

## STUDENTS AS CHANGE AGENTS: NEW WAYS OF ENGAGING

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There has been growing concern about a conceptualisation of students as customers or consumers, and the way in which this impacts on attitudes, engagement and identity in higher education, for students and staff alike: *'If students are envisioned only or primarily as consumers, then educators assume the role of panderers, devoted more to immediate satisfaction than to offering the challenge of intellectual independence'* (Schwartzman, 1995). Cheney et al (1997) argue that the customer metaphor encourages students to be passive and detached rather than engaged in the co-creation of education. Furedi (2009) is adamant: *'There is little doubt that encouraging students to think of themselves as customers has fostered a mood in which education is regarded as a commodity that must represent value for money'*.

New metaphors relate to co-production, collaboration and partnership: *'Co-production requires active engagement with the entire learning process on the part of the student, and sees the student as an active participant in the development of knowledge'* (McCulloch, 2009). Ramsden (2009) outlines his view of the student role: *'Student involvement in quality processes should start from the idea of building learning communities. Practically speaking, this involves shaping student expectations of their role as responsible partners who are able to take ownership of quality enhancement with staff and engage with them in dialogue about improving assessment, curriculum and teaching'*. However, as Little et al (2009) point out, active partnership may not be easily achieved: *'While institutions' rationales for student engagement processes stem from a central concern to enhance the student experience, for many...institutions a 'listening and being responsive' rationale seemed to take precedence over a rationale that emphasised student engagement as being central to creating a cohesive learning community (and hence staff and students being viewed as partners in enhancing learning experiences).'*

In the context of such debate, the University of Exeter has recently been working on an initiative in which students have been fully engaged and responsible partners, collaborating in bringing about improvements in learning and teaching across the institution. Over a period of two years, twenty small-scale projects have involved undergraduate students looking at topics such as assessment and feedback, engagement in lectures, seminar provision, technology development, learning spaces, employability, sustainability, personal and peer-tutoring, and academic writing. The initiative has been collaborative, with topics for projects being decided by students within Staff-Student Liaison Committees (organised through the students' Guild) and being coordinated by a graduate student working within Education Enhancement. Students involved act as apprentice researchers, developing a research question, and planning their own methods of data collection. They design questionnaire surveys (online, paper or using voting systems), run focus groups, and collect and analyse data from their peers. They then make evidence-based recommendations or provide solutions for change and, where appropriate, put their projects into action. Each of the projects is written up to provide a series of formal case studies detailing processes and outcomes. The value of evidence-led change is specifically emphasised, and two student-led conferences have shared findings with staff and students across the University.

As a more detailed example, a student-led research project in the Business School - where staff have been piloting a range of technologies - has had significant impact. Research findings from a student-designed survey, focus groups and interviews highlighted, for example, that three quarters of the 207 respondents used video recordings of their lectures when they had difficulties with understanding content; over half indicated that this was an integral part of their revision process; and international students used recordings to support their language development as well as disciplinary learning. Importantly, most students were clear that having streamed video did not affect lecture attendance, and that they preferred to view streamed lectures as a back-up; 82% wanted video recordings of all their lectures. Students also thought that using an electronic voting system kept them focused in lectures and they appreciated the interactivity it allowed; almost all wanted to use it repeatedly. Such findings have enabled the School's Director of Education and other staff to be confident in pushing strongly for furthering technology use for learning. Since the initial student survey (2008/09), streamed video is far more widespread, and the voting handsets have been used by large numbers of first years, with continuing outstanding feedback from both staff and students. It has been requested that the student survey should be repeated as the data was so useful to the School. For 2010/11, a further 3000 voting handsets are being ordered (making a total of 4000 in total), to cover all undergraduates and taught postgraduates. The drive cannot be said to be due entirely to the Change Agents project, but it has played an important part in promoting change through the provision of evidence to support the greater use of technology.

Most projects have had a widespread impact in each of the subject areas involved, with some also influencing decision-making and practice in unrelated disciplines. Students have engaged deeply in their research, in making recommendations, finding solutions and developing resources; they show total commitment, despite no payment or credits for their activity. Understandings gained have allowed the development of a theoretical framework for integrating students into educational change, highlighting a continuum from more passive forms of participation in change to active involvement by students, and from institutionally driven initiatives to those driven by students. However, evaluation highlights that the projects - though influencing provision overall for many hundreds of students - are not about deep-rooted and fundamental change; they are about improvements and enhancements rather than about changing thinking and the culture of the institution. They demonstrate in important ways that students can, want to, and will engage with pedagogy (and that those who engage can learn a good deal about leadership and managing change). What is yet unknown is to what extent this kind of involvement can be scaled up or in any way become transformational, with student engagement taking on powerful new meanings.

## References

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