
Jisc change agents' network

Case study

Student Academic Partners: central to the vision at Birmingham City University

Students at the heart of the university

Birmingham City University serves approximately 23,500 students drawn from 80 countries. The university has four faculties covering a range of subjects and specialisms which are delivered over three main campuses with additional sites throughout the city. The four faculties are:

- » Health, education and life sciences
- » Computing, engineering and the built environment
- » Business, law and social sciences
- » Arts, design and media

The university prides itself on providing a diverse and multi-cultural environment and on focusing on the development of practical skills of professional relevance as well as putting students at the heart of everything they do. The university aims to enable students to be:

- » professional and work ready
- » creative problem solvers
- » enterprising
- » with a global outlook

Birmingham City University won the Times Higher Education Award for 'Outstanding Support for Students' in 2010 and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and National Union of Students (NUS) Institutional Partnership Award in 2013.

(Source: www.bcu.ac.uk).

Student academic partners scheme

The student academic partners scheme (SAP) brings together project teams of students and staff working in partnership on initiatives designed to improve the student experience. The collaborative design of the scheme aims to integrate students into the university's teaching and pedagogic research communities and faculties.

The SAP scheme grew from early discussions in 2008 between the director of learning experience (previously titled director of learning and teaching), faculty staff and key student union representatives around the need to create a greater sense of learning community. This had been identified as an area of concern from national and internal surveys.

The philosophy underpinning the SAP scheme and student engagement activity at BCU was that it should be a meaningful partnership, have an impact on the learning community, put students at the heart of design and delivery as well as that the activities and lessons learned should be proactively disseminated both across the university and to other institutions.

T-SPARC

The **Technology-Supported Processes for Agile and Responsive Curricula** project (T-SPARC) led by Birmingham City University and funded through the **Jisc transforming curriculum delivery through technology programme (2008-12)** ran alongside, and contributed to, development on student engagement. Exploring the role of technology in curriculum delivery was part of the university's wider redesign of the learner experience (RoLex) initiative. The T-SPARC project also produced a wider **stakeholder engagement model** which could be used when considering the development of student engagement activities.

Funded projects

In December 2008 the university's Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) and the Students Union (BCUSU) developed and formally launched the SAP scheme, inviting collaborative student-staff teams from each faculty to identify educational development projects. Over 35 project proposals were submitted in this first round, 24 of which were funded through the SAP scheme. These first projects included initiatives designed to improve communication between students and staff, the evaluation of online peer assessment tools and the development of new services.

SAP projects conducted over the last eight years have typically centred around four main themes:

- » Development of new content (learning, resources, assessment approaches, curriculum focus)
- » Consultation and communication (surveys, networking projects, community building, student engagement focus)
- » Employability (employment, professional practice and placement experience)
- » Thematic (progression, retention, first year experience, internationalisation)

In 2016 over 100 projects are being supported under the SAP scheme and its sister mentoring programme (StAMP). Between 2008 and 2015 over 60 student engagement projects that focus on improving the learning experience have been completed involving over 1200 students.

Recognising student commitment and effort

Those seeking funding for SAP projects apply on line and bids are scrutinised against criteria. One of the key criteria is to assess the partnership between students and staff in the design and proposed delivery of the

project. Students participating in SAP projects are paid at a rate of £10 per hour for up to a hundred hours work to recognise their commitment and effort. They value the professional skills they learn and how this can enhance their employability prospects.

Students are also able to work towards an accredited qualification to recognise their student engagement activities. The Student Knowledge in Learning and Leadership (SKILL) course was developed in 2014 and is accredited by the Staff and Educational Development Agency (SEDA). The course involves three full days of student development plus self-directed work and is designed to:

- » Develop students' skills and knowledge in learning and teaching
- » Enable students to articulate and communicate the skills and development they gain from their student engagement experiences

Students who took part in the course in 2014 were enthusiastic about their experiences:

"SKILL was a really rewarding course that allowed me to develop a whole range of skills from presenting and teaching, to improving my employability as a whole. It was really nice to look back and reflect over my time at university and the teachers are great at supporting you with this. It's even better that you get a nationally recognised certificate at the end."

