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‘The lecturer should know what they are talking about’: Student Union Officers perceptions of teaching-related CPD and implications for practice

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Abstract

Continuing professional development (CPD) for HE academic staff, through accredited courses for new lecturers, teaching innovation grants, peer review, mentoring and conference attendance, is firmly established practice, engagement with these activities may be essential to career progression. The input of students to CPD, student awareness of, or active engagement with these activities is limited despite the growing emphasis on agendas such as ‘student engagement’ and ‘students as partners’. In this paper we examine their perceptions of teaching-oriented CPD and the potential contributions of students through interview data collected from eight elected Student Union (SU) officers. This informs a discussion of the mechanisms by which SU officers’ can influence teaching-related developments in HE and provide recommendations to enhance future working relationships between SU and providers of CPD.

Keywords: student engagement, teaching enhancement, student representation, student voice, students as partners

Introduction

Student engagement is widely perceived to be a goal those working within and supporting higher education (HE) should be striving for. However, it is a term that is recognised as poorly conceptualised, with its meaning and application varying according to context (Kahu, 2013). Kuh et al. (2007: 43) define student engagement as “participation in educationally effective practice” both inside and outside the classroom. Kuh (2009) demonstrated that where students are more engaged in their studies, they are more engaged in their institution, with positive benefits for retention, performance and success. This has led to

movements to promote student engagement across all aspects of HE which, whilst initially focused on engagement in their learning (Coates, 2009), has extended to include students taking an active role in curricula, quality assurance and institutional governance, albeit with varying levels of success (Lizzo & Wilson, 2009; Trowler, 2010). Implicit in this move are the constructivist underpinnings of student engagement whereby an individual's learning is influenced by how they participate in educationally purposeful activities (Coates, 2005) and that institutions and staff will provide meaningful and supportive opportunities for students to become engaged within their institutions.

Moves to promote student engagement have resulted from the changing fee regimes and status of students within HE (Guan et al., 2015). The neo-liberalisation of HE has repositioned students as consumers, with increased emphasis on the quality of the student experience and the need to provide fora to hear, and respond to, the student voice (Leathwood & Read, 2009). This has manifested itself in a number of ways; increasingly feedback on the student experience is solicited from students during their studies through academic module evaluations and wider student experience surveys (Moore & Kuol, 2005). Though commonplace, these surveys provide little opportunity for students to become agents of change and visibly influence practice in their School or Institution. Usually changes benefit future students rather than those currently studying (Kember et al., 2002). Students are more proactively engaged in their institutions through systems of representation within their programmes and their student unions (Brookes et al., 20015), and through partnership activities such as curriculum design and research (Healey et al., 2014). One area where student engagement remains under-developed is in teaching-related CPD. For some this may represent a surprising oversight given the attention paid to the professionalization of teaching and learning by the Educational Development community, and the integral role this is perceived as making to the student experience (Parsons et al., 2012). For others this may reflect the complexity of promoting an ethos of partnership in contemporary HE where both staff and students face increasing demands on their time (Bovill et al., 2011).

In this paper we examine the potential for promoting student engagement in academic staff development, considering specifically the agency of student unions (SU) or guilds. Drawing on data collected through interviews with elected SU officers from eight HE

providers we consider their perceptions of teaching-related CPD and the role this plays in student learning. Mechanisms through which elected officer's influence teaching and learning in their institutions are also considered. We conclude by providing recommendations to foster a culture of greater partnership working in this area. These recommendations are informed by the substantial literature on student engagement in HE and recent innovations in the 'students as partners' arena.

Student Unions and representation of student issues

SUs have a long history within the UK, with the first established in 1864 in St Andrew's University Scotland (Brookes et al., 2015). There are currently over 600 SUs affiliated to the National Union of Students (NUS). Constituent SUs are usually run by a combination of sabbatical officers elected annually from the student body and permanent staff who play an increasingly important role in ensuring continuity and a strategic vision for SUs (Brookes et al., 2015). SUs provide a range of functions, including activism, organisation of social / sporting activities, providing support on academic and welfare issues, campaigning and representation (Brookes et al., 2015). The significance of these different roles has changed overtime (Guan et al., 2015). Until recently the activism and campaigning roles were perceived to have reduced, with a greater emphasis placed on representing student issues (Brookes et al., 2015). There has been recognition of the cooperative relationships that have developed between SUs and universities senior managers (Brookes et al., 2015). Institutions increasingly recognise the need to engage with students around issues of quality assurance and as a result SUs are consulted to ensure institutions are representing students fairly (Brookes et al., 2015). Issues around representation centre on concerns regarding a high quality educational experience and providing mechanisms through which students can influence their education (Guan et al., 2015).

