Faculty Student Engagement Officers: working in partnership

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Wendy Garner is a Senior University Teaching Fellow in the Faculty of Education and Children's Services. Previously she was a Senior Lecturer for twenty years. She is currently doing a PhD in student engagement.
After two terms as Vice-President, Education at Chester Students' Union, Becky Lees is the University Student Engagement Officer (SEO) responsible for designing the strategic approach to SE and encouraging implementation.
Matthew Fletcher is a final year student studying Primary Education, and has been an SEO for two consecutive years, running several different projects across the faculty.
Samuel Yates recently graduated with a degree in Sociology with Education Studies and has been a Student Engagement Officer (SEO) for 1 year.
Rajan Bhatti studied BA (Hons) Primary Education QTS and began the role as an SEO during third year. Having just completed the degree, Rajan will be beginning a teaching position as a Reception NQT, and undertaking an MA programme specialising in Early Years.
Sarah-Louise Mason studied BA Hons Primary Education with QTS, who became an SEO in 2015.

Summary

Phase 1: Nine Student Engagement Officers were appointed to work with the Senior University Teaching Fellow (Faculty of Education and Children's Services) and the Student Engagement Officer (Academic Quality Support Services) during the academic year 2014-15.

Phase 2: Ten Student Engagement Officers were appointed to work with the Senior University Teaching Fellow (Faculty of Education and Children's Services) and the Student Engagement Officer (Academic Quality Support Services) during the academic year 2015-16.

This initiative is funded by the faculty with each Student Engagement Officer (SEO) being allocated a maximum allowance of 50 hours work to be completed during one academic year. This funding is used to pay SEOs an hourly rate for meeting attendance, project work and continuing professional development activity.

The project will be running for a third year during 2016-17.

Description of project

It has been found that engaging students as partners at the faculty level of institutions has proved challenging for many HE providers (Velden et al, 2013; NUS, 2012).

The Faculty of Education and Children's Services (ECS) at the University of Chester has developed a creative solution to embedding student engagement and opportunities to work in partnership at the institution's faculty level.

The SEO project is a new scheme which was launched in October 2014 by the Education and Children's Services Faculty at the University of Chester. We recruited 9 students across a number of courses, locations and levels of study with the aim of working in partnership with students to bring about positive enhancements to the learning experience of the wider student body in the faculty. This is the second year of the scheme and the faculty have appointed a team of 10 SEOs for 2015-16. Four of these SEOs are returning for their second year in role.

The SEOs have shown exceptional leadership individually and collectively. In the first induction session the SEOs used their initiative and critical thinking to plan and design a number of projects based on student opinion data and key areas for development as identified by the Faculty Senior University Teaching Fellow (SUTF) and Faculty Management Group (FMG).

The SEOs worked as a team to unpick the complex data relating to the student experience. For example, National Student Survey data, First Year Experience Survey data and module evaluations. Areas of good practice were identified and suggested improvements for the faculty articulated.

The SEOs quickly organised themselves into smaller sub-groups dedicated to their areas of interest and taking into account their analyses of the survey data. There was a close correlation in terms of priorities identified by the SEOs and Faculty staff, and those featuring within the survey analyses. The SEOs then went on to develop specific projects and produced a proposal for approval by the SUTF. The initiative shown by the SEOs has been impressive as they have led on strategic projects appropriately and with minimal guidance from their line managers. In addition, the group represent a strong unified team despite being in different year groups and studying on different courses. This is indicative of their strong collective leadership. Furthermore, each SEO has demonstrated an impressive ability to manage their time effectively between SEO projects, studying, working in schools on compulsory placements and working at part time jobs.

The unique leadership qualities and determination of delivery demonstrated by the SEOs has made this initiative the most outstanding student engagement practice relating to faculty level engagement.

The projects designed and implemented by the SEOs can be found in the next section.

Enabling partnership
Our intention from the outset was to work with the students in partnership, to determine how the SEO project would run. Students initially analysed survey data, key faculty documentation (for example, Learning, Teaching and Assessment Improvement and Development Plan) and also identified areas of personal interest.

