Co-creating a student charter

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Summary

At the University of Portsmouth the co-created student charter, approved by Academic Council in June 2018, was developed using a co-creation workshop process which brought together a range of students (international, undergraduate, postgraduate research, postgraduate taught, part-time, distance, mature) deliberately drawing upon those who do not engage with the students' union, academic staff (covering a range of roles including personal tutors, undergraduate, postgraduate, distance learning, collaborative) and professional services staff, to develop a concise and memorable charter which staff and students feel they can 'sign up to'.

We co-created a set of five core principles which summarise what students and staff should expect from each other during their time at university, and to help students achieve the 'Hallmarks of the Portsmouth Graduate' (a set of graduate attributes, henceforth 'Hallmarks'). The student charter is a tangible outcome of the sense of belonging which we achieve as a community at Portsmouth, and the authentic partnership between students and staff.

The case study describes the collaborative development process, undertaken in the 2017/18 academic year, and presents the student charter as a specific outcome of working together as partners. It also provides some highlights and lessons learnt for those considering the creation of empowered partnership-working in HE.

Description of project

By way of introduction, this project should be situated within current practice in the HE sector. Student charters, which set out students' rights and responsibilities, have become increasingly commonplace since the early 1990s, in Australia (Beeson 1998) and in the UK (Simpson 1992). In some cases, and at the University of Portsmouth this is the case, this is a means of ensuring the student is an active participant in the enhancement of the quality of their experience. Other forms of charters are more contractual in nature. At Portsmouth feedback was received that the partnership approach adopted between the student body and the university was not reflected in the student charter which appeared to the current students to tend toward a more contractual approach in its wording and layout.

It is also important to situate the project within the institutional context. At the University of Portsmouth we had undertaken a wide consultation and co-construction exercise with the whole university community to co-create a university and an education strategy including the development of the Hallmarks. The overarching aim of constructing the Hallmarks was to unify our staff and student communities in a set of shared beliefs about the identity of the university, and what it means to be part of

the institution as a student, academic, professional service staff member, and alumni. In line with our education strategy which committed us to 'providing a vibrant, supportive, collegial learning community of staff and students', and, among other things, to 'empower students as partners in a community of learning where staff, students, practising professionals and employers can work together to learn, create, research and solve problems', we co-created the Hallmarks to be meaningful to the whole university community.

At Portsmouth we champion a students as 'active collaborators' approach, as described here:

"There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that 'listens' to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes. The concept of 'listening to the student voice' – implicitly if not deliberately – supports the perspective of student as 'consumer', whereas 'students as change agents' explicitly supports a view of the student as 'active collaborator' and 'co-producer', with the potential for transformation." (Dunne in Foreword to Dunne and Zandstra 2011, p.4).

The 'active collaborator' approach was what we set out to adopt in the co-creation of our new student charter, building on the successful use of this approach in other institutional projects. For example we had successfully adopted this approach in the co-creation of curricula (Dunbar-Morris, Barlow & Layer 2019). Our staff-student partnership and co-creation work has become embedded within our curriculum and quality enhancement work, which is good practice in the sector (Bovill, C., 2013).

This familiarity with co-creation, and having a framework for it, allowed the students' union (SU) President and the Dean of Learning and Teaching (L&T) to work together to ensure an authentic partnership and co-creation with a planned outcome which would be richer as it would bring together staff and student input, rather than relying on only one input, as described by Dollinger et al., 2018. However this project was different in that it extended co-creation work beyond co-creation on the curriculum and with mainly academic staff who had benefitted from staff development in that area. It also set out to engage the entire student community.

Following student feedback on the existing student charter, the SU President, at the time, and the Dean L&T met to discuss launching a project to develop a new student charter. Given the way in which partnership-working at the university had been developing, and student engagement and co-creation had become much more common, the SU President and Dean L&T agreed that it would be an ideal project to undertake as a co-creation project. A small steering group was brought together which had membership drawn from the SU and across the university.

The steering group considered the student feedback on the existing charter, which was felt to be, in summary: too long, repetitive, not user-friendly and unhelpfully divided into three separate sections for the students, the university and the SU. It was agreed that the objective of the project was to develop a concise and memorable charter which staff and students feel they can 'sign up to'. These words were those of the SU expressing what the student body wanted from the new

student charter, something that would be common to both staff and students as members of a single, united community, and which the steering group agreed.

Thus a project was born to develop a set of principles that were common to the whole university community and which would be created together by the staff and students of that community. The SU representatives explicitly rejected the contractual type student charters and the way in which some institutions had responded to changes in the UK HE sector with charters which set out services students can expect to receive and the resultant expectations on them (Naidoo, R., & Williams, J., 2015). The SU representatives were thus tasked with undertaking desktop research of exemplars of student charters across the sector, so as to ensure that the full range of student charters were considered in the development of the new charter.

The steering group designed a co-creation workshop process which would enable the student charter to be co-created by staff and students during the 2017/18 academic year. The workshop process was designed to give equal voice to all participants in the room. The workshops were run by the SU representatives, supported by the Dean L&T.