The SU officer post is temporary; though they have the legacy of past SU officers on which to draw and support of permanent SU staff, this is a demanding role which involves cross-institutional working (Brookes et al., 2015). As elected sabbatical officers they receive training from the NUS in support of their role (NUS, 2010). Their role includes the recognised functions of an SU officer; however, in taking on this role there is a change in

their status from undergraduates to advocates for their students, involving them representing the student voice through interactions with academics, professional support staff and senior managers across the whole institutions (NUS, 2010).

The NUS shapes the practice of its constituents; in addition to providing training and support, it identifies and leads agendas to promote good practice around issues relevant to its constituents (NUS, 2010). It often works in partnership with other organisations who also support HE (e.g. the Quality Assurance Agency, Higher Education Funding Council for England), who came together to form The Student Exchange Partnership. In 2011 the NUS and the HEA led a campaign to promote **Student-led Teaching Awards (SLTA)** which allow students to identify and celebrate what they perceived as good teaching (Swain, 2013). This was a campaign many constituents adopted to recognise and reward good teaching, across a suite of locally determined categories (e.g. best personal tutor, best feedback) (Swain, 2013). Given the remit of the SU officer, and prevalence of SLTAs, it was assumed they would have a conception of what constituted good teaching and how this was supported by their institution, for example, through academic staff development, an assertion supported by the work of Guan et al. (2015).

This study was undertaken as part of a wider project funded through [PROJECT REFERENCE REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW]. As part of the project [DETAILS REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW] spanning research-intensive, teaching-focused and college-based institutions from across the UK were involved in creating and trialling a resource of adaptable templates and case studies to **promote the effective evaluation of teaching-related CPD**. Research with SUs is limited (Guan et al., 2015), and there is limited evidence of students contributing directly to educational development practice. Therefore these data represent initial insights which may inform future developments.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at all the pilot institutions that had an elected SU officer (N=8). The sample included officers working in research-intensive and

teaching-focused universities as well as college-based HE. Elected officers were asked to consider: their own views of what constituted good teaching, and on what basis this was developed; the support they and their institution provided on matters related to teaching and learning (e.g. problems students experienced, celebration of good teaching, staff development for lecturers around teaching); the mechanisms through which students could provide feedback on teaching and learning (e.g. their awareness of modules evaluations, the use of such data and the impact it had); their views, on teaching-related CPD generally and the students' role within it. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was then undertaken in Nvivo.

Findings

Representing students on issues relating to teaching and learning

In line with national guidance (e.g. Porter, 2008; NUS, 2010) SU officers were in roles which involved them providing representation for their students on issues (e.g. student complaints / concerns over areas such as feedback / teaching quality) related to teaching and learning, indeed for many this was the main focus on their work. All respondents discussed engaging in activities such as supporting and training course representatives, organising and supporting student consultation forums, attending and presenting issues at meetings with course teams / senior managers, responding to course evaluations and organising SLTA. Often they attended meetings with students to create the impression that it is a safe environment in which to share their concerns / provide feedback:

We invite students to come along, we are all sat in a room and they are given the opportunity to ask questions [...] things get dealt with 'cos the Dean is there and they don't have to go through a million levels to get sorted with and it's an instant reaction and again it's that conversation format that helps.
(SU05)

These activities could broadly be classified as creating and supporting systems through which students were given a 'voice' to consider issues relating to teaching and learning. They used mechanisms advocated by the NUS (e.g. course representatives) which serve a quality assurance function, and mechanisms employed by the institution to capture and evaluate the student experience (QAA, 2015). To facilitate these meetings SU officers spent considerable

time building relationships with senior managers and used informal opportunities such as these to raise student concerns:

I do meet with a lot of senior managers and academics more informally, so I'll go for a coffee with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for learning and teaching, or one of the Associate Deans for Faculty, and, you know, and we'll often talk about, you know, issues in teaching in a certain area. (SUO2)

Through these activities SU officers perform an important brokering role, often bringing issues to the attention of senior managers or supporting students to voice concerns. Informal ways of providing feedback, particularly around issues of concern or worry to students, represented a common approach used by SU officers. Indeed informal mechanisms of soliciting feedback have previously been recognised as an effective way to ensure student concerns are heard and they are cared about (Stockham & Amann, 1994). These ran alongside institutional mechanisms of providing feedback but were perceived as effective in enacting immediate change to address concerns:

Informal level, that's certainly a first step that we'd encourage any student to take, and quite often, you know that's what it takes to improve something. (SUO1)

The success of formal and informal mechanisms of providing feedback varied considerably. In small institutions there was a sense that students did not want to have a voice due to concerns about identification or hurting feelings. Larger institutions appeared to be less responsive:

Whenever you ask them to voice concerns maybe formally, I say 'well could we take that to the student consultancy forum' I get an 'oh no I don't want to kick up a fuss' sort of reaction. (SUO7)

Well looking at this year's concentration of problems specifically, [I] find it's the fact that students feel they have no control whatsoever, they feel very much at an arm's length, as if nothing they say gets anywhere. (SUO3)

The first concern was not unanticipated. Studies of academics' responses to student feedback show lecturers' confidence can be boosted or dented based on feedback (Arthur, 2009); therefore students are perhaps mindful of the potential impacts of negative feedback, especially when it is delivered directly rather than through anonymous mechanism such as module evaluations. Likewise the nature of the feedback, and its perceived relevance, determines the response made by the academic concerned (Arthur, 2009; Moore & Kuol,

2005). However, the second response is a commonly cited frustration by student groups, whereby they question the impact of their feedback, and are concerned by the extent to which their views are not truly heard or responded to in a timely manner (Porter, 2008).

Across these data SU officers' discussions of engagement with issues relating to teaching and learning were centred on representation, as it framed within their role as advocates for students or as shaped by national policy (e.g. NUS, 2010). The impact of national policy was indicated by the extent to which SU officers dedicated time to SLTAs, which has grown in significance following a steer from the NUS (Swain, 2013). These were present in all of the respondents' institutions', though the scale of these schemes varied from small-scale tokens given to academics in recognition of a nomination by student groups to formal awards ceremonies. These were discussed enthusiastically; signifying a chance for students recognise good teaching and reward staff, for example:

It's very student led, and it's all picked and finalised by the students, and on the night the students give them out themselves [...] it is one thing the University really admire because it is picked by students.
(SUO6)

Interestingly they were not discussed in terms of changing practice or altering attitudes towards teaching and learning - a concern noted by only one SU officer:

I don't necessarily think it makes people stand up and think, "I'm going to start becoming a good teacher because I might get recognised for it". I think it does something else. I think it rewards the people who are already very good teachers. But I don't think it necessarily improves teaching as such, at least, if it does, in very few circumstances. (SUO1)

This quotation is one of the few references made to engagement with a discourse of teaching and learning, either in their institution or more widely. Even in institutions which could be categorised as teaching-focused such discussions were limited, indeed its absence was notable during the analysis of these data. This could have significant implications for institutions seeking to promote meaningful student engagement in curriculum development and evaluation for enhancement.

'Lecturers are trained?!'

Recent surveys highlight concerns amongst the student body regarding the training lecturers receive to enable them to be effective teachers and supporters of student learning. A Higher Education Academy / Higher Education Policy Institute survey of 15,000 full-time students reported that ‘professional experience’ and ‘training in teaching’ are staff characteristics of primary importance for 44% and 39% of respondents respectively, whereas, only 17% of respondents cited the significance of staff research activities (Buckley, Soilemetzidis & Hillman, 2015; Shaw, 2015). A survey by The Student Room (2015) indicated that students expected lecturers to have a teaching qualification, though here they rated subject knowledge of primary importance. This position was echoed by the respondents in this study, who recognised value of academic staff CPD but showed limited awareness of the content or impacts of this provision. Instead they discussed their value in an abstract way, relating it to vague notions of what they perceived as good teaching:

Well, I think it’s important in relation to engagement, because there’s a phrase they have like everyone can be a teacher but not everyone can teach. (SUO4)

I think it is very important erm [...] I mean some people are just naturally amazing teachers but you can hold all the knowledge in the world and be a really bad teacher. (SUO5)

So if [it’s] teaching qualifications that you’re talking about to help with that process of increasing the inclusivity and about the vibe in the teaching room, then I’d say super important, especially from a student’ perspective. (SUO2)

Interestingly, respondents were confident that undergraduates would not necessarily be aware of, or consider, *what* constitutes good teaching and learning:

I don’t know if they do I think, they just kind of expect that the lecturer knows what they are talking about; that is why they don’t challenge the lecturers like why are you just reading off a PowerPoint so I don’t think they kind of think about that area they need to be trained to be a teacher. (SUO5)

They don’t know much about the teaching aspect, so when they come to university what do they say teaching is? It’s lecturer giving a presentation or different kind of activities what is happening in the classroom. They believe that is teaching. (SUO4)

These data could be indicative of two issues. Firstly, the relatively hidden nature of staff development, which largely takes place away from the student body, led by central teams that may have only limited direct contact with students. Systematic collection for national reporting of HE teachers qualifications has only taken place since 2012 and has yet to have a real impact in informing students’ choice at the application stage (HEFCE, 2011). Nor does

this discourse reflect the progress made nationally and internationally around the professionalisation of university teaching and learning, student engagement and innovative practice (Parsons et al., 2012). These data suggest students' pay little explicit attention to teaching-related CPD, although evidence is emerging to show this is changing (e.g. the results of the HEA/HEPI survey). Teachers in compulsory education are required to obtain a teaching qualification before they can teach independently; whether or not the same conditions apply in HE does not appear to be considered by these respondents. Indeed there seems to be the assumption from these data that students assume that lecturers are 'qualified' to teach.

Secondly, as evident in these data, discussions surround 'good teaching' were centred primarily on what happened in the classroom, or related to student experiences of assessment. Whilst these are the focal points of much teaching and learning it is widely acknowledged that the majority of student learning takes place outside formal teaching environments (Gibbs, 2010; Kuh, 2009). Teaching and learning in contemporary HE is a hugely complex enterprise; we have to question whether universities are communicating this complexity effectively to students, as it is only by undergraduates developing a holistic understanding of teaching and learning that they will be able to proactively participate, in an informed fashion, in lecturer-CPD and shape future practice. This was a reflection made by SUO5; who recognised the need to raise the profile of lecturer-CPD:

Maybe [it] should be more obvious to the students about training and things like that so they are kind of more aware of what they are getting and where they might influence that kind of decision. (SUO5)

Successes documented in the work of Campbell et al (2009) and Peat (2011) demonstrate this is possible, however, they highlight the need to support students to have the confidence and skills to feedback on teaching.

Creating potential for student engagement in teaching-related CPD

In the institutions respondents were drawn from, student engagement in teaching-related CPD was minimal, and where it did take place, it was ad hoc and localised:

We did a great activity where we asked students and staff to design their own course [...] we found that staff often kind of took over from the students and said this is how it should look, but it was obviously about empowering students and how would they want it to go and it was funny when students were saying no actually it might work if we had a few more seminars [...] I think it got staff thinking about it from a different perspective so that was really good. (SUO5)

This echoes this position in the Educational Development community more widely, where examples of student engagement in teaching-related CPD are limited in scope and scale (e.g. Campbell et al., 2009; Hargavel, 2015; Peat, 2011). Instead discussions centre on the challenges around promoting student engagement in CPD, and there was hesitation observed from the respondents around the idea of developing meaningful practice in this area:

[...] having a student be involved I think, again, not at the moment, and I feel it's challenging, I don't know the answer to how it's going to happen unless we just send out an email to all students that there's a CPD there which encourages lecturers development and is all about teaching, but I'm not sure that would be a real engagement. (SUO4)

