
Jisc change agents' network

Case study

The University of Lincoln: a research-engaged and collaborative community

"At Lincoln we are one community. There are no differences; staff and students are all scholars, just at different stages. When you come to Lincoln you become a citizen of this community with equal rights and responsibilities."

Professor Mary Stuart, vice chancellor, University of Lincoln

The University of Lincoln hosts around 13,000 students and 1,500 staff across campuses in Lincoln, Riseholme and Holbeach. Three colleges of Arts, Science and Social Science accommodate 19 schools. The university has established a strong international reputation for the quality of teaching and research, with academics and students working together on a variety of major projects.

The 2015 National Student Survey shows high student satisfaction rankings and in its most recent Quality Assurance Agency review, the university was commended for the innovative ways in which it gives its students a voice (November 2012).

The University of Lincoln's Students' Union won the title Students' Union of the Year at the National Union of Students (NUS) Awards 2014.

Students as producers of their own education

The university's **Student Engagement Strategy for 2012-2016** highlights the ambition to create an environment where students and staff work together as one community and introduces the concept of students becoming "producers of their own education and their own university". This concept has developed from the university's Higher Education Academy (HEA) funded 'Student as producer' project which began in 2010 and is now established as the underlying principle for student engagement at the University of Lincoln.

"Student as producer" is "a movement which aims to connect research and teaching and enhance the student learning experience"

(<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/enhancement/definitions/student-producer> accessed 6 October 2015).

At the University of Lincoln, the emphasis is on research-engaged teaching rather than research-informed teaching, with research and research-like activities at the core of the undergraduate curriculum across all faculties and subject areas.

The emphasis is on partnership with undergraduate students working in collaboration with peers and academics in the design and delivery of their teaching and learning programmes, in the production of learning content, in quality processes and a range of other roles.

Planning for change and sustainability

From the outset, Professor Mary Stuart, vice chancellor, at the University of Lincoln wanted to ensure the benefits and lessons learned from initiatives such as 'Student as Producer' project and investment in student engagement were embedded cross the university and integrated with wider institutional initiatives.

"One of the things I got frustrated with is the project-based approach, when funded projects highlight best practice in an area but that when the funding stops the wonderful ideas just die. I wanted to make sure the learning from 'Student as producer' was embedded into core quality processes and the annual monitoring of programmes"

Professor Mary Stuart, vice chancellor, University of Lincoln

The vision is holistic – the university experience is seen as much more than teaching and learning. A deliberate decision was taken to start by introducing the principles articulated in the student engagement strategy in management structures and professional services before spreading this out across the whole organisation.

A student engagement officer was appointed and it was decided that the work on student engagement should initially be led from the vice chancellor's office to signpost the importance of the initiative and provide visible leadership and support.

Staff and students were encouraged to think about what this meant in terms of their everyday practice or service offer and to view the initiative as an opportunity to develop their ideas as well as to reflect the values and culture of the university. Sharing early successes and ideas helped to engage others.

Once the core principles and approach were established in management structures and professional services the focus expanded to embed student engagement more widely across the university to enhance the whole educational experience, including teaching and learning. To reflect this, the student engagement team has been relocated and now forms a significant part of the new Educational Development and Enhancement Unit.

"The real strength of locating the student engagement team within the Educational Development and Enhancement Unit is that it embeds student engagement in everything we do to enhance the student experience and reminds us to work with the whole university community in education enhancement"

Dan Derricott, student engagement manager, University of Lincoln

A variety of change agent roles for students and staff

'Student as producer' remains the definitive principle and the baseline for the different ways that students and staff collaborate and engage in research that is designed to enhance any given aspect of teaching, learning and the overall student experience. Some of these roles and ways for students and staff to collaborate are described below:

» **Student engagement champions** – each department was invited to nominate a member of staff to lead on engaging students as partners to improve the quality of what they do. The initial number of six champions has now grown to 46 with 20 of these being located within academic schools. This means that every bit of the university now has an active champion. The role of a champion is to support and encourage colleagues and also to support student representatives. Examples of some of the activities led by the staff SE champions includes:

