

The place for student community engagement in the curriculum

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The Student Community Engagement Project

This article reflects on the Student Community Engagement project which took place over two years at The University of Edinburgh from 2014 to 2015. The project was part of a broader department, the Student Experience Project which was set up to explore the ways in which the student experience across the University could lead to excellence.

Students engaging with their communities

The role of the university in the twenty first century is frequently discussed in Edinburgh, a city in which its four universities have a considerable footprint. The question is prominent in lecture halls, the cafes which serve as staff rooms, the student association, and among the local community. 'Town and gown' is perhaps a concept as apt now as when it was first coined. Many students come to study at the University of Edinburgh not just because of the institution's academic but also to live in and be a part of the city itself.

Globally, the models in which students engage with local communities are as numerous and as varied as the institutions and cities to which they belong. In North America service-learning (in which students carry out civic engagement for credit) has been a mainstay of the curriculum for decades. In Europe there are a number of models: public engagement, science shops, volunteering, and credit-bearing activity. This case study uses the term 'student community engagement' as an umbrella for all these activities.

Town and gown in a 21st Century city

Iles (2007) notes that some of the significant changes which we have seen in the relationship between the higher education sector and society were motivated by Dearing's 1997 report which 'addressed the issue of experiential learning and emphasised how community service learning provides one of the most effective ways of providing key skills' (p. 143). David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education, following the New Labour appetite for active citizenship (and later followed by the move to the Big Society) promoted volunteering as being 'intrinsically beneficial to all concerned, and integral to the development of generic skills among students as well as higher education's wider responsibilities to local communities' (Blunkett, 2000). It is worth noting that public engagement, which brings researchers into contact with the community, has been boosted by the inclusion of impact as a part of REF2014 and that this is likely in turn to have trickle down consequences for student community engagement.

The student experience

The Student Community Engagement programme was one of twelve strands of the Student Experience Project which was created in 2012 at The University of Edinburgh. A number of approaches were developed to enhance the student experience, both in the curriculum and in other activities. It was recognised from the outset that exploring the opportunities for students to engage with the local community in a strategic and sustained structure would have a number of benefits for both the students and the community more broadly.

Although bringing these areas together was new, engaging with the community certainly was not. The University had a long history of working in partnership with the town, most notably with the Edinburgh University Settlement, which endured for more than a century after its inception in 1905, and became a beacon for similar projects across the United Kingdom. During the academic year 2013/14 around 1,500 students took part in volunteering opportunities coordinated by the Edinburgh University Students' Association. There are also a number of academic areas which have provided experiential learning opportunities for students in a community setting.

Why does student community engagement matter?

There is no doubt that volunteering has a considerable impact: at a national level it contributed an estimated £2.6 billion to Scotland's economy in 2012. In the student context, it can act as a bridge between student and local communities.

The relationship between students and their institution has become more complex following the increase in tuition fees (in Scotland this is the case for students, from England, Wales and Northern Ireland coming to Scottish universities) giving academic studies an explicit monetary value. It is clear that employability is at the forefront of student expectations with 'evidence [which] indicates that as jobs for graduates become increasingly scarce students' priorities globally have 'employability' with a direct link between learning and financial gain' (Millican, 2014, p. 1623). The Edinburgh Award (<http://www.ed.ac.uk/EdinburghAward>) was established at The University of Edinburgh several years ago to allow students to reflect on the graduate attributes which they develop through a wide range of extra-curricular activities, including community engagement projects, and is central to the University of Edinburgh's employability vision. Through this, students are encouraged to articulate the skills which they have developed.

Why should the activity be credit-bearing?

While volunteering and extra-curricular activities can be positive experiences for both the students and the community partner, research at The University of Edinburgh showed that there are additional benefits when this activity is part of the curriculum and credit-bearing. Placing community engagement at the heart of the curriculum encourages students from different cohorts to take part. If a student has responsibilities beyond their studies (for example working or caring), being able to be involved in engagement activities within 'university time' is essential. Gaining credit for engagement also provides an incentive for students who might not have considered outreach in other circumstances, and also gives the activity credibility. Most importantly, community engagement is likely to give students more autonomy of their learning, providing them with an opportunity to take responsibility for choosing projects and reflect on their academic and personal development.

