CASE STUDY

Building equal partnerships: The Student Engagement Associate scheme at the University of Nottingham

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ABSTRACT

The Student Engagement Associate scheme at the University of Nottingham showcases the impact of student-staff partnerships for positive change. Through these partnerships, the scheme has managed to produce innovative projects that underpin the institution's core principles and has fostered a sense of equality and community between its staff partners and students. In the academic year of 2019/20, twenty students from diverse backgrounds were employed as student engagement associates and involved in projects such as the Digital Conduct module, the Equality, Diversity, & Inclusion (EDI) booklet, and the development of Student Reviewers, a scheme supporting pedagogic innovation.

KEYWORDS

partnership, pedagogy, institution, inclusive, community

The Student Engagement Associate (SEA) scheme at the University of Nottingham engages students as active partners in teaching and learning enhancement. This is one way in which the university ensures that the student voice is not only heard but actively turned into action through partnership with students. Prior to the 2019/20 academic year, the SEAs were primarily responsible for supporting the university's Student as Change Agents (SACA) programme (Watts et al., 2017). From 2019/20 onwards, the SEAs have been responsible for bespoke projects that enhance teaching and learning.

SEAs are employed primarily for a particular project and then may also optionally contribute to wider strategic enhancement work such as educational research, reverse mentoring (a process in which a student mentors an academic staff), and educational conference support. These have a tangible output that has an impact on pedagogical innovation at the institution (Healey et al., 2014).

A crucial aspect of the scheme is to promote student-staff partnerships, as this approach has been shown to increase the drive for educational transformation (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). The SEA scheme is a key vehicle for this at the University of Nottingham. Staff members may commission projects, but they must always work in partnership with students to co-produce and co-achieve the project's aims and outputs. In pursuit of this

transformation, there are four core values to which the scheme aims to adhere. They are as follows:

- Ethical: The scheme pays the student engagement associates above the national living wage and provides meaningful career experience in a professional business environment. As well as this, the scheme strives for transparency in the process of recruiting the SEAs to ensure the process is as fair as it can be.
- Collaborative: To work in partnership, the recruited SEAs are treated and valued as colleagues and not as the stereotype of interns. This is achieved by providing them with meaningful work informed by university strategy and involving and empowering them in decision-making.
- Representative: The SEA team looks to recruit in an open and inclusive fashion to ensure that the voices of people from different backgrounds are heard and to give everyone an opportunity to actively engage in bringing about change. The team also ensures the recruitment process is representative by having SEAs on the recruitment panel who are equally valued as staff.
- Developmental: The scheme strives to promote a rich and effective higher education learning environment within the university, whilst allowing the recruited students to develop and exhibit good professional practice.

While these principles have always formed the core of the scheme (Mercer-Mapstone & Marie, 2014), they have been better articulated and integrated this year, as will be explored in the following sections. The importance of the SEAs is highlighted by the pro-vice chancellor for teaching and learning who states that "SEAs provide rich and deep insight into the things that matter to students. Working with a SEA enables staff to develop significant projects that have big impacts across the university" (personal communication, February 17th, 2022).

This quote stresses the significance of having students as active collaborators in ground-breaking projects. The equal partnership with the staff partners supports the professional development of the SEAs and upholds the rich learning environment the university strives to achieve. This is echoed in several pieces of research that emphasise the gravity of equal student-staff partnership (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; National Union of Students [NUS], 2012; Healey et al., 2014). As such, this fuels an increase in knowledge on both sides and thus should be advocated for more across institutions.

The SEA projects are generated and scoped by the Educational Excellence Team. In most cases, the student engagement officer also acts as the supervisor to the recruited SEAs, while the academic staff member remains the staff partner or the commissioner of the project. This case study discusses and evaluates selected projects, highlighting the outcomes for the students and staff partners and the impact they've had on the university.

THE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS

In this section, we detail three projects and an evaluation of them using qualitative and anecdotal evidence collected from surveys from the students and staff partners who participated in the Student Engagement Associate scheme. Out of the thirteen SEA projects in 2019/20, the selected three highlight influential factors that contribute to the overall student learning experience whilst conveying the impact of student-staff partnership. They

were also selected because they serve as a model we recommend for the future of the scheme. This evidence was obtained following ethical approval and all data is stored in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines.

