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Transformation of the student learning experience through student engagement – Examples of students as partners, co-producers and authors (0233)

Programme number: L9.1

Research Domain: Student Experience

Background context of the study including how it relates to previous research / literature in the field.

BCU'S approach to student engagement places the notion of students working with staff, as partners in the improvement of the learning experience, at the centre of our institutional enhancement agenda. We acknowledge that as an institution we are not unique in working with students as partners, but we contend that few institutions have taken the strategic approach to student engagement that is a characteristic of BCU. The initial aim of the student engagement activities at the University was to create a greater sense of learning community within the institution, a large metropolitan university of 24,000 students spread across eight campuses.

The Quality Assurance Agency (2009) identified a number of reasons as to why the discourse of students as consumers had weaknesses and would in fact "throw the system off balance". It was one of the first governance-based instances of the recognition that "co-production could bring numerous benefits" (Quality Assurance Agency 2009). It suggested that there may be a myriad of benefits from this approach which could lead to increased learner satisfaction and success plus greater understanding of learner needs. This argument is further explored by Gibbs (2012: 11) who found through a series of interviews with leaders in the sector that "while there is a sense in which students are being treated as consumers of a product, institutions with good and improving NSS scores often have initiatives that engage students as co-producers of knowledge, or partners in an educational enterprise". At BCU we believe that through working with students as partners we create more effective and motivated learners.

In addition, the NUS Manifesto for Partnership (2012) acknowledges that "student engagement as a policy priority is relatively recent". This has significant implications for the NUS who are moving away from a narrow focus on traditional systems of student representation and instead "...describing concepts linked to student identities and the potential of individuals to influence their environment". This shift towards believing in the value of student engagement coupled with arguments in the literature and wider research findings is important. Recent research has suggested that engagement, in a variety of forms, can have an influence on the student learning experience. For example, the 'What works? Student retention and success programme' (co-ordinated through the Higher Education Academy) considered the evidence of seven national research projects into student retention and success and concluded that "belonging is critical to student retention and success" (Thomas 2012).

Theoretical approach / methodology adopted

In 2008, a challenge was proposed at BCU based on a new philosophy to generate a new type of learning community where there would be co-creation of the learning experience through students as partners. Both quantitative and qualitative data gathered since the inception of the projects at

BCU in 2008 has been used to examine wider outcomes (e.g. impact on NSS) plus the personal benefits for students involved in the initiatives. A combination of survey data and semi structured interviews were used to gather this information.

This paper is therefore based on the premise that a move towards student engagement has multiple positive benefits and is also a growing trend within the HE sector. A range of literature supports this notion. For example Bensimon (2009) noted that productive engagement was an important mechanism for students to develop feelings about their peers, lecturers and institutions, created a sense of belonging and also offered opportunities for learning and development. Trowler (2010) goes further to suggest that student engagement can not only enhance the student experience but also boost the learning outcomes and development of students and the reputation of the institution.

The specific shift towards students as co-producers is explored by Gibbs (2012) who believed that “students do not consume knowledge but construct it in a personal way in the context of learning environments that include teaching: they are co-producers and collaborators”. Added to this is the work of Löfvall & Nygaard (2012) who suggest that there seems to be a benefit for both students and institutions if they succeed in creating a culture where students perceive themselves as partners or employees rather than as pupils or customers.

Activities and findings

A number of interrelated initiatives have been successfully introduced at BCU since 2008. The following provides a brief summary.

Student Academic Partners (SAP): Staff and students working together with 100 hours of paid student work allocated per project. Topic areas include: development of new content (e.g. resources or assessment approaches) and employability (e.g. professional practice). The number of SAP applications has risen from 52 in the first year (2009-2010) with 25 projects awarded, to 73 in 2011-2012 (53 awarded).

Student Academic Mentors (StAMP): This scheme began in 2011 with 22 projects (~65 students employed), rising to 23 projects in 2012 (~100 students employed). Students are paid an hourly rate and may perform a number of activities including: Discussion Group Mentoring, One on One Academic Assistance Mentoring and Teaching Assistant Mentoring.

Collaborative projects: A new development for 2012/13 building on this success; designed to continue to broaden the Learning Community through large-scale, cross-disciplinary projects that provide opportunities for student and staff partnerships. In the first year 23 projects were funded with ~200 students engaged.

Opportunity Student Jobs: An institutional partnership with Northwest Missouri State University (NWMSU) in the United States demonstrated a model for working with students that capitalised upon the broader value of students as a valuable (and valued) human resource. NWMSU’s model of employing students across all university services demonstrated enormous potential for enhancing a sense of belonging and community through the creation of co-delivered services and shared interests. Since September 2012, 1165 student jobs have been created on campus at BCU. These include Administrator, Researcher, Technician, Marketing and Ambassador.

Students as authors: The idea for a collaborative writing project was fostered in the beginning of 2012 in dialogues between LIHE (The International Academic Association for the Enhancement of Learning-Centred Higher Education), the Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching and the Students' Union at BCU, and Libri Publishing Ltd. One major aspect of this book, though, distinguishes it remarkably from any other published work on student engagement. Not only is this book dealing in depth with cases of student engagement, more importantly it is itself a product of true student engagement, as all chapters are written in close collaboration between students and staff at BCU (see Nygaard C et al. (2013) *Student Engagement: Identity, Motivation and Community*).

Implications of the study

From this it can be suggested that student engagement can have an impact on the student learning experience including satisfaction and success as well as potentially boosting the image of the institution. For example, responses to the NSS question 'I feel part of an academic community in my college / university' have significantly improved at BCU from 65% of respondents agreeing with this statement in 2009 to 76% by 2012. The implications of this study, and in particular the practice developed and adopted at BCU, can advance knowledge, inform policy, and enhance practice.

Within BCU the next challenge includes embedding and understanding good practice through partnerships and maintaining the momentum achieved since 2008 to achieve greater and wider impact.

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