Invitations were issued by the Dean L&T to ensure that the workshops were seen as important events. The invitations went to a range of: students (international, undergraduate, postgraduate research, postgraduate taught, part-time, distance, mature) deliberately drawing upon those who do not engage with the SU; academic staff (covering a range of roles including personal tutors, and tutors on undergraduate, postgraduate, distance learning, and collaborative courses); and professional services staff (including those who work in services such as wellbeing, student support, and equality and diversity).

A great deal of the activity at the first workshop focused around co-creating the principles which both staff and students would feel they could 'sign up to'. On tables led by SU representatives, working with the exemplars, the students, academic and professional services staff drew on their own personal experiences, and input provided from students who could not be there in person, to develop some key considerations. The other information available to all participants were the set of Hallmarks. The charter was to be designed to help students achieve the Hallmarks which are at the heart of everything we do at Portsmouth both within and outwith the curriculum.

The Dean L&T then drew together the separate table conversations into a group discussion leading to a set of potential principles for the steering group to work on before the next workshop.

Next the outcomes of the first co-creation workshop were considered by the small steering group, including that: our student charter was designed to support excellence in teaching and learning, and equality and diversity, and to promote wellbeing and resilience; it would be designed to be electronic instead of a hard copy paper document; it would be short and memorable. Over a number of meetings, and electronically, we then developed five draft core principles which summarise what students and staff should expect from each other during their time at university, and

to help students achieve the Hallmarks. We also developed a mnemonic for the principles.

The next stage was to describe in more detail what underpins the principles. We developed some working ideas to take to the second co-creation workshop along with our draft principles.

Following the same format as before, the co-creation workshop participants worked on the draft principles and underpinning statements. The outcome was a draft co-created student charter which would go to University Executive Board (UEB) for approval, before final approval by Academic Council.

The steering group, over a number of meetings, and electronically, finalised the charter and a presentation for UEB, which the SU President and Dean L&T jointly made. UEB were very receptive to the new charter and complimentary about the co-creation approach that had been taken. UEB recommended it to Academic Council with one minor change.

Enabling Partnership

The entire project was conceived of as a partnership project between the SU and the university. The intention of the Dean L&T was to empower the SU President to lead the project and for the SU representatives to have an important role to play in the co-creation workshops.

The steering group was made up of both university staff, SU staff, and Sabbatical Officers. At the outset the intention was that the SU President would chair the steering group, however in the end this did not prove practical. The SU President was involved in many other activities across the university and did not have any project-management experience. The Dean L&T stepped in to ensure that the meetings happened and actions were assigned and actioned. The SU President also had a strong Sabbatical team who shared an understanding of the project and of co-creation. This allowed actions and responsibilities to be shared out, and good use to be made of the strengths of the SU representatives. The SU President and SU representatives could therefore focus on the key element of gathering and enabling student voice, and being empowered to lead discussions during the co-creation workshop. In terms of success regarding co-creation the SU President's occasional disengagement from the leadership of the project risked pushing elements of the project away from co-creation and student engagement and back towards mere student input into something 'owned' by the university, as Taylor & Bovill (2018) describe regarding co-creating curricula. However the input of other members of the Sabbatical officer team with more experience of co-creation at pinch points kept the project on track and at the desired partnership level. The need to consider mitigation for competing priorities on either side of the partnership should be factored into any co-creation project development.

One very key element to the project was enabling engagement with students who do not normally engage with the SU. The SU representatives were key to finding student input from part-time, postgraduate, collaborative and distance learning courses for example. Where it was not possible to have students join the co-creation

workshops in person their input was gathered via survey and other electronic methods and fed into the workshops. Having the tables led by SU representatives enabled the students to speak up. The Dean L&T circulated and intervened if she felt any participants (staff or students) were not being heard. This was another mitigation which was considered in the design of the project as the risks were evaluated.

Ideally the overarching discussion at the co-creation workshops would have been led by the SU President or SU representatives, however beforehand they had indicated they did not wish to lead that element. This is understandable and it can be difficult to bring consensus in a room full of separate conversations. The Dean L&T saw her role as an enabling and empowering one for the students in the room in terms of the partnership, so this was best achieved by facilitating that part of the discussion in order to achieve a truly co-created charter. In hindsight more support and training could have been provided to the SU President and SU representatives ahead of the workshops to enable them to carry out this activity at least in partnership with the Dean L&T, but the timing of the workshops and the deadline of the university committees had not aided this. For those considering undertaking a similar exercise, it would be worth considering that one approach to facilitating joint leadership of the summing up section of the co-creation workshops could be through the SU President and Dean L&T creating a joint summary during a refreshment break for the participants and jointly sharing it with the group.