Digital conduct

The aim of this project was to research and design a short online course to portray good online behaviour, using the university's virtual learning environment, Moodle, and Xerte content (Xerte is a web-based tool for developing learning content). The course highlights the consequences of online harassment both within the university and externally, with the intention being that it acts as a deterrent.

After an initial briefing, the two SEAs met with the university's conduct and investigations manager to establish the wider context. This was a confidential discussion detailing the types of online harassment and bullying that the security team deals with. Following this, several focus groups were conducted by SEAs and with other students or members of staff to collect primary data on what the content and delivery of the course should look like. Alongside this, the project was coordinated with various university staff groups to identify and emphasise relevant policies and resources that could also be included in the course.

The main outcome of this project is an open online course that was made available to students for the start of the 2020/21 academic year. It is now an integral part of online training which has been used by 2,782 students so far.

The SEAs on this project reported improved digital skills and expressed a sense of accomplishment that came with producing a course that is beneficial for all students regardless of their academic pursuits. A SEA working on this project reported:

> Staff partners provided me with the tools to complete this project, guided me when I felt stuck, and went over and beyond to make me feel like a "partner" in this project and not just a student. All this while giving me the freedom to lead the project.

Nurturing leadership in an academic context can only be beneficial for the students' personal and professional development. This is supported by the 1996 Dearing Review of post-16 education which states that key skills, such as leadership, should be developed and applied to both work-based and academic routes (Dearing, 1996). This ultimately feeds back into the development of the student engagement associates as well-rounded individuals equipped with skills that can be applied to multiple fields of work. In this way, the SEA projects provide a developmental space whilst also producing strategic products.

Equality, diversity, & inclusion (EDI) student partnership booklet

Another project delivered in the 19/20 academic year was the EDI Student Partnership booklet. The project's goal was to celebrate the accomplishments of relevant Student as Change Agents (SACA) projects, their contributions to inclusive practice, and to highlight the impact these SACA projects have had on a larger scale. The booklet contained stories of seven different projects from schools within the university that have upheld the values of equality, diversity, and inclusion. This project was sponsored by the University of Nottingham's pro-vice chancellor for EDI, who recognised the value of showcasing staff-student partnership projects as a vehicle for good EDI practice.

The stages of the project included market research, design, conducting interviews, and content creation for the booklet. The sense of community was especially highlighted in

this project as one SEA led the project and was offered support and contribution by four other SEAs. The lead SEA explained that:

> Leading a project and having the pro-vice chancellor for EDI as a staff partner not only gave me the chance to build on my skills, but to have the confidence to take on the role of project management. This ranged from delegating tasks to fulfilling certain responsibilities.

Evidence suggests that valued partnerships result in a range of skills and values that are beneficial to students, some of which are enhanced confidence, enthusiasm, and a degree of ownership for their own learning (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Being able to collaborate with staff, especially those in university leadership positions, challenges the traditional hierarchical relationships which are the norm in higher education. It paves the way for modern, transformational learning for both parties involved. This, therefore, reinforces a stronger learning environment and establishes equal value across students and staff (Chambers & Nagle, 2013, as cited in Healey et al., 2014).

Student Reviewers of Teaching

The Student Reviewers of Teaching is a project led by a SEA and staff partner who were supported by two other SEAs. The project focused on assisting teaching staff to develop their pedagogy through partnership with students. The service is a development tool for staff, in which they get a student perspective on their practice in a safe and confidential manner. The three student reviewers were intentionally chosen from different academic schools to that which was reviewed. They offered a perspective on the accessibility and delivery of and global approach to teaching and learning. Recruited reviewers received training that outlined good review practices and the objectives of the project and learned about the theoretical and practical aspects of pedagogy. A document was produced by the lead SEA and staff partner to act as a review framework that could be easily followed by subsequent student reviewers. The lead SEA on the project fed back that:

> The independence, responsibility, and respect I was given, and the confidence that my supervisor had in me—that is the blueprint of the environment I'd like to work in in the future. Not only were my opinions valued but implemented in a project impacting the university community.

