understand the structure of the Union and how it could benefit both partners. It was recognised that, owing to the diverse nature of the student body at Cardiff Met, the relationship being developed between the Union and the University would need to be responsive to the varying nature and needs of a diverse population. Feedback from staff and students suggested there was confusion regarding the position of the reps and part-time officers – were they Student Union-led or truly representative of the general student body?

The structure within the Union was often confusing and required clarification regarding the hierarchy of roles, which included the student representation structure, thematic part-time officers and the sabbatical officers. Each of these roles changes annually and is only as effective as the individual who takes up the post. In response to this, the Union and the University worked together to create a new role within the academic schools, called a 'student rep liaison', who would provide a clear link between the Union and the University. The liaison role is long term, allowing for continuation between years as well as providing a handover structure for reps and sabbatical officers. This link role has been vital in achieving clarity about the role of reps in the Union and in the academic schools as well as the sharing of information and context between the two.

The staff and students

The role of the student rep liaison has been key to guaranteeing clarity within a constantly-evolving and ever-changing nature of roles, such as that of sabbatical officer. The strength of the relationship between the University, Union and part-time officers/student reps was

showcased at the inaugural Cardiff Met Student Rep Conference: Student Voice Matters in January 2018. This provided an excellent opportunity to highlight the partnership work being undertaken with school reps and part-time officers and how this can be extended to all levels of representation across the University. Following the success of the inaugural conference, the Rep Conference will, in 2019, be again showcasing further enhancement activities undertaken in partnership between staff and students.

4. Engage in ethical partnerships

The Union and the University

Ethical partnerships are key to the success of 'students as partners', but also in the partnership approach adopted between the Union and University. Cook-Sather and Felton (2017, p.176) discuss the idea of the ethic of reciprocity within their work, noting that:

> *"…both an ethic of reciprocity and the practice of partnership foster a comfort with and commitment to ongoing revision of approaches to learning and teaching".*

When undertaking work in partnership, there is a focus on ensuring parity of provision and resource as well as the ethics of the partnership, particularly where students are involved in it. The idea of mutual benefit has been key to our collaborative work across the Union and the University and has led to a number of very successful projects and initiatives, such as the Cardiff Met's Student-Led Teaching Fellowships.

The Staff and Students

The Fellowships were introduced in 2011, to provide students with the opportunity to recognise a member of staff for her/his impact on the student experience. The project highlighted the need for clarity and true partnership in order to deliver a robust and ethical scheme for students to engage with, as well as for staff to feel a sense of achievement in receiving the Fellowships. To be successful and robust, the Fellowships require a number of trusting partnerships, which include partnership between the Union and the University, the Fellowship campaign and our students and, finally, between our staff and students. Our own experiences of working collaboratively were instrumental in ensuring that ethical and trusting partnerships were established in all aspects of the project via clear communication and mutual understanding.

5. Enact partnership for transformation

The Union and the University

The success of this partnership approach has led not only to the development of true partnership between the Students' Union and the University but also to the establishment of principles to underpin student/staff collaborations from now on. It has provided an opportunity to work collaboratively on transformational projects and initiatives with real impact – the focus purely on benefit to the student and not on any need for clarity of responsibility or ownership. The transformative element of the partnership approach is more clearly reflected in the partnership between students and the University, such as the 'Peer-Assisted Learning Scheme' (PALS) introduced in September 2018.

The Staff and Students

The success of the PALS pilot has been a striking example of how our approach to partnership work has been reflected in the collaboration between staff and students. An academic contact has been assigned to each of the PALS pilot programmes, with responsibility for overseeing content and alignment to teaching currently being undertaken in the programme. Following the pilot, recommendations will be provided for University roll-out. The success of the pilot has been the engagement of students and the development of their skills in facilitating interactive sessions for their peers. In 2019, the PAL Leaders who have been running the session showcased their facilitation skills to staff at the Students' Union Student Rep Conference and the Annual QED Conference. It was an opportunity not only to promote the scheme but also to demonstrate the level of interactivity and transformative learning these students have been facilitating with their peers.

Lessons learnt

As stated previously, a key issue caused by a lack of partnership work within the University was the duplication of effort and resources, which resulted in confusion and a misconception about responsibility in relation to projects, initiatives and opportunities for students.

A benefit of adopting Matthews' (2007) model has been more sustainable working practices for both the University and the Union. Such current projects as the Student-Led Teaching Fellowships and the institutional 'enhancement of induction' programme at Cardiff Met have allowed for existing relationships to be reviewed, with consequent significant success in outcomes for both staff and students. New initiatives and enhancement activities have been established, with greater buy-in by – and mutual respect between and within – the Union and the University; as a result, new student partnership initiatives, such as PALS, are being introduced for 2018/19.

As outlined in point 3 of Matthews (2017) model, accepting partnership as a process with uncertain outcomes highlighted the strengths and weaknesses in the changing nature of sabbatical roles within the Union and how this is reflected in the nature of new cohorts of students joining the university each year. This is now viewed as a key area of uncertainty, with the prospect of untold new areas for innovation, creativity and insight, all allowing for new partnerships to be built on the previous ones.

Cook-Sather (2014) remarks: *"the concept of student-faculty partnership in pedagogical explorations is troublesome because it is at once counterintuitive for many faculty and contradictory to norms in higher education. As a result, it can be threatening, disappointing and/or (potentially) productively unsettling"*. The move to work in partnership with the Union required a change in perception of the Union. This lesson was vital in enacting true student partnership which is inclusive, ethical and mutually-beneficial, in removing barriers and misconceptions and in supporting staff and students to build these partnerships.

Future developments

The opportunity to reflect on the current practices within the institution has resulted in key developments in embedding students as partners – e.g. the introduction of a 'Student Learning and Teaching Consultant' role for the University. Such developments herald a much more formalised agreement between the University and students in true partnership within a number of different areas, including quality enhancement and quality assurance.

The 'consultants' will be working on a range of projects and systems within the University, alongside both staff from academic schools and professional units.

The main aim of the University and Union in taking further this partnership approach for staff and students is not purely to repackage student voice with new titles:

> "[student] *consultations were used as a checking mechanism to reinforce their opinion of teaching and learning process rather than to interrogate and develop a new understanding derived from the Student Consultants' unique position*" (Jensen and Bennett, 2016).

Following the development of the monthly meetings between the Union and the University, the number of attendees was increased, to include colleagues from a range of areas including quality assurance and Library and Information Services. A key focus was building a partnership with students within quality processes. This has led to the re-design of the Student Representative role within the Annual Programme Review process, enabling a continuing conversation between staff and students to take place throughout the academic year and culminating in the production of a shared and agreed action plan for the next academic year. This will be rolled out across the institution for 2019-2020.

Finally, the next stage of development in embedding true student partnership within Cardiff Met will be how we best support staff to embrace and engage with partnership opportunities to enhance their teaching. Having students as consultants and partners within quality-assurance processes is fundamental to normalising collaborative activity; equally important is providing staff with such skills and knowledge that they will feel neither threatened nor defensive in this new environment.

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