Megan Caulfield, 2014 Graduate in Media and Communications (Journalism)

"The SKILL course not only helped me to present myself with confidence but changed the way I felt about my employability and career prospects for the future."

Katie Llewellyn student on SKILL course and 2014 Vice President Student Experience at BCUSU.

Students have been motivated to participate in projects because of the potential impact on the development of their academic and research skills, core competencies and on their future in terms of increased employability. The financial support offered is also a motivating factor, but so too is the altruistic element in that they feel their activities are enhancing the experience for future students. They have also appreciated the increased impact of the student voice and how their views and concerns are responded to.

For staff, the motivation to participate includes the additional resource SAP activities offer and the positive impact this can have on delivery of learning, increased knowledge for content and the narrowing of any perceived gaps between students and staff. Student engagement seeks to address the division between staff and students or 'Us and Them' through greater provision and potential for formal and informal connections.

SAP in action

Some examples of SAP work in action include:

Top Ten Tips: BSc (Hons) Radiography

Current Radiography students worked to reduce anxiety for new starters by creating three online videos and a supporting community. The videos provide tips under three categories: Academic Studies, Clinical Practice and Social Activity.

When Your First Year is Also Your Last Year: BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies Top-up degree

This project recruited three Student Curriculum Design Consultants to work with staff and the current cohort of Early Childhood Studies Top-up degree students to identify ways in which the transition into University-life and top-up degrees could be enhanced. The consultants worked with the course team to develop support materials and amendments to course design in response to these consultation findings.

Student Life Hacks – Video Series: Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment (CEBE)

Staff and students produced a series of short, informative YouTube videos for the faculty, acting as 'how to guides' for a number of academic and technical skills e.g. Harvard Referencing, academic writing. They were designed to provide student friendly explanations and give more lecture time to course content.

Preparing to Moot – A Step-by-Step Guide: BA (Hons) Law

This project supported three second year Law students to research and draft a book around Mooting. The book, 'Preparing to Moot,' is being published by Routledge and aims to provide a step-by-step guide for students new to mooting on how to analyse problems and research relevant laws.

The Student Academic Mentoring Programme (StAMP)

The StAMP scheme grew out of the SAP programme as it was noticeable that in the first couple of years a number of mentoring type projects were being proposed. StAMP drew upon a partnership with colleagues at Northwest Missouri State University. The aim of the scheme is to support student progression and achievement through peer-mentoring. More experienced students provide the peer-to-peer mentoring with guidance and support from academic staff.

The StAMP scheme supports between 30-45 projects each year and the type of mentoring activities include:

- » Discussion group mentoring for specific modules that provides extra assistance in disseminating module content
- » Workshop mentoring that encourages students to apply theory from lectures in a practical environment
- » One-on-one academic assistance mentoring/coaching which follows a more traditional 'tuition' model of academic assistance for modules. This is provided on a drop-in or appointment basis.
- » Teaching assistant mentoring to provide assistance for academic staff for specific modules. The type of assistance may include supplemental instruction for students, demonstrations, course development or lesson implementation.
- » Course induction mentoring that provides guidance on how to succeed, an introduction on the expectations of the university, induction sessions and a student perspective of the course, the university and Birmingham.
- » Employability mentoring to assist students to build their Curriculum Vitae, portfolios, covering letters, job-searching and interview practice.
- » Placement mentoring offering advice, support and assistance for students while they are on placement.

Employing and upskilling students to support their peers in a mentoring capacity both with academic studies and out-of-class activities has removed barriers and addressed student worries. Some mentoring is done online using Moodle and Facebook. The mentoring scheme has now been expanded to include supporting students prior to their arrival at BCU through pre-transition activities. It has been noticed that many projects are focusing on the first year experience of students, in particular, and other transitional phases.

Examples of StAMP projects include:

Academic Mentoring for Success for Internationals: MA Interior Design

A part-time, second year student provided one-on-one academic assistance by mentoring an MA Interior Design cohort, made up entirely of international students in their first year of overseas study. The mentoring contextualised the cultural and language aspects of the Interior Design course and helped students' communication skills.

Partners in Braille: BSc (Hons) Rehabilitation Work (Visual Impairment)

Partners in Braille was a mentoring project that supplemented 1.25 hours of first year scheduled teaching time for Braille in the School of Allied and Public Health Professions. This was achieved through weekly or fortnightly one-to-one Braille mentoring by second years and enhancement of the Braille club.

