

Enhancing employability and engagement with the University through the Student Experience Leaders (SEL) scheme

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Presentation abstract

The University of Bedfordshire launched a new Education and Student Experience Strategy (2022-2026) (University of Bedfordshire, 2022) that includes expanding students as partners opportunities as a key priority. The Student Experience Leaders (SEL) scheme was launched in 2022 and is managed by the Learning Development Team at the University of Bedfordshire in partnership with the Students' Union. SEL provides opportunities for students to work with course teams and professional service staff to deliver curricular and co-/extra-curricular projects (aligned to key strategic priorities). SELs also act as representatives for Course Reps within faculties to champion the student voice.

We believe that the formal representation partnership co-led by the Students' Union and Learning Development Team differentiates our scheme from more traditional Peer Assisted Learning schemes. Our approach, therefore, contributes to the wider learning development field in terms of redefining how learning development teams could co-lead students as partners initiatives within their institution.

Approximately 30 students have been recruited to the SEL scheme, which consists of nine projects from four faculties and two directorates. The SELs received training on various identified key transferable skills from the Learning Development Team and Students' Union to support them in their roles. The Learning Development Team have also established and facilitated a community of practice for SELs. The first round of the scheme will conclude in June 2023 and will be evaluated through a narrative-focused and empirical evaluation using a mixed-methods approach. Pre- and post-questionnaires that focus on the transferable skills of SELs and focus group interviews will provide data for evaluation. This session considered the role of a Learning Development Team in leading a student as partners institutional scheme. We discussed how the SEL scheme will inform the future delivery of learning development at the University. We also considered how to best support students as partners in their role and how a learning development team can be effectively promoted through such activity.

Keywords: students as partners; student voice; transferable skills.

Community response

The community response to this presentation praised both the way in which the presentation was structured and communicated, and the honesty in which the evaluation of the work was carried out and shared. One respondent noted the presentation was:

A helpful insight into both the strengths and lessons learned from implementation of the SEL scheme. I was particularly struck by both the detailed 'theory of change' rationale/overview of the project, and the 'cautionary tales and lessons learned: issues and pitfalls'. The former provided a helpful summary of the project overall (its aims, constituent processes and desired outcomes) whilst the latter was refreshingly candid, especially the points about the effects of siloing and the decisive role that proactive project leads and faculties play in ensuring the success of such schemes.

It is worth noting that at the time of the presentation, much of the evaluation work was ongoing, but the student focus group highlighted that being a SEL led to a greater sense of

belonging at the University. This research area is one which will be of interest to many colleagues, especially where the work drew on the concept of 'student as partner' and 'co-creator'. Those working on transferable skills will be curious to learn more about why students initially felt their information and communication technologies (ICT) and research skills were weakest, and colleagues working in third space roles (as per Celia Whitchurch, 2013) might like to consider how a Learning Development Team leading this project worked to bring down silos among staff as well as students.

Editorial comment

One aspect which emerged from the authors' analysis of this work is the extent to which such initiatives need to be work-loaded and funded – breaking down silos is important, but it also comes with difficulties in maintaining communication across teams. I was interested to see that the students were paid for their time, which I think is an important part of respecting student contribution, but also that the authors suggest a move from a bursary style to an hourly paid approach would be more successful. It was noted that students wanted more support, and finding the balance with peer-led initiatives can be difficult to measure on this front, regarding the extent to which activity is directed by staff, students or participants. The evaluation of the challenges associated with the work were, as the community response indicated, both honest and insightful.

Next steps and additional questions

I hope the authors will continue to share their findings as evaluation progresses. It might be of note to follow up with SELs who have gained employment to evaluate how their experience supported them in this process. Tangible results or success stories from students in this area might be of great use in recruiting the next generation of SELs.

Authors' reflection

Presenting our project and evaluation findings has been a rewarding experience. As indicated in the community response, the findings of this project can be of interest to

colleagues who work towards expanding students as partners opportunities. Now we have completed our final evaluation, we have a clearer idea of the impact of the SEL scheme and the improvements for the future. Overall, the staff and students highlighted improved representation across the University and improved graduate competencies. Following this feedback, greater emphasis was placed on creating a meaningful output through the training process, and we have created a personal development portfolio culminating in a structured write-up of the students' roles, responsibilities and enhanced skillset from their employment. The evaluation team recommends tracking students in their graduate destinations and further evaluating how their experience supported them in the employment process. The improved enhancement of the operational aspects of the scheme in the future may make for a stronger case for this to contribute to student voice, anticipating the resultant reduction in withdrawal from the SEL scheme. Finally, if active participation in evaluations is included as a requirement in the SEL contracts in the future, the number of responses to some of the evaluation tools should increase.

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The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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