Giving responsibility to students, partnered with members of staff, has been shown to boost their confidence and push their boundaries of creativity. This is a result of the trust put in them to deliver efficient projects. This theory is supported by research that reports that this form of partnership encourages critical thinking and allows students to explore methods and ways of thinking that were previously unthought of (Healey et al., 2014). Providing opportunities to encourage innovation and leadership in this manner enables students to seek more environments and occasions where they can practice and develop essential skills such as these, as supported by the quote.

IMPACT OF THE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SCHEME ON AN INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Redistributing power dynamics

In order to maintain equality within the student-staff partnerships, the recruitment process was adapted to include SEAs. This was intended to allow the SEAs to feel as valued and respected as any other member of staff, with the hope that it optimises the decisions they make within their individual projects. One of the SEAs commented on the recruitment process and stated, "The team practiced what it preached. We did not just talk about equality, diversity, and inclusion; our team was actually a great example of what EDI looks like. It made me feel more comfortable voicing my opinions."

The SEA scheme conducted a survey, taken from the employed SEAs, which looked into the efficiency of the scheme itself. From the survey, the student-staff partnership was evaluated.
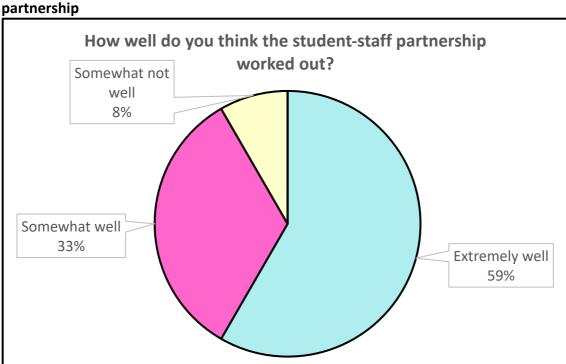
Figure 1. Results from a survey question reviewing the quality of the student-staff partnership

How well do you think the student-staff partnership worked out?

- Somewhat not well 8%
- Somewhat well 33%
- Extremely well 59%

Although a small sample size, Figure 1 shows that seven of the SEAs found the partnerships to have worked extremely well or somewhat well. This internal data demonstrates the success of this aspect of the scheme and supports the benefits highlighted above. The partnerships will continue to evolve and be at the centre of the outcomes delivered by the scheme.

The recruitment process for the student engagement associate includes two major stages: submission of CV and cover letter, followed by the interview. To make the recruitment process inclusive and representative, a SEA is involved as a partner with equal say in the decision-making process from the outset. This includes the selection of CVs, drafting interview questions, and the selection of recruiting candidates. In doing so, traditionally perceived notions about responsibilities are challenged and barriers between students and staff are partly removed. This encourages the rich and effective working and

learning environment the university strives to achieve (Mercer-Mapstone & Marie, 2019; Healey et al., 2014).

The financial incentive also enforces equal student-staff partnership, as it reassures the SEAs that their time is both valued and rewarded as much as their staff partner. The SEAs are paid above the living wage, which is a testament to the ethical values the scheme upholds. Traditionally, amongst HE institutions, work such as this is considered voluntary. Paying the students not only fuels their motivation to continue participating in these projects, but it also maintains an ethical standard that other institutions should strive for (Healey et al., 2014). This lays the foundation for an efficient and enjoyable partnership that enables transformative projects to be delivered. On this topic, a SEA stated that "the high hourly rate surprised me since it is more than what is provided in other student roles. It is greatly helpful to me as a student."