Student Engagement in Recruitment and Selection: BSc (Hons) Nursing

BSc Nursing students took part in designing the recruitment and selection process for new starters by assisting the Admissions tutors with interview days and open days. They also offered a student perspective of the programme and university contributed towards attempts to ensure that students better understood the programme and what is expected of a student nurse.

Re-Induction Conservatoire Undergraduate International Students: BMus Performance, Composition and Music Technology

Run online, this project mentored new international students who had been offered a place on the BMus course at The Conservatoire starting in September 2015. Students were offered pastoral and academic advice before arrival using one-on-one sessions with a postgraduate student (recently graduated from the BMus course) or current BMus3 student

Narrowing the Gap – Mentoring the Prospective Student Through the Transition: A Partnership Project with a Sixth Form College

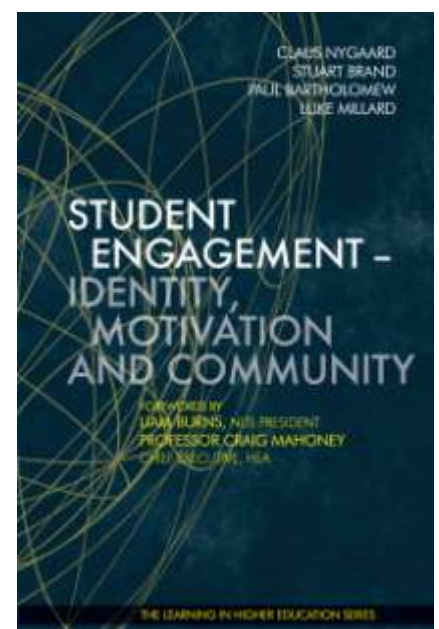
A specific group of black minority ethnic (BME) students who are now successfully studying at BCU returned to their former college to offer other BME students mentoring and support them in their study aspirations. Student mentors worked with staff from the university and college to design interventions to support student development at the college.

Students as writers

Students are regarded as partners at BCU with their contribution having as much merit as that of staff. This was most apparent in the creation of the text *Student Engagement: Identity, Motivation and Community*¹ which showcases the work of SAP and StAMP innovators. Each chapter in the book was jointly written by students and staff explaining the process of their project development and the impact of it on the participants, the student body and the university.

"..it is encouraging to see such wonderful examples of a diverse range of approaches taken to support the enhancement of the student experience, recognising that working with students as partners and co-producers of knowledge, can have significant and tangible benefits to not only students, but to the staff, the institution and the development of future learning landscapes for the next generation of leaders..."

Craig Mahoney, formerly chief executive of the Higher Education Academy



Showing faith in student abilities

Supporting the development of practical and professional skills is an approach that is embedded throughout the change agent initiatives. The third initiative that has evolved from the student engagement work at BCU is the **OpportUNity: Student jobs on campus** scheme.

Developed through the HEA's Change Academy process, the OpportUNity scheme was established within the University's Human Resources function and saw the creation of student jobs on campus as an outlet to offer students a first opportunity to fill many of the part-time positions available at the university.

"I feel student employment is the central part of the student engagement agenda. By employing our own students the University shows a sign of faith in their abilities, a sign that we recognise the strengths of what our students have to offer, but it's also a way of the University carrying out its own functions more effectively."

Professor Stuart Brand, director of learning experience

OpportUNity facilitates and supports students to apply for part-time jobs at BCU, to work while they study and to fit the job around their course requirements. The roles vary and include marketing roles, research assistants, mentoring, library assistants, student liaison officers, technicians and ambassadors. Around 1,000 jobs are made available each year to students across the university and it continues to expand and develop.

Students have reported that their wider involvement and employment has broken down barriers and made them feel included and more a part of the university as well as feeling able to approach staff members. It has also equipped them with valuable employability experience and helped to develop their skills.

"A lot of employers are looking for what else you have done and these partnership projects are perfect for those, that is self-development. I can't tell you the transformational skills I have learned in public speaking, communicating and presenting, and those have all come from working in partnership that have been given as opportunities. Not only is it a safe environment, you are benefiting yourself academically within your own field but it is also the most flexible work you will ever be involved in because we do pay our students for this kind of activity so it goes completely around your timetable."