Similarly when the charter was presented to university committees with the SU President, the Dean L&T had to resist the call for amendments to the co-created product. The members of the university committees had to be reminded of the co-creation process and framework within which the charter had been developed and agreed.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts

"When [Vice President Activities] and I first looked at the Student Charter, we thought it was worthy but wordy. Speaking to students, many found it quite dense reading whilst others were not even aware of it. But it was important to us that if the Charter was going to change it needed to involve a wide group of students and staff with a broad range of views of university life. We're very proud of what's been achieved, and for us personally it's real legacy of our time at the Students' Union." SU President 2017/18

The partnership work on the charter has continued since its approval by Academic Council. The charter is a living document in that the planned and continued activity post launch has been about staff and students making sense of the charter for themselves. This is how the continued relevance of the charter and understanding of the common principles live beyond the student cohort and staff who were members of the university community at the time of its launch. For example, at induction week the Vice-Chancellor, new Sabbatical Officers and new students wrote what the principles meant for them by leaving messages on interactive boards.

"One of the key purposes of creating a new Student Charter was to make it more meaningful for students. […] It was clear to see that the opportunity to write comments about what the principles mean to them helped bring the Charter to life

for new students, so they can better understand what they, staff and the Union need to contribute to create a fantastic student experience." SU President 2018/19

All students are given opportunities to engage with the principles of the charter. In comparison to the previous charter there is much greater awareness of the charter, and staff are able to remember the principles and recite and refer to them easily in student sessions due to the mnemonic. It is used in our pre-sessional programme, in which the Dean L&T teaches interactive sessions on it. The equality and diversity team and the wellbeing team use it in sessions with students. We have created a whole-institution approach to wellbeing, including a new wellbeing for learning framework with the charter at its centre. Most recently the content developed for our blended and connected teaching and learning in response to the Covid-19 pandemic has included a wellbeing module which is centred around the charter and wellbeing for learning. Similarly our new Personal Tutoring and Development Framework which was launched in September 2019 has been developed to enable personal tutors, and staff in the wider supporting network, to support students to achieve the Hallmarks and gain familiarity with the charter and the principles.

Reflections on the project

Staff perspective

The SU President at the time said about our partnership:

> *"When [the Dean L&T] and I set out to redesign the Student Charter, we knew from the offset that we wanted it to be something that everyone at Portsmouth could easily recognise and identify with. Throughout its creation, we gathered feedback from both students and staff to ensure that the final results would be something that everyone could sign up to and be a part of. I feel like we achieved that and I'm proud of the partnership that made this possible."*

For me this was a great example of staff and students working together towards a shared goal: co-creating our student charter, which really captures the essence of what we are trying to achieve as a community at Portsmouth.

Student perspective

Some quotes from the National Student Survey (NSS) that link to our student charter principles provide a snapshot of a student perspective on our partnership. These link well to the new Personal Tutoring and Development Framework and our co-created curriculum framework:

Support

> *"Overall, I would say that I have been given the opportunities to help me create a well-rounded student experience for myself. There are several sports clubs and societies on offer, suitable for students from all walks of life. The Students' Union has been extremely helpful in all aspects, in both personal and professional matters. I was given plenty of space within my course to discover and explore my*

interests and future career paths. I feel as though I have always been surrounded by staff who are approachable and are able to give me advice on assessments, careers, placements, etc." NSS 2018

Community

"Lecturers take interest on views on opinions of students. Care about health and wellbeing. […] Feels like a community between students and lecturers." NSS 2019

Opportunity

"There have been lots of opportunities to develop skills in a variety of areas. I have been given information which has enabled me to find other areas of interest and expand my research in a broader sense. The variety provided across the units has helped me to decide what I want to do at postgrad and I was given a lot of advice with this by my personal tutor." NSS 2019

Respect

"I've learnt how to improve my skills and knowledge in terms of communicating with people as well as respecting them." NSS 2019

Education

"I think the course allows students to grow in many different skill sets and lets students try and learn things that they have never experienced. I also feel that the lecturers connect with students and this helps with the dissertation process as students are able to trust their dissertation tutors to guide them through the work." NSS 2019

In the section above, on enabling partnership, there is a discussion about things that did not quite pan out how they had been envisaged at the beginning, but the project itself has been a great success. Indeed UEB thought that the charter, and its collaborative development process, could be a potential entry for an external award, given how successful it had been.

It was particularly useful to carry out co-creation in a project that was not curriculum-based, thereby providing opportunities for more staff from across the institution to work in partnership with students.

It is hoped that this case study provides some useful insight for those considering carrying out a similar project, in partnership with their SU and their students, to develop a charter in which both parties are equal partners, both when it is developed and when it is launched. The development of a student charter is one that can be recommended by this methodology, and this case study provides some lessons learnt and an indication of a method which could be implemented.

Follow up and future plans

There is continued work to enable students and staff to bring the charter to life for themselves, as mentioned in the section above on evidence of effectiveness and impact. As the charter is a living document, as explained above, while the principles do not change year on year, the intention is that staff and students make sense of them in their context and use them in their context. Discussions about the charter at the start of the academic year have proved to be a useful way to start building a sense of community and course identity for example, which is particularly useful in the context of a blended and connected delivery in 2020/21 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Evaluation of the blended and connected delivery and of the new Personal Tutoring and Development Framework will therefore provide additional measures of the success of the charter in due course.

Related publications and resources

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