

Engaging students to support inclusive cultural change in higher education

Case study 5 – Students as Researchers

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Teesside University

1. About the project

The Collaborative Development Fund supports the development of our members by addressing key sector challenges together, through a series of innovative projects. Topics are co-created with the sector and projects aim to highlight different approaches, in different contexts, to support members to understand how practice might be learned from and applied. Awards are made based on the expertise of teams and the evidence and the relevance to sector-wide practice from an open call for submissions.

Working collaboratively across six University Alliance Universities in England, this project, led by Kingston University, explores the key attributes of student engagement programmes which support meaningful, far-reaching, and sustained transformation to a more inclusive higher education,

Research indicates that students who actively engage with their university through not only their academic curricula, but also co-curricular activities are less likely to drop out and more likely to achieve better outcomes (Thomas, 2012). However, not all university students engage with their institutions to the same degree. These groups include mature students and those who are first generation to higher education, students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, as well as those from lower socio-economic households.

This case study forms part of a project that aims to surface the work of various student engagement programmes in six higher education institutions in England which have been developed to support inclusivity in their universities.

1.1 Summary section

This case study surfaces an initiative that universities may wish to consider. It was designed by Teesside University with the intention of helping to better understand how to transform and enable inclusive cultures and ways of working in higher education through a programme which facilitates staff and student partnership to identify improvements in university facilities and services in order for them to become more inclusive and culturally responsive, thereby more effectively supporting diverse student experiences.

1.2 Name of programme and university

Students-as-Researchers, Teesside University

1.3 What is the programme trying to achieve?

A longstanding programme established in 2011, the Students-as-Researchers (SAR) scheme is designed as an initiative specifically in support of ongoing enhancements around research informed teaching, as well as to support University agendas around employability. The scheme was developed as a mechanism to encourage and support student partnership in curricula work at institutional scale and develop student engagement across the University. At the time of launch, the SAR scheme was a flagship scheme within the University and was centrally managed and administered, doubling up as a staff engagement programme, as well as a student engagement scheme. Therefore, it has always been part of a bigger institutional project of providing transformational and authentic learning experiences for students at all levels of study.

The SAR Scheme provides opportunities for undergraduate and postgraduate students on taught courses to work as paid research assistants on a variety of discipline and pedagogic research projects across all Schools and Departments. These include both disciplinary-based research projects and pedagogic research projects. Projects must be explicitly mapped to School strategic priorities, such as student continuation and attainment, assessment feedback or inclusive practice.

The aims of the scheme are to:

- + develop learners as co-creators, rather than consumers of knowledge
- + enhance research, communication and organisational skills
- + provide students with part-time employment pertinent to future graduate-level work
- + encourage students to consider the option of postgraduate study
- + students are contracted to 65 hours of project work.

1.4 Who is involved?

Sponsored by the PVC Education and Director of Student Learning and Academic Registrar, the Scheme benefits from a permanent programme lead and receives administrative support. Appointed Student Researchers are supported by this central team, as well as their staff project lead (at School level). The scheme is factored into staff members' Professional Development and Review processes and is, therefore, a valued mechanism in staff progression.

1.5 Impacts and Achievements

1.5.1 Participants

Opening up the scheme to PGT students has created a platform and mechanism for students to develop research expertise which has foregrounded many students continuing their studies in the form of postgraduate research degrees.

1.5.2 Institution

Remaining aligned to its initial principles of partnership and co-creation, the scheme has yielded over 300 research projects, and supported in advance of 350 student researchers. Since 2018, the scheme has averaged a 90% project completion rate, up from 64% in 2017. The evidence generated through the scheme has provided a valued and important evidence-base for service evaluation and improvement as well as advances in discipline-based research, and pedagogic development initiatives.

1.5.3 Examples

In one student researcher project, a student was involved in working with the university's Future Facing Learning Space and Campus Development group, including colleagues from Campus Services, Student and Library Services, and the Students Union, to co-design and develop a student-centred post-occupancy evaluation framework for the review and design of learning spaces institutionally. The student researcher worked in partnership with the project team to devise, pilot and deploy a new evaluation framework for learning spaces, that has subsequently been operationalised as a key mechanism for evidence-based learning space design and planning.

A future development already planned is for the development of a series of Student Research projects each year that focus on key Learning and Teaching priorities, allowing more intentional and productive work institutionally and at school level around priority work and drawing student researchers more closely into shaping university-wide work.

1.6 Quotes

“Being part of the SAR scheme and being given the chance to build functional, professional skills has given me the confidence and self-belief to pursue my goals and begin my PhD journey” – Alex Wood, PhD, the use of gamification to enhance inclusivity in Higher Education, year 1 (previous BSc/MSc student SAR project)

“I have personally been involved in three SAR schemes which have enriched the learning experience of all parties. The project has generated new ways of learning, and sought to discover and answer discipline-specific questions in a nurturing community of practice, which plants and fosters the benefits of collaboration beyond the life of the project. Reflecting across the different projects, I have developed a real sense of pride and achievement where students in partnership have refined skills and bred confidence whilst working with internal and external communities.” – Paul Chesterton, Professor of Learning and Teaching, Allied Health Professions, School of Health and Life Sciences

1.7 This case study exemplifies the following toolkit attributes:

Flexible

The students are afforded flexible work patterns and opportunities. Each project is unique, but not affording students the flexibility to work their involvement in a project around their studies is counterproductive.

Championed

Sponsored by the PVC Education and Director of Student Learning and Academic Registrar, the Scheme benefits from a permanent programme lead and receives administrative support.



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