- › The Lincoln School of Film and Media participate in the co_LAB (Collaboration Laboratory Research Network) that brings together staff and students from different fields, disciplines, contexts and countries to collaborate on innovative trans-media projects. co_LAB was designed to explore and develop new approaches to collaborative teaching and learning. A variety of projects have been run both in collaboration with international universities and by applying the same model to different disciplines at the University of Lincoln (eg. computing science, psychology, criminal psychology and the school of film and media).
- › The Lincoln School of Fine and Performing Arts is the home of The Lincoln Company. The Lincoln Company provides students with the opportunity to showcase their work beyond the University at the Edinburgh Festival and other venues in the UK. In addition, the Student Engagement Champion holds fortnightly meetings with student representatives and has worked with students to redesign 'the perfect first year curriculum', which in turn has inspired a university-wide drive to creatively engage students in curriculum design and development.

"It is not just about the CV but about having a total and rounded experience. Performing Arts students want to be involved and want to take ownership – if anything needs doing I put a call out and get responses in minutes".

Lisa Gaughan, senior lecturer and student engagement champion at Lincoln School of Fine and Performing Arts

- › The School of Psychology has an annual intake of 300 students and wants to ensure students feel a valued part of the community of practice from the outset. Engagement activities include the 'getting started' Blackboard site which is populated by other students and is made available to students before they officially enrol; a 60-strong team of peer mentors drawn from second and third-year students; and an annual student conference where third-year students present their papers. The school is one of 5 schools that have taken part in a piloting the Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) scheme that uses the experiences of higher-year students to support the learning of their lower-year peers. Student representatives have also led on redesigning assessment feedback forms in responses to student comments. After consultation, an entirely new feedback form has been introduced which encourages student reflection.
- › The Graduate School caters for students from across the university and engage these 'hard to reach' students through advisory groups and a range of initiatives such as the creation of student generated welcome packs; students representing the school at conferences; mentoring schemes and action learning sets.
- › The catering service team at the university have employed a 12-strong team of students as catering assistants and are encouraging them to be active in asking peers and friends for feedback and ideas. They have also engaged Marketing students in the re-brand of all of their on-campus outlets and in differentiating the focus of each outlet to meet the distinctive needs of different student groups.

- » **Funded project leaders** – staff and students can apply for development funds which aim to stimulate and support innovative practice. These were previously separate funds but have been brought together into a single 'Student Engagement in Educational Development Fund' (SEED funding), which puts the principle of partnership working with students at the heart of all funded project activity.
- » **Student recruiters** – students are invited to participate in the recruitment processes, interviewing potential members of staff including teaching staff, senior managers, support staff and professorial students. Students receive training from the student engagement team and Human Resources (HR) professionals to ensure best practice in key HR requirements such as equality and diversity are observed and to help students to research and develop appropriate question sets and techniques. There are currently over 60 students trained to act as recruiters. Student recruiters play a full role on the interview panel; they prepare for interviews by reading through the application packs, write their own question sets based on student voice guidance as well as give and receive feedback after each interview.

"Doing the interviews in a real and professional setting makes it clear what is expected of you – this is the best career advice you will get at university".

Reece Horsley, student recruiter participant at the University of Lincoln

- » **Student consultants** – the students consulting on teaching or SCoTs team is comprised of students recruited to provide consultancy on a subject other than their own. After training they are invited to look at a given area of teaching practice and provide feedback on a confidential basis to staff either by email or face-to-face, sometimes in pairs. The observers are tasked to provide constructive criticism as well as to identify what is going well. Staff have found the observation process helpful and all parties gain a deeper understanding of each other's' experience. The consultation is requested and driven by the academic and SCoTs are supported with two half-days of training to prepare them for the role. The student engagement team has also been funded by SEDA to explore how student peer observation can be integrated with more traditional forms of staff-to-staff peer observation.

"I was involved in conducting a SCOT analysis for online learning materials for sports and exercise with a focus on how accessible the Blackboard site was to students. Teaching staff wanted to know why students were not using it as much as was hoped – our feedback was that reorganising it would make it more accessible."