However, the importance of partnership, in which both the student and the community partner learn together is vital as 'simply having students do charity encourages the notion that they do service for disadvantaged people rather than seeing it as an activity carried out with them' (Parker-Gwin and Mabry, 1998, p. 278 in Iles, 2007, p. 144).

Equally importantly, there are benefits for the community partner. Recruiting and training new volunteers takes both time and resource, and several third sector organisations report that often students start with good intentions, but dropping out when academic pressures take over. By being involved in credit-bearing community engagement a longer-term, sustainable relationship is built up not only with the individual student but with an academic department (if not at institutional level). Having a student involved who has a medium-term commitment to a project, often with the objective of producing an output at the end, makes it easier for the community partner to offer support.

What are the challenges of putting community engagement into the curriculum?

There are a number of challenges involved in introducing community engagement to the curriculum. The academic rigour of credit-bearing community engagement is often questioned and the motivation of academic colleagues engaging in this area is diverse: enhancing the student learning experience; developing civic responsibility; or as a vehicle for advocating social justice (Boland & McIlrath, 2007, p. 94). The assessment of a course which has a considerable external component at its centre is not straightforward. At The University of Edinburgh, like many other institutions in the UK, it is generally the resulting research or reflection of the engagement which is assessed, and not the outreach activity itself.

In addition to academic related barriers, there are a number of logistical issues which need to be overcome: engaging with community partners can require a great deal of administration, not least when dealing with risk assessment and disclosure processes; setting up partnerships and monitoring students can require a large amount of staffing resource; the training commitment for community partners (and the burden this can place on small volunteer-run organisations) is considerable; and community engagement requires commitment and energy from the students themselves. Most of these challenges can be eased, if not resolved, by building strong relationships between the academics, students, and community partners; clearly articulating the expectations, and allowing time for the partnerships to be developed and to reflect on them.

One challenge which we spent time considering when setting up a new first year community engagement module was partnering students with service users of a third sector organisation which supports older people. We were aware that the partnership relied on the relationship which would be developed between the student and the service user, and that in the case of illness or death this would not only be difficult on an emotional level for a student to deal with, but the project and assessment of the student would also be in jeopardy. As a result, provisions were made to support a student to deal with the emotional fallout and also for alternative academic pathways to enable the student to complete the module. More traditional degree modules do

not require this level of planning and relationship-building, and university management needs to consider how to resource and support this.

It has been useful to look at areas in which experiential learning is central to the degree programme to learn from their practice and also to explore institutions in which student community engagement has been embedded for some years to see how they have successfully overcome these challenges as we look ahead to developing a wider portfolio of curriculum based opportunities.

What are the benefits of student community engagement?

At Edinburgh, community engagement has been central to equipping students with skills which they have taken forward professionally. Research of alumni from one community engagement course at The University of Edinburgh reported 'I have landed my dream job in Northumberland as a result of doing the outreach course'; 'I got a far better job than I thought I would, they were really interested in the outreach course at the interview'.

The community partners with whom students were placed have also spoken positively about the experience: 'My student was a breath of fresh air, bringing a different perspective to lesson planning, leading parts of lessons and really engaging well with the pupils. They all miss him now.'; 'the student has done a wonderful job and we now have a new resource that we can use for years to come'.

Is it worth engaging with the community?

There can be no areas of student engagement which come without challenges, and community engagement is no different in this respect. The experience of supporting academic staff, students and community partners, in addition to broader research in this area (which demonstrates that an increased interest in citizenship and the growing importance of employability) leave me in no doubt that there is a place for community engagement within the curriculum. In the words of a community partner: 'I hope this isn't a one off, we would like another student next year'.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to a number of people who supported this project through its lifecycle and who continue to work in this important area: colleagues from across The University of Edinburgh; from other institutions who gave their time generously, particularly at the Community University Partnership Programme at the University of Brighton and the Community Knowledge Initiative at NUI Galway; the teams at Health in Mind and the Bethany Christian Trust and others across the third sector in Edinburgh; and to the students who were willing to have a go at something new, and to stand up to the challenge with such enthusiasm and ability.

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