

From fresher to fresh perspective

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Georgia Horsley is a first year undergraduate Education Studies student at Canterbury Christ Church University, participating in two Partners in Learning projects; as a Student Consultant (and team leader) designing a student guide to the Learning & Teaching Strategy; and working within the School of Childhood and Education Sciences, developing a 'Student Learning Community'.

If you asked me to describe my experience working in student engagement with one word, I would say “transformative”. I am aware how clichéd that may sound, but I believe that thanks to my involvement with the ‘Partners in Learning’ initiative at Canterbury Christ Church University my experience at university has been made richer, my opportunities have broadened, and I have developed as a person. Back in September 2015, when I arrived at University as an 18 year old ‘fresher’, I was insecure in my abilities and still unsure if going to university was the right decision for me, but since then my confidence has grown thanks to the opportunities available to me.

Partners in Learning (PiL) is a student engagement initiative at Canterbury Christ Church University that gives students the opportunity to work in partnership with staff, to co-create projects and collaborate. It gives students an opportunity to engage more deeply with their university experience and feel part of something bigger; a wider learning community. My own journey with PiL began in quite an unconventional way. I had originally applied for the position of Student Consultant on the programme back in October but my application was unsuccessful against hundreds of other applicants. Following a chance meeting, and eager to get involved with the wider student community, I jumped at the invitation to be involved in a school-wide PiL project; where I would work alongside the Head of the School of Childhood and Education Sciences. It was from this that I met the Student Engagement Officer and Head of PiL programme. Phil saw potential in me and asked me along to meet and potentially join the student consultant team.

The team had begun work back in November, so when I attended my first meeting in January, I found myself in a hectic fast-paced environment where ideas were flying around, objectives were being set and issues being raised and resolved. Entering an already established group was exciting and perhaps a little nerve-racking. The team themselves were phenomenal; never could I have imagined a group of students so engaged and passionate about a project. They were welcoming and friendly, creating an atmosphere where I felt able to express ideas freely and without judgement.

Our project focused on the creation of a guide to learning and teaching at the university and a major element was the ‘translation’ of university policy into a more ‘student-friendly’ dialogue. The new ‘Learning and Teaching Strategy’ is based upon nine key principles, which are intended to form the heart of the Canterbury Christ Church University experience. In collaboration, we created a physical scrapbook-style guide, which explained each principle using case studies and condensed

versions of the policy. However, after conducting research into where students might expect to find such a guide, we discovered that a digital version would be much more appealing. Upon further reflection, offering online availability ensured far greater accessibility for students.

Not only did we develop this tool, which we hope will be useful to students upon its launch in Autumn 2016, but there was also an emphasis throughout the project on developing ourselves. Throughout the project, the team members were encouraged to reflect on their work and experiences of working in partnership with staff. We were also offered a range of bespoke workshops designed to develop particular skills such as project management and presentation skills. Following on our team presented the project as the afternoon keynote at the university's annual Learning and Teaching conference in June 2016.

We shared short personal reflections as part of the presentation. These revealed what a beneficial, and in some cases transformative, experience our role had been. One of us spoke about feeling isolated as a mature student and how being part of a Partners in Learning project enabled her to make new friendships and networks. Another expressed how the insight she gained into the 'Learning and Teaching Strategy' empowered her to speak up about an issue she encountered within her own course of study. This issue has subsequently been resolved, and alleviated her concerns about continuing her studies.

My own reflection centred on my experience as the only first year student in the team. I spoke about how I felt I had to overcome and dispel the assumptions that came with 'being a fresher'. It motivated me to prove my worth in the group and from this my confidence really grew. As the weeks went on and I became assimilated into the group, I felt myself developing into a more self-assured person as my ideas were being listened to, praised, and taken on board. I felt comfortable being assertive when just months before I had been unsure of the value of my contribution.

I have experienced from students and staff alike a perception of first year students (especially those coming straight from school or college), of needing time to become accustomed to university life. The anxieties of adjusting to independent life and higher education mean that the pressure of participation in an extracurricular project is likely to be unwelcome. I believe this assumption is wrong. In my view there are many students who are eager to get involved and devote their time to interesting projects working alongside staff in partnership. Although some students may find their passion in sports or societies there are those who have little interest in either, or are looking for something different. Therefore programmes, such as the PiL project creates an opportunity for a student to feel more involved and making the most of their university years. In my course alone I could identify several students, in their first year, who would be eager to partake in such a project and would be willing to commit their time to it.

By offering a broad range of both short and longer-term opportunities, hesitant students can participate actively, giving them a chance to see if a partnership project is something that interests them. Even if they decide not to continue into longer term projects, at least they have had the opportunity to take part. However, longer-term projects can be a great way of enabling students to feel connected with a wider

community. There is a sense of pride in making changes that are sustainable even after graduation, or from knowing that your actions will have a direct positive impact on current and future students. Not only is this important for self-esteem, it may have a knock-on effect on students' productiveness on such projects. This was definitely the case in our own project when it emerged that this project would have a long-term legacy. This heightened everyone's engagement and enthusiasm for the project, it made us feel that what we were doing was of real value.

Another reason the team and I have been so inspired through this project is our co-ordinator's approach. Phil allows us freedom for creativity whilst providing a supportive and encouraging presence. He encourages individuals to take responsibility for their own tasks but also emphasises the importance of co-creation. Ultimately, the most significant aspect of his approach is his attitude towards the team. He offers respect and faith, makes us feel that our ideas are valued and that we are working *with* him and not *for* him. This is what enables us to thrive.

At University in my opinion, it should not feel as if there is a divide between staff and students, especially on a project like this. It is about working in a partnership of equal responsibility. This approach makes the student feel like they are a *part* of an institution, not just someone who attends. Thus granting them a sense of community and belonging which is such an integral aspect of university life. From what I personally have experienced, the main motivation for students' involvement in partnerships within peer mentoring, partnership projects, projects in sustainability, or similar engagement opportunities, is often the desire to help people and to improve the university environment. In a rapid, ever-changing world, those students who are fully engaged are no longer satisfied with the commonplace – we seek opportunities for the creation of something new, or the enhancement of what is already available.

The future direction of the 'student engagement' movement should emphasise the significance, not just of student opinion, but also of active and equal student participation. This would involve a diverse body of students at the centre of decision-making, working in partnership with staff to effect changes and developments that will positively impact other students. This would include mature students, part-time students, commuting students, to name but a few, in order to ensure that all students are fully represented.

From speaking to staff at my university who have worked with the PiL students, they have been hugely impressed by the range and complexity of projects completed by students as part of the initiative. Once fully engaged and granted the opportunity to make a contribution, students are capable of so much more than some people may presume. They can be valuable members of staff/student teams. Students are eager to learn and to start making a real and lasting difference to the 'university experience'. Partnership is all about respect, trust and mutual collaboration. Working in the project at my university, for less than a year at the time of writing, has ignited a great passion in me for the concept of student engagement and partnership.

I am currently undertaking an internship with PiL over the summer months where I have already gained a host of skills applicable to my graduate development. The whole experience has not only developed me personally but professionally too.