

Partnership support for departments with low student satisfaction

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Abstract

UCL ChangeMakers' support for departments with poor student satisfaction ties student partnership work for educational enhancement into institutional quality assurance mechanisms. This support began in 2015, with students collaborating with the 20 departments at UCL with the lowest overall student satisfaction scores in the National Student Survey (NSS)¹ to enhance their assessment and feedback practices. This paper looks at the impact of the work and student perspectives of it. It describes how the intervention resulted in an increase of 5.2% in the NSS scores for assessment and feedback in those departments, compared to 3% for UCL as a whole. Students who participated had a positive experience, despite working in an environment where departments were required to participate.

Sector Background

In the past decade, a number of schemes have arisen within UK Higher Education Institutions to enable students to initiate and carry out projects to bring about educational enhancements. These include 'Students as Change Agents' at Exeter University, 'Student Academic Partners' at Birmingham City, 'Student Fellows' at Winchester University, and 'UCL ChangeMakers' at University College London (Dunne, Zandstra, Brown & Nurser, 2011; Nygaard, Brand, Bartholomew, & Millard, 2013; Sims et al, 2016; Marie and McGowan, 2017). The schemes vary to some extent in how they are run, but all offer the opportunity for students to work with staff to make educational change rapidly at a local level. At UCL we have found that the number of projects proposed on assessment and feedback has been quite low – possibly because it is seen as an area less open to student influence, although there are a few examples of individual partnerships in this area in the literature, such as Deeley & Bovill (2015).

Lincoln University and UCL also provide opportunities for students to work with staff to review teaching practices (Crawford, 2012). At UCL this includes reviewing assignment briefs and so affecting the quality of assessment practices in this way. There have also been cross-institutional student-staff partnership schemes to enhance assessment practices. These include the [FASTECH project](#), run by the universities of Bath and Winchester, who employed students to use technology to enhance assessment; and the University of Greenwich, who trains students to conduct [TESTA](#) (Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment) audits. The latter is still offered on a consultancy basis. The project described in this case study is therefore unusual in targeting specific departments on the basis of NSS scores and in focusing on partnership projects in the area of assessment and feedback.

Description of project

In 2015/16 UCL replaced its process of Annual Monitoring with Annual Student Experience Reviews (ASER). These brought together a variety of data (e.g. NSS results, Destination of Leavers of Higher Education and widening participation data) and departments were tasked with reviewing their educational practices and creating an enhancement plan.

The 10 departments with the lowest overall student satisfaction scores in the NSS entered into a process called 'ASER Intensive' whereby they met a senior member of the university on a regular basis to review progress towards their plan.

In 2015/16, the 20 departments with the lowest overall student satisfaction scores were required to conduct a UCL ChangeMakers project in that academic year, in partnership with students, to enhance their assessment and feedback practices. The initial plan was that students would help form the ASER action plan and then help to implement the part around assessment and feedback, in a consultancy role. This did not occur because recruitment of the students was delayed until after the action plans were due.

During this phase, we provided the students with training on assessment, feedback and research ethics. This was intended not only to provide them with more pedagogic expertise in these areas but to provide examples of best practice that they could draw on. Following this, the students met staff from their department to negotiate an assessment and feedback project for them to work on, with the Director of UCL ChangeMakers acting as a facilitator. A small amount of project funding (£100, increased to £300 in 2016/17) was made available alongside student stipends, which was mainly used to incentivise attendance at focus groups.

In 2016/17 the 8 departments with the lowest NSS scores that year entered into ASER Intensive and a further department opted into the process. It should be noted that 7 of these had also undertaken a UCL ChangeMakers assessment and feedback project the previous year. In 2016/17, we divided the work between an 'ASER facilitator' who worked to ensure there was student input into the action plan and the project students, who worked on the Assessment and Feedback project. We repositioned the support from being compulsory in 2015/16 to optional the following year, resulting in 5 departments working with ASER facilitators and 7 undertaking an assessment and feedback project.

Work carried out included creating feedback proformas, student commentaries on feedback, markers' commentaries on assessments, best practice guides for rubrics, and focus groups into issues such as exam feedback and assessment variability.

This work was informed by the working hypothesis that departments with low student satisfaction probably had weaker relationships with their students and so this intervention was likely to improve satisfaction through both the process and the outcomes. If the hypothesis was accurate, it also enabled us to bring partnership working to areas of the university that were less likely to take part in this way of working.