[...] maybe the students would know exactly the sort of the extra things needed to learn, but it's not something we've done here, so I don't feel I could, my personal opinion, my personal thought would be I don't think it would necessarily help, but I don't really know because we've not tried it, unfortunately. (SUO1)

SU officers interviewed do not feel that they are in the position to promote and enact long term or meaningful change around teaching and learning. This may be attributed to their status as recent graduates with experience of only learning rather than teaching in HE, but also, the need to develop a wider awareness of the complexity of teaching and learning, beyond those gained from their time as undergraduates. The current remit of their role, where their focus on representing student issues rather than supporting teaching enhancement, does not currently provide them with the forum through which to develop their expertise in this area. This is a gap in current practice which potentially undermines the development of 'learning communities' where students actively engage at all university levels. The notion of a learning community underpins much of the rhetoric around the student engagement (Coates, 2005; Kuh, 2009). However, unless students, through their SU officers, are given the knowledge and expertise to participate in meaningful dialogue around teaching and learning, informed by the evidence and good practice underpinning teaching-related CPD, we may question the extent to which true learning communities can be fostered.

Changes in working practices of SU officers and the preparation they receive to engage with issues relating to teaching and learning needs to be considered. They represent students, and receive training from the NUS to support them in doing this, but there was limited evidence of sustainable links with staff development / education development units. Indeed based on the accounts reported here, SU officers may benefit from joining postgraduate teaching qualifications for new lecturers to introduce the practices and theory underpinning teaching, learning, assessment and student support within their institution which shape the student experience. This would provide SU officers with the knowledge base and confidence to respond to concerns surrounding teaching and learning drawing on their awareness of student and academic perspectives.

The practice of the Educational Development and SU communities could also be informed by the Students as Partners agenda which has successfully brought students and academics together in ‘pursuit of shared enterprise’ (Flint & O’Hara, 2013: 8). Indeed the potential for student engagement in teaching enhancement was highlighted by work of ‘The Student Engagement Partnership’. There are growing numbers of evidence-based examples of partnership working within the literature (e.g. Brooman et al., 2015; Cook-Salter et al., 2014), and a number of institutions are integrating students holistically into their strategic direction (e.g. University of Lincoln). Developing these partnerships is not a quick fix; rather it requires a change in the institutional ethos to place value on meaningful engagement of students throughout the learning community, rather than ad hoc involvement on a limited number of activities (Flint & O’Hara, 2013). Integral to this will be the development of relationships between SUs and Educational Development Units (EDUs), whereby; they serve to broker relationships between EDUs and the student body. For these partnerships to be successful institutions need to accommodate the transient nature of the student body (Shaw, 2015) and the differing motivations underpinning student and staff engagement (e.g. students seek empowerment and voice) (Guan et al., 2015). Likewise issues of power and participation also need to be reconciled (Healey et al., 2014). However, these issues are not insurmountable, and curriculum development activities resulting from partnership working have been identified as potentially offering ‘new horizons for teaching and learning’ and they ‘might see happier and more engaged students’ (NUS, 2015: 11).

There is also the potential for SU officers to take a more proactive role in teaching enhancement; they could for example engage in an active dialogue around areas of concern raised by students, or use the outcomes of SLTA for not only recognition but to shape enhancement. Given their remit for enhancing teaching and learning there are considerable gains to be made through the development of closer working relationships between EDUs and SU officers that build on the shared vision of enhancing student learning.

Conclusions

In this small scale study SU officers from a range of HE providers have presented an insight into students' awareness of teaching-related CPD of staff that teach and support learning. It highlights generally opportunities for future research work involving SU officers - a lacunae in HE policy and practice research (Guan et al., 2015), and specifically to make a greater contribution to shaping teaching enhancement practices. The SU officers involved in this research showed a commitment to enhancing the quality of the student experience. With respect to ensuring full representation of student voice SU officers should be able to promote meaningful dialogue around teaching and learning, recognising the diversity of practices that underpin students learning, challenging outdated conceptions, for example in the role of the lecture. Such moves could extend current practice in student engagement to extend it beyond engagement in individual students' own learning to influencing more explicitly institutional ways of working – a recognised mark of institutional quality (Coates, 2005).

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