Students as colleagues: creating belonging and confidence through employment on campus

Luke Millard
Neil Hollins
Ryan Sharman

This is the accepted manuscript of the book chapter:

Students as Colleagues – Creating belonging and confidence through employment on campus.

Introduction

Birmingham City University (BCU) has been at the forefront of student engagement developments in the UK since 2008. At that time, the University's partnership work with the Student's Union sought to employ students as colleagues to work with academic staff on self-generated projects that would improve the student learning experience. The Student Academic Partners (SAP) scheme was the first of its kind (Freeman et al 2014) and, since those early developments, ideas and practices have evolved at the University and across the sector.

The SAP scheme was created to improve the quality of the learning experience and to generate a greater sense of learning community (Curran and Millard 2015). However, as with many innovations, there were some unintended learning outcomes (Nygaard et al, 2013: 109). In particular, these related to the benefits of the employment experience to student development around work-related skills and behaviours, and the changing nature of their relationship with staff and therefore