Enabling Partnership

The scheme was devised in consultation with both the UCL ChangeMakers steering group, which has student participation, and the student union. The student union initially had concerns about the students inputting into the ASER action plan, as this was something that they felt the Student Academic Representatives should be doing. For the first year, it was agreed that to mitigate this the students for that year would be recruited from the representatives in the participating departments in the first instance. This was not very successful, so in 2016/17 the student union and UCL ChangeMakers agreed that the role should be separated into two, with a UCL ChangeMakers ASER facilitator recruited from a different department to facilitate discussions between the representatives and department to form the ASER action plan. An assessment and feedback project was then supported in the departments, with the students recruited by the department. The training for these roles was conducted jointly between the Student Union and UCL ChangeMakers.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts

Of the 20 projects that began in 2015, 13 have produced known outputs and it is likely that outputs were produced in a further two departments, giving a 65-75% completion rate. Additional funding was given to one department to conduct follow-up work the next year. The students have either reported that their work will be taken up or have given grounds for optimism about this in seven of the departments and staff have confirmed they will use it in another.

Table 1. shows the average change in NSS scores between 2015 and 2016 in departments with different types of intervention. The difference in the change in NSS scores for assessment and feedback between departments that participated in the scheme and those that did not is statistically significant. The table suggests that these departments saw benefits to their NSS scores in other areas and that the addition of the ASER Intensive process provided noticeable additional benefit. Some of this additional benefit is likely to have come from the extra support the departments received and some may have come from departments taking their projects more seriously when exposed to this additional scrutiny. The movement was not universally positive, with four of the departments seeing their scores for Assessment and Feedback decrease, two of which were in ASER Intensive and seven having a decrease in their overall satisfaction, three of which were in ASER Intensive. The reason for their scores decreasing is unclear.

Intervention	Number of departments	Change in NSS score (2015-2016)						
		Overall satisfaction	Assessment & Feedback	Teaching	Academic Support	Organisation & Management	Learning Resources	Professional Development
1. No project under this scheme	24	-1.4%	+0.9%	-1.1%	-2.0%	-4.3%	+0.63	-0.2%
2. All departments with a project under this scheme but not ASER Intensive	11	+2.2%	+3.3%	+2.5%	+2.0%	+5.7%	+1.9%	+0.8%
3. All departments that were ASER Intensive & project under this scheme	9	+8.3%	+7.6%	+4.8%	+6.1%	+7.0%	+0.1%	+5.6%
4. All departments with a project under this scheme	20	+5.0%	+5.2%	+3.5%	+3.9%	+6.3%	+1.1%	+3.0%
5. All UCL departments	44	+1.5%	+2.9%	+1.1%	+0.7%	+0.5%	+0.8%	+1.2%

Table 1: Changes in NSS scores at UCL by type of intervention, 2015-2016.

The changes in NSS scores between 2016 and 2017 have not been analysed. UCL was hit by the National Union of Students boycott of the 2017 NSS, which resulted in many of the departmental results being highly unreliable. The change in NSS questions also made any comparison between the years invalid.

The results between 2015 and 2016 are interesting, as the outputs from the projects were not implemented until after the NSS was completed by students. Any impact from the partnership work was thus from the process of the projects occurring.

Feedback from project students suggests that the scheme gave them more confidence in their department:

“From this experience, I become [sic] more confident with my department as it actually values students’ opinion and trying to improve as much as they can.”

Students said that the work helped to develop a sense of community and belonging to their department: “I genuinely feel more involved with the department and my academic studies.”

The students fed back that they found the scheme supportive. They spoke of their work empowering them, increasing their engagement and being enriching: “This project built a strong sense of commitment and engagement.”

They wrote of it developing their writing skills and of giving them experience of running focus groups. They also gained insight into the university and wider sector:

“What was really interesting for me was the fact that I was able to witness and directly participate in the internal workings of an university, in spite of being a student.”

They found it very pleasurable to contribute towards the enhancement of other students’ experience.

“I am happy to know that my project will be useful for future first year students and that the work I have put onto it will help other fellow students in the future.”

The major difficulty mentioned by students was the lack of time for them to complete the work.

Feedback from the departments has been more informal and generally positive.

“...they [the reports] are both really useful and the departmental version will be used as part of the TESTA Audit that we are undertaking so will be very useful for identifying areas for future improvements.”

However, one department noted that many staff in the department had just gone along with the process rather than embracing it because of its compulsory nature.

Reflections on the project by the authors

Jenny's perspective

The scheme was highly successful at empowering and engaging the students that took part in it. Initial concerns that the students may have had a difficult experience because the departments were forced to participate, do not seem to have been justified.

The scheme appears to have been successful in terms of the outcomes that the students produced, despite a number of difficulties. It also brought partnership working to departments that we believe would have been less likely to engage in this type of working without such a scheme. The increase in NSS scores for assessment and feedback and overall satisfaction, suggest that these projects have the power to increase student satisfaction through the process of them occurring in departments. In terms of the amount spent on the scheme (less than £4000 plus staff time), I believe it provides good value for money.