Contribution to the institution and staff partners

Conducting strategic projects in an authentic manner in partnership with students also gives staff the opportunity to recognise and challenge implied assumptions regarding perceived typical student-staff partnerships. As well as this, it fosters critical reflection and allows for innovative ways of learning and working in modern higher education. Several staff partners have been able to utilise the outcomes from the SEA projects by presenting at different conferences, such as the Inclusive Practice Conference and the Teaching and Learning Conference at the university. The work done on projects also contributes to the staff partners' professional development and can be used for promotions and/or the university's Recognition Scheme. The director of modern language teaching reported:

> My experience working with the SEAs was really terrific. They were incredibly hard-working, self-motivated, and brought a range of knowledge and skills to the project. There is no doubt in my mind that their contributions enhanced the quality of the project's outputs.

LESSONS LEARNED

Partnership work is inherently challenging, and Healey et al. (2014) describe it as "a way of doing things, rather than the desired outcome itself" (p. 7). Striking the balance between running an efficient service and facilitating authentic partnership is a process we continuously try to achieve and improve on. Student partners are, by definition, students first, meaning their academic work is prioritised above extracurricular activities such as the role of a SEA. This creates practical challenges when scheduling students from different courses and with different personal commitments. It became clear that it was important for staff—both scheme supervisors and project staff partners—to cultivate opportunities for partnership at the most fruitful times.

On some projects, staff partners attempted to negotiate top-level project detail such as the strategy, outcomes, and delivery dates with SEAs. Whilst admirable, this placed a lot of pressure on SEAs to immediately make such decisions, which many did not have prior experience making or the full context for. It was found that SEAs responded well to having clear aims, expected outcomes, and responsibilities laid out from the initial stages of the project. This was implemented by asking the staff partners to complete a short form outlining the structure of the project, alongside an initial discussion with the SEA scheme supervisors. This gave the staff partners a plan and an expected outcome to work toward. The scheme supervisors were then able to relay the key information to the

recruited students regarding the projects. This gave a structure for the students to work within, which was vital given their limited availabilities to work on projects. Paradoxically, having more structure created a better space for disrupting traditional power dynamics.

Along with this, having a defined relationship between SEAs on an individual project gave them confidence and clarity of their role within a project. Projects with a single SEA as lead, as highlighted in the EDI booklet project, allowed the SEA to draw on the skills and availability of other SEAs for discrete tasks within that project. It reinforced the structure for the project and gave a clear set of expectations and time needed for all involved, whilst still enabling collaborative partnership working. By the same token, a clear structure creates better transparency for the staff partner and facilitates a clear timeline and point(s) of contact. Therefore, the recommendation is to have one SEA lead on each project and encourage them to draw on the expertise of the wider SEA team when required. This approach would allow for a skills- and need-driven collaborative approach.

From an institutional perspective, the SEA projects in 2019/20 came at the end of the university's Global Strategy 2020 and the start of the Coronavirus pandemic. Moving forward, there is opportunity for deeper strategic engagement from the SEA scheme, and SEAs are now contributing to the university's programme-level design objectives and on projects to co-create curricula. This could embed student partnership and co-creation deeper with the university's strategic approaches to teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

The SEA scheme is constantly evolving in a way that strives to achieve its core values and encourages efficient and effective student-staff partnership. As previously mentioned, the scheme allows for the development of both student and staff partners in a unique and collaborative way. The different projects described contribute towards the improvement of the wider university and play a part in the authentic development of its student employees. It challenges traditional hierarchical structures by introducing modern, evidence-based methods that benefit both staff and students equally and ethically. Therefore, we hope this can serve as a blueprint, not only for further projects within the university, but for other higher education learning institutions which aim to build stronger partnerships with students.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Ololade Obadare *is a final year medical student at the University of Nottingham who has also been a SEA since the academic year 2019/20. She is passionate about instilling change and tackling issues faced by the student population.*

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Matthew Watts *is a student engagement officer at the University of Nottingham. He manages the university's Student Engagement Associate and Students as Change Agents programmes and supports programme-level design work, particularly initiatives to co-create the curriculum with students. He was also previously a student engagement associate at the university.*

Dean Lymath *is the educational enhancement manager at the University of Nottingham, where he runs the Teaching and Learning Conference and manages processes to meet Access and Participation Plan targets. He previously ran the Students as Change Agents and Student Engagement Associates programmes, winning a* [European Consortium for Innovative University award](#)*.*

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