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Collaborative working: engaging students and staff in learning and teaching development (0126)

Outline
Introduction
Students have, for some years, been viewed as the key stakeholders in higher education (Harvey, 1996). In many cases this has manifested itself primarily in the discourse of student as consumer, one which has affected much recent government and sectoral management policy (BIS, 2009; Paradeise et al., 2009). However, academics themselves have generally proved resistant to this approach (Harvey and Williams, 2010; Lomas, 2007). Others have attempted to redress the balance by positing an engagement based not on service provision but on active partnership (Bergan, 2004).

This must be placed in its historical context. Higher education has become a 'massified' system in the last decade (Scott, 2011). Trow has argued (2006) that, as higher education becomes 'massified', decision making by the elite becomes less acceptable. Concomitantly, the current economic climate of financial retrenchment and increasing student fees has lead, arguably, to a sharper focus on the need for clear added value to being a student.

One recent high profile engagement scheme has been developed at Birmingham City University. The Student Academic Partners (SAP) scheme won a *Times Higher Education* award in 2010 and provides a useful case study of experiences of engaging students as partners in their own learning. It is timely, therefore, to hold a discussion group that, focusing on the SAP scheme, identifies the different levels of engagement with learning and teaching and explores the relative value of such schemes.

There are three main aims of this discussion group. The first aim is to identify different levels of engagement. The second aim is to identify key challenges in engaging both staff and students in the life of the institution. The third, longer term aim is to explore with participants ways of theorising engagement activities with a view to effective evaluation.

Brief outline of SAP project
The Student Academic Partners scheme offers paid employment for students to work as part of the learning and teaching development community at the University. Run by Birmingham City University (BCU) and Birmingham City Students' Union, the scheme invites students and staff to identify educational development projects in which students play an active and equal role. This provides students with the opportunity to guide the development of learning and teaching at the University and strengthens the learning community at the institution.

The SAP scheme was developed from existing work in the US and at Copenhagen Business School and brings together two important strands of work at Birmingham City University. The University has a long history of research and development in graduate employability and was an early proponent of engaging students in the governance of the institution. The institution, as University of Central England, developed the Student Satisfaction Approach as a way of engaging the key stakeholders in the process of quality improvement (Harvey, 2001).

The SAP scheme is therefore designed as an antidote to the 'student as customer' mentality and, arguably, stands in the educational tradition of Thomas and Mathew Arnold. The student is not seen as a passive consumer but an active participant in the governance of their own and others learning. The project recognises, therefore, the importance of informal learning approaches to the development of the individual student (Coffield, 2000).

Discussion
The group would be asked to explore the different levels of engagement using the model originally designed by Bristol Futurelab 'Levels of learner voice participation' (Rudd et al., 2006). This

comprises a y-axis which ranges from notification and information giving through to collaboration and empowerment and an x-axis which includes levels of engagement, stakeholder roles, engagement tools and anticipated effects. Participants will identify where they feel their institutions are placed on this grid and in what activities their institutions are engaged.

The group will then identify key challenges to engaging students and staff in teaching and learning by focusing on the following three key questions drawn from the SAPs experience:

- Is the SAP scheme only touching the surface of the student population – are we only getting the motivated first class students who are known by tutors?
- How do the skills developed through participation in the SAP scheme impact on future employment possibilities
- What is the impact of the SAP project on the student, staff, course and organisation – does it live beyond the life of the project?

In order to help develop the theory behind SAPs and other engagement activities, ideas derived from the discussions will be collated and disseminated to the whole group. These will be made available to participants after the conference as a resource and focus for further communication.

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