Nicole Hoskin, psychology student and SCoTs participant at the University of Lincoln

- » **Student and staff insight scheme** – every member of the university's executive team is paired with a student for a year at a time. This offers senior staff a real opportunity to better understand the lived student experience and in turn students gain a wider sense of the university and all the things that happen 'behind the scenes'. The Insight scheme reinforces the university commitment to student engagement and embodies the cultural values of 'one community' that the university has adopted.

"Insight participants jointly negotiate their targets using a peer-coaching approach. It may be that a student wants to understand more about the management and governance of the university or finance, marketing or IT. The relationships formed often last beyond the scheme."

Karin Crawford, director, educational development and enhancement unit, University of Lincoln

"I have attended Board of Governors meetings and both my Insight partner and I attended the 'Student as Producer: Beyond the University' conference, working together and sharing ideas. In turn, my Insight partner has shadowed me by coming to rehearsals for my performances and workshops."

Linford Butler, MA drama student and participant in Insight and student as recruiter schemes at the University of Lincoln

"I am working on a campaign called 'Faces of Lincoln' with the Marketing and Communications Manager and we are interviewing staff, alumni, students and everyone who make Lincoln the vibrant community it is. We went to the House of Lords to encourage public figures to come to the university."

Olly Bakewell, student and participant in the Insight scheme at the University of Lincoln

Support from the student engagement team

The student engagement team based within the Educational Development and Enhancement Unit work to embed student engagement across the organisation and to support staff and students in the various activities and initiatives on offer. The team comprises a student engagement manager, a student engagement officer, a student evaluation and communications assistant, a student engagement administrator and three students working part-time as projects assistants. Work includes:

- » Delivering the student engagement strategy
- » Supporting student engagement champions
- » Providing training and support for the student recruiters, SCoTs and Insight scheme participants mentioned above and for students involved in internal quality assurance processes
- » Building up a students' expert network focused on recognising and accrediting the skills students develop
- » Coordinating and developing the university's use of student surveys
- » Developing how student reps are engaged by the university
- » Piloting the internationally recognised PASS scheme in five schools with the intention of rolling-out across the university.
- » Harmonising and enhancing the personal tutoring programme working with the senior tutor in each school
- » Building student confidence - student engagement is not necessarily something students have experienced before or something they all readily understand.

"There can be variations in engagement over cohorts and years – some seem more willing to engage than others. It is about building confidence and once students get over that barrier and get engaged they tend to come back and get engaged in more schemes."

Dan Richardson, former student engagement intern, University of Lincoln.

"What is different about Lincoln is that it is a collaborative community that you feel a part of and that people are open to change and innovation. You can get things done quickly. Wherever you are in the organisation you can have a role and make a difference – we are equals across the board."

Emily Parkin, student engagement officer, University of Lincoln.

Key relationship with the Students' Union

"The university and the Students' Union share a common interest in providing the best possible student experience for every student at Lincoln."

Professor Mary Stuart, vice chancellor, University of Lincoln

This common goal sustains a positive and strategic relationship with the students' union. Some committees on teaching and learning, internationalisation and wellbeing and are jointly chaired by the university and students' union officers and initiatives are run collaboratively, such as student rep training and the job shop.

Students' union officers and staff meet student engagement champions several times a year.

The university is in the process of formalising their arrangements through a partnership approach with the students' union.

Emerging impact

Some of the ways the student engagement strategy is impacting on the student experience include:

- » **Changing the conversation at subject committee meetings:** Subject committees are jointly chaired by the head of school/programme lead and a student representative. Wider consultation is achieved in a growing number of areas by using wikis and the virtual learning environment (VLE) to populate the agenda in advance. This allows anyone to contribute to, or comment on the agenda and contribute to the debate. Previously, student representatives would bring issues that had been brought to their attention by their fellow students to meetings chaired by members of staff. This meant that a large proportion of the meetings were taken up by discussing problems, leaving little time to focus on driving quality improvement. The changed approach together with the increased student-to-staff engagement generally has allowed problems to be more easily surfaced and more promptly dealt with, freeing up time for more forward looking conversations that focus on developing courses and practice.
- » **Building the university:** Students are taking an active role in contributing to the design of new buildings at the university. One student is researching access to the various buildings and is taking part in meetings and working with the estates team to improve access. In addition to the positive benefits for the whole university community it also presents a real opportunity for the student to develop research and employability skills.
- » **Student engagement action plans:** Each area of the university is required to develop their own student engagement action plan. These are all published and shared on the website ensuring visibility and transparency. The plans are easy to see, easy to follow and can be adapted by others.