Elgan Hughes, formerly student engagement officer at Birmingham City University

The financial rationale for OpportUNity was relatively easy to establish when the university considered the amount of funding spent on part-time staff supplied by agencies. However, the development of employability skills, student self-confidence and the creation of a greater sense of community are also clear benefits that helped to secure commitment for the initial development.

Emerging impact

Feedback from students taking part in engagement work indicates that the SAP activities are creating a sense of ownership and pride in the institution and the programmes of study offered. In addition, the average grades of

students taking part in the SAP scheme increased by 9.5% during projects rising to 11.3% after projects (Source: BCU presentation at CAN event March 2015)

"The more I got involved in different projects, roles and jobs the more I felt involved with the university and my grades soared. It is weird because I had so many responsibilities but my grades improved. That whole sense of belonging is really fabulous because without that I wouldn't be sitting here with a first class degree."

Stacey Watkins, former student success advisor, Birmingham City University

"95% of students surveyed that had been involved in student partnership activities at Birmingham City University say they feel a greater sense of belonging and are more motivated to study. They report a stronger sense of community and affiliation with the university and say that they are working hard at their studies."

Elgan Hughes, previously student engagement officer, Birmingham City University

Sustaining and embedding

"We need to live the student experience and thrive at all levels. We seek to engage our students at all levels as they progress through their journey."

Professor Cliff Allen, Vice chancellor for Birmingham City University speaking at the Universities UK conference on enhancing the student experience (December 2015)

BCU has developed three strong and inter-related initiatives in the Student Academic Partners, Student Academic Mentoring Partners and OpportUNity: Student jobs on campus schemes. The roles that students are invited to play within the BCU learning community and in shaping and developing their own learning experience and those of their peers continues to grow and evolve.

Staff at BCU feel that through these three schemes they have developed a robust approach to involving students in change agency activities so that they are able to contribute to and build the BCU learning community. Key features are that the activities have a clear identity, motivate students to participate and that effort is rewarded.

BCU has achieved institution-wide commitment to student engagement and partnership working – this has senior support, is led from the executive and is embedded within the university's mission and vision. The role of the student union is also vital to the ongoing development and to sustaining and embedding the various student engagement initiatives.

Looking to the future

Working with students is now woven throughout all aspects of the university. The principle of student engagement is a starting point for the vast majority of new initiatives. Welcome Week has been redesigned by the university and Students' Union revisiting the student experience and employing a new event management graduate each year to make it relevant to new students. This new approach has seen student attendance at the Welcome fair double and student sign up for societies increase by 20%.

The latest collaborative development is a new CPD programme for undergraduate students that recognises the extra-curricular aspects of their university life. **Graduate+** is taking shape with substantial student input into the development at strategic and implementation levels. The lifewide experiences of BCU students will be recognised through Graduate+ as the university strives to recognise and encourage learning that takes place both within and beyond the campus.

Find out more

For further information please visit

- » [Student Engagement at BCU](#)
- » [Student Academic Partners Scheme](#) and information
- » [OpportUNity Student jobs on campus](#) initiative
- » [Case study relating to BCU's winning entry in the HEA and NUS joint Students' Union and Institution Partnership Award in 2013](#)
- » [Jisc video clip featuring Elgan Hughes, formerly student engagement officer at Birmingham City University](#)
- » [Vimeo clip from 2015 Jisc Change Agents' Network event featuring Elgan Hughes \(formerly student engagement officer at Birmingham City University\) and Stacey Watkins \(student success adviser at Birmingham City University\). Elgan and Stacey talk about their roles and the impact of student engagement activities at BCU](#)
- » [Jisc change agents' webinar featuring Paul Chapman, formerly at BCU, recorded 27 April 2015](#)

Contact: Luke Millard, head of student engagement, Birmingham City University Luke.Millard@bcu.ac.uk

You can also find out more about Jisc's work through the [Change agents' network](#).

¹Nygaard, C. (Author and editor), Bartholomew, P., Brand, S. and Millard, L. (Editors) (2013). *Student engagement – identity, motivation and community*. Libri Publishing: Farringdon.