The two major difficulties the projects encountered were a lack of time and a lack of funding for the project work. The first arose because we centrally recruited the students, first via the student representatives' scheme and then opening it up to all taught students in the relevant departments. We then had to schedule training for all the students before scheduling meetings with all the departments. To overcome this, in 2016/17 we enabled the departments to recruit their own students. This improved the time available for the project work, but made collective training difficult and weakened the students' identity as a group – we plan to re-establish the collective training and peer-support sessions for 2017/18.

In 2016/17 we increased the project funding to £300 per project, which appears to have resolved the difficulty of conducting the projects with little money. We also shifted participation from being mandatory to UCL ChangeMakers guaranteeing funding. I anticipated that would help to increase departmental buy-in. It is hard for me to tell whether that was right – however, it did decrease the number of departments participating. In 2017/18 we have put more pressure on the departments to participate, without going back to fully making it compulsory again.

Fumika's perspective

I undertook a project with UCL ChangeMakers to investigate ways in which my department could improve the types and quality of assessment and feedback it provides. Through conducting focus groups to hear students' opinions and incorporating my views from the experience I've had in the department, I was able to compile what the students expect and desire from the department. I was then able to inform the Head of Undergraduate, and the Examination Officer, who were eager to listen and to attempt to change how assessment is given, and how to give effective feedback. For example, a mark scheme was finally successfully incorporated in the feedback process, allowing students to see which aspects of the rubric they need to improve on.

The ChangeMakers team was supportive. They not only provided us with useful training, but also supported me throughout the whole of the project, giving me helpful advice when I was struggling. My experience as a whole was fulfilling as I felt like my

voice was heard and that I was able to contribute to improving student satisfaction. I now know who to approach when I get new ideas on how to improve feedback. I hope that I will be able to continue working and follow up with my department to ensure that necessary changes are being made. To any students thinking of undertaking a project such as that supported by UCL ChangeMakers, I highly encourage you to do so as it is a great way of getting to know the staff and students in the department and thereby creates a sense of community and empowers you with the knowledge that it is possible to change some aspects in your own department, even though it may seem daunting at first.

Follow up and future plans

In 2017-18, alongside the departments in ASER Intensive for their undergraduate provision, are 5 departments who have been placed in ASER Intensive for their postgraduate taught provision. This will enable us to have an impact on postgraduate taught provision through this scheme for the first time.

The time available for the gaining student input into the ASER action plan remains a lasting difficulty for the scheme. We have contemplated shifting this work to the end of the spring term – so that it is in place for the following year - or alternatively decoupling it from the ASER development plan reporting process, so that its main function is informing the department and helping them to decide on an enhancement project. The former has the disadvantage of delaying the benefit for a year, but keeps the link to the Quality Assurance process. The latter risks repeating work to gain student input but helps to bring together the two parts of the scheme, which risk seeming disjointed. No final decision has yet been made and we will seek departmental input on this.

The projects themselves are likely to be broadened out from their focus on assessment and feedback in future years, because so many of the departments have been involved in the process for 2 or 3 years now and they have other areas that they wish to focus on as well.

Our evaluation efforts will focus on lasting impact – what difference have the projects made to practice in the long term – and what burden have they placed on the department, who may have undertaken 2-3 projects in as many years.

Related publications and resources

Crawford, K. (2012). Rethinking the student/teacher nexus: students as consultants on teaching in higher education. *2012) Towards teaching in public reshaping the modern university*, 52-67.

Dunne, E., Zandstra, R., Brown, T., & Nurser, T. (2011). Students as change agents. New ways of engaging with learning and teaching in Higher Education. ESCalate, HEA Subject Centre for Education, University of Bristol.

Marie, J., & McGowan, S. (2017). Moving Towards Sustainable Outcomes in Student Partnerships: Partnership Values in the Pilot Year. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(2).

Nygaard, C., Brand, S., Bartholomew, P., & Millard, L. (2013). *Student Engagement. Identity, Motivation and Community*. The learning in Higher Education Series. Faringdon, Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing.

Sims, S., King, S., Lowe, T., & El-Hakim, Y. (2016). Evaluating partnership and impact in the first year of the winchester student fellows scheme. *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 2(1) doi:10.21100/jeipc.v2i1.257

For more information about UCL ChangeMakers and the support for ASER Intensive departments: www.ucl.ac.uk/changemakers

For more information about the Annual Student Experience Review (ASER): <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/srs/academic-manual/c6/aser/aser/purpose>

For more information about TESTA: www.testa.ac.uk

For more information about the FASTECH project: <http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/51251270/FASTECH%20Project>

¹ The National Student Survey (NSS) is completed by final year undergraduates at all publicly funded Higher Education Institutions in the United Kingdom about their experience of their course. Results are publicly available; they influence league tables and are intended to help prospective students to choose between universities.