What the students say

Comments from students show that they feel a greater sense of engagement in their learning as well as a sense of belonging to a collaborative and forward-looking community. They feel they are receiving an experience that is rewarding, confidence building and that is contributing to their professional development:

"As a student you are here for the core business of getting your degree but the whole experience of being at university can be so much richer than that. My experience as a student at Lincoln has been massively enriched – the impact is much bigger than the course. It is a cycle that compels you to be a part of this place and when you leave the relationship doesn't end."

Linford Butler, MA drama student and participant in Insight and student as recruiter schemes at the University of Lincoln

"Taking part in student engagement activities helps you realise that you are more than your course, you are part of the bigger picture and you can see how things link together to function. If you just focus on what you are doing you lose that sense of working together to do something collaboratively."

Reece Horsley student recruiter participant at the University of Lincoln

"When you come to university what you get is the curriculum. What students expect is to be prepared for working life and to work with professionals. These engagement activities are what students want from a university."

Sam Biggs, business and management student at the University of Lincoln

"At Lincoln you are not just a number. The university is not resting on what they are good at but are always forward thinking and engaging students to ascertain what we want, rather than what the university thinks we want."

Olly Bakewell, student and participant in the Insight scheme at the University of Lincoln

Embedding practice by normalising innovation

Student engagement work is now integrated into all institutional initiatives and an indication of the success of work on student engagement at the University of Lincoln is the feedback received during consultation on the university's new strategic plan. The message from both students and staff was clear – the work on student engagement was cited as something no-one wanted to lose.

Presenting student engagement as an opportunity for people to develop their own ideas is encouraging more people to get involved, to take ownership of what student engagement means to their service, school or course and to generate yet more ideas.

The use of established change management protocols and visible leadership has helped the initiative to grow at a manageable pace. The phased implementation achieved by rolling out the initiative in one area of university

before expanding to encompass all areas has enabled the university to build momentum, test engagement initiatives, adapt the principles, refine and share successes and to build a collaborative and engaged community.

Recognition and reward

Students participating in student engagement activities can receive recognition for their work through the **Lincoln Award** run by the university Careers and Employability Service. The Lincoln Award is an achievement framework that can be tailored for each subject and is designed to support, enhance and recognise extra-curricular activity. Students are guided through the award by recommendations from their College's Careers Advisor to ensure they make the most of the opportunities available and reach their full potential.

Looking to the future

The University of Lincoln continues to develop practice in student engagement and has already committed to working with other UK universities as well as with several overseas universities.

In addition, a new deputy vice chancellor is being recruited with responsibility for student engagement with the aim of engaging students before they arrive on campus.

"In terms of moving student engagement forward we have very much decided that we want senior leadership around the whole lifecycle of the student – from before they join us through to alumni. Student engagement has to be part of that"

Professor Mary Stuart, vice chancellor, University of Lincoln

The Educational Development and Enhancement Unit has recently completed a research project funded by the HEA: *Pedagogies of Partnership: What Works?* Three students were employed as part of the research team and in sharing their findings via the HEA blog and in webinar.

Find out more

- » The website of the university's **Educational Development and Enhancement Unit**
- » HEA case study on **Student as producer: University of Lincoln** (December 2013)
- » From the HEA Blog **Partnership in learning and teaching: what works?** and a recording of the **HEA Research Webinar One: What works in partnership learning and teaching?** given by Dr Karin Crawford, Andy Hagyard and Reece Horsley from the Educational Development and Enhancement Unit at the University of Lincoln on 7th October 2015.
- » The Student Engagement Partnership's case study on **Student Recruiters**
- » You can also find out more about Jisc's work through the **change agent network**.

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