From this, a number of specific enhancement projects evolved and are being undertaken throughout the academic year (2015/16).
The focus is always on staff and students working in partnership and SEOs are encouraged to take the lead by taking an educational approach which takes different perspectives into account.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts

The following journal article (https://journals.gre.ac.uk/studentchangeagents/) details work which was completed last year and includes projects undertaken by the 4 SEOs who have returned to post for this academic year (2015/16).

Here is a link to the video we showed at the University Annual Staff Conference: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7RCiTBFrjA

The following projects are being undertaken throughout this academic year 2015/16.The focus is always on staff and students working in partnership and SEOs lead by taking an educational approach which takes different perspectives into account:

- Buddying scheme organised and led by SEOs for first year students and as a pilot for 2016-17;
- Improving communication - project 1 - use of email and the introduction of a series of protocols for staff and students;
- Improving communication - project 2 - production of a flow chart to enhance channels of communication between staff and students at faculty level;
- Preparing the "Taking Feedback Forward" campaign for 2016-17 - led by two SEOs with a view to promoting further and enhanced engagement by students with written feedback;
- Analysis of 'outlying modules' and a research based, focus group approach used to gain insight into mark profiles and attainment;
- Reviewing the way in which the partnership with local schools operates through participatory methods and by feeding the student voice in and reporting back to their cohorts;
- Filming two short videos to help students on placement to complete documentation with improved accuracy. This represents part of the Faculty's preparation for an upcoming Ofsted[i] inspection.

As shown by the examples above the team have initiated a considerable breadth of change in the Faculty and across the University. The SEOs as a team have inspired us to do things differently, to work in new ways and to truly engage students as partners in the enhancement of the learning experience.

- The SEOs have designed, delivered and implemented sustainable projects in the Faculty of Education and Children's Services covering a number of areas of the learning experience from learning and teaching to assessment and feedback. Some projects are ongoing and in their second year. For example, the popular 'Workshop Wednesdays' which promote academic skills development for all. It is expected that this local approach will be rolled out across the University in the near future.

- The SEO Team has exceeded our expectations in terms of their teamwork, determination, passion, hard work, communication, organisation, forward-thinking, creativity and leadership skills. The students have 'stepped up' to initiating change, driving quality and working with others for the benefit of students, staff and the university. We have already co-produced a journal article and disseminated our case study at the national RAISE conference in 2015.

Reflections on the project
Staff Perspective
Some of the challenges faced and lessons learned are as follows:
1. Students need to be treated as equals and trusted to work in partnership with staff to effect positive change. High quality induction and opportunity for students to shape their own projects is crucial to the success of the project.

2. Issues and problems need to be addressed using a solutions-based approach which takes into account a wide range of perspectives of both staff and students. For example, communication issues were identified in relation to the use of emails. Staff and students discussed the core issues and collaboratively produced an 'Email Communication Guide' for use in one department (as a pilot). The new guide effectively addresses issues raised by both staff and students

3. Communication is key and initial team building is essential. We use a closed group on Facebook to keep in touch at regular intervals.

4. Avoid tokenism and high levels of control and give students the opportunity to 'think outside of the box'. The SEOs have had opportunity (particularly this year) to think more strategically and to take a leadership role. An example of a longer term and more strategic project is the 'Taking Feedback Forward' campaign. This project relates closely to changes in assessment procedures across the faculty and will be introduced to all new and returning students during induction for the academic year 2016-17.

5. Monitor and review in terms of impact. The work of the SEOs is embedded within our Learning, Teaching and Assessment Improvement and Development Plan. For example, in relation to the 'Taking Feedback Forward' campaign, success criteria comprise:
 - that survey data (NSS, programme and module level evaluation) shows   marked improvement in terms of student satisfaction 2015-16 and 2016-17;
 - that there is evidence of improved engagement with assignment feedback at module level as indicated by Grademark statistics on moodle.

6. Celebrate success and recognise impact. The SEO Team have won the 'step up to leadership award' at the Valedictory Ceremony for the last two years running.

Student Perspectives:
Matthew's reflections
Throughout the role of student engagement officer there is a consistent trend when it comes to projects. They require both staff and students to work in unison. On my current project, I am creating a system that helps to streamline information given to students on professional placements. In other words, a guide on who they need to contact for different requests, situations etc. The reason this requires unison from both students and staff is that if affects both parties. By not knowing correct protocols, students often send the wrong staff, emails for assistance, wasting time for both parties involved. A printable/electronic guide would help to eliminate this issue.

Looking at the current situation, I have found that the hardest barrier to overcome is staff schedules. To approve the final guide, staff need to agree that the process created is the correct one. Understandably, staff finding the time to meet and discuss this is proving difficult. The fact that the parties involved are from different areas in the university is making this doubly hard to arrange. This has shown me of the importance to streamline information when multiple parties are involved. It has also helped me to respect even more the difficult and busy timetable that staff have. To overcome this, I have created a draft guide in an electronic format. This is going to be sent to all parties involved. From personal experience, staff are more flexible when it comes to talking via email, as it does not require scheduling. I intend to use this information to advance my project, without disrupting the staff involved.

Samuel's reflections
One of the main barriers that I had faced regarding the role was the ability to engage fully in the projects but due to time constraints I was unable to be involved as much as I wanted to. I would have liked to be more involved with other projects set up by other engagement officers alongside the project that I was conducting myself. However, as I am in my third year, academic time constraints didn't allow me to fully immerse myself within the role. In hindsight improved time management would have possibly allowed me to be involved with multiple projects. However, this has highlighted an area for self-improvement and provided me with an opportunity to develop my time management skills.

Rajan's reflections
My project was based around improving the quality of feedback within the faculty. From personal experience, I have received different 'types' of feedback from my assignments. These have sometimes been very brief but other times detailed with numerous suggestions for improvements. Following this, I discovered some shocking statistics from the faculty that not all students access their feedback. This prompted me to want to make a change within the faculty and improve this aspect. Whilst taking on this exciting project, I achieved considerable support from Wendy and Becky as well as my fellow SEOs. It was very valuable having others supporting me in my project and this had a significant impact on the quality of it. Being involved has enabled me to developed several skills including organisation, public speaking and leadership. These are all valuable skills that I can now transfer into my future teaching career. As I also aspire to progress into educational leadership and management, being an SEO has been a great introduction to this field.

Whilst completing my project, I did find it at times difficult to complete. As I was completing my final placement for my primary education degree, I did not have much time to work on my SEO project. Nonetheless, the flexibility and support provided by my peers made this possible. One feature of being an SEO that initially attracted me to the role was that it was so flexible. I knew I still wanted to be involved in higher education even whilst on placement and the flexibility of the role made this possible. As a result of this, I was able to complete my project in my own time yet still had considerable support. Consequently, I have decided to become a Senior SEO and continue my role when I leave university. I still want to make an impact and a difference within the faculty and I am passionate about my role. I feel that being a Senior SEO will develop my knowledge, skills and experience of working within higher education. This is an important partnership that I know I want to mature as I

begin my career as a primary school teacher and eventually progress into a leadership and management role.

Sarah-Louise's reflections
I have really enjoyed doing my project, because we got to choose the project we did I have more of a passion for this. It has enabled me to see that there is a lot that goes on in the background at university. I decided to focus on communication as several fellow students have mentioned that their PATs (Personal and Academic Tutors) or dissertation mentors hadn't replied and it had been a while. I then decided to see what the staff thought about this. Several agreed with me that they were very busy and occasionally missed emails from students. I then decided that something needed to be done for both the staff and the students. I am currently looking at introducing a staff and a student protocol which will be separate so both staff and students know how long to wait. I am also looking into a new way to book meetings with members of staff and making the staff timetables available to students so it is easier to set up a meeting. I found on placement my project was put on hold for a short time and I regret this but I am now raring to go and to continue with my project to make it more successful.

Follow up and future plans
We are confident that due to the high impact of the students as individuals and a collective authority that this project will continue for the coming academic year 2016-17 (its 3rd year). Furthermore, due to the success of the project there are proposals to extend this initiative across all 8 faculties of the university.

Related publications and resources

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[i] Ofsted is the UK's quality inspectorate for teacher training in education departments.