

Engaging students to support inclusive cultural change

Case study 7 – Student Technology Mentors

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University of Hertfordshire

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 the University of Hertfordshire 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 where university students are employed as Technology Mentors to support staff in using technologies, thereby enabling them to deliver more inclusive curricula and to have greater empathy for the student experience.

1.2 Name of programme and university

Student Technology Mentors, University of Hertfordshire

1.3 What is the programme trying to achieve?

The University's Student Technology Mentors (STMs) builds on and develops a previous project which ran from 2005–2010 where students were employed to work with staff and support them in using technologies to embed sustained cultural change in relation to Blended Learning. When the University implemented a new online learning environment in 2017, Student Technology Mentors were reinstated to help staff in their creation and management of new module sites. Currently a team of 19 mentors from across the institution (from level 4 to Masters) also support the implementation of the Herts Learning principles (principles developed since COVID-19 to strategically embed blended and flexible curricula).

Clear objectives for the STMs align with the university's commitment to blended and flexible pedagogy (Herts Learning) and its cross-wide development of digital capabilities for all staff and students. These objectives are:

- + to support the delivery of digital capability training to staff across the university, supporting Herts Learning
- + to work in partnership with academic staff to assist in any use of technology in learning and teaching (measured through academic staff Digital Experience Insights (DEIs), survey results, module reviews and staff bookings)
- + to support and contribute to the implementation of the student digital capabilities strategy (measured through student DEI survey results, resource creation, JISC Discovery Tool results and student feedback)
- + to contribute to the Data for Learning strategy (measured by contributions to the working group and student feedback).

Key responsibilities of the STMs include:

- + conducting module site reviews using the Inclusive Curriculum and Guided Learner Journey Checklists

- + providing Digital Accessibility guidance
- + supporting the development of student/academic staff Digital Capabilities
- + providing hands-on support within module sites (e.g. setting up Talis reading lists, discussion threads, formative quizzes etc).

1.4 Who is involved?

The strategic lead for the programme is the Director of the Learning and Teaching Innovation Centre who reports to the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience). The programme is managed by the e-Learning Technology Team in the Learning and Teaching Innovation Centre and reports to the Learning Environment Strategic Governance Group. Senior Educational Technologists line-manage the Mentors and help support the scheme.

The Student Technology Mentors also bring the student voice into various strategic working groups on different projects. For example, all the Student Technology Mentors are on the Data for Learning Working Group. They have fed directly into the group, not only through their voice but through user testing and development. They also represent the student voice on the Learning Environment Strategic Governance Group.

1.5 Impacts and achievements

1.5.1 Participants and the programme

The Student Technology Mentors have developed their digital skills as well as other key skills such as publishing research articles and presenting at conferences.

1.5.2 Institution

Increased Resource

Although initially funded as part of the implementation of the new Online Learning Environment, the value of the work was so significant that the programme is now annually funded through the PVC Education and Student Experience budget.

Culture change

Academic staff attitudes towards students as partners has evolved over time. Initially, there was resistance to working alongside students but now it is actively asked for. Mindsets have shifted from the ground level up; STMs working positively and directly with staff has had a ripple effect to academic peers. The support that the STMs have given has been highly valued across the university and enabled staff to develop their skills at the right pace for them.

Specifically, the programme has enabled students to support staff to become more inclusive with their curriculum and to have greater empathy for the student experience.

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Engagement with the programme from both staff and students

In 2020/21, there were over 1000 engagements with academic staff with training and support, where our STMs are involved. 478 one-to-one sessions were offered with our STMs.

1.6 Quotes

"I enjoyed being a Student Technology Mentor at the University of Hertfordshire. My role involved working with university staff members and students that expanded my networking, which might be beneficial in the future when I finish my studies... Overall, the role of a Student Technology Mentor was a great opportunity to get new skills, meet fabulous people in my team, and become a better listener and problem-solver" – Michal Kochanowicz, BSc Computer Science, 2nd year

"Working as a Student Technology Mentor (STM) has enabled me to engage in various activities and thereby gain valuable experience that will help me in my future career. Being a student while having the opportunity to view and learn from a staff perspective was the aspect that allowed me to broaden my horizons and develop greater respect for others. I have also significantly improved my written and oral communication skills by providing support and advice for staff members and students on their digital capabilities..." – Joanna Szpunar, BA (Hons) International Business, 2nd year

"The Student Technology Mentors have been an integral and crucial element of our partnership approach to the successful implementation of our new VLE and Guided Learner Journey. Their impact can be seen in how they have supported the enhancement of both staff and student digital capabilities and in how they have helped us change our culture, putting partnership working at the heart of what we do in terms of learning and teaching at Herts. Lucy and team who have led on this student–staff partnership have much to share in terms of success and best practice in this area." – Karen Barton, Director of Learning & Teaching, Learning and Teaching Innovation Centre

1.7 This case study exemplifies the following toolkit attributes:

Flexible

Building on previous projects on blended learning, the programme has shifted ground to support firstly the implementation of a new online learning environment and secondly the Herts Learning principles (principles developed since Covid-19 to strategically embed blended and flexible curricula) which focus on the Inclusive Curriculum and Guided Learner Journey Checklists and provide Digital Accessibility guidance. By being flexible, the programme has remained current and relevant and continues to offer excellent support to both staff and students.

Embedded

Addressing key institutional priorities of digital engagement, the Student Technology Mentors are also embedded in various working groups, including the Data for Learning Working Group, and represent the student voice on the Learning Environment Strategic Governance Group. They are firmly embedded in Schools and are known for their digital development role for both staff and students.



Contact us

All enquiries:

Email: communications@advance-he.ac.uk

Website: www.advance-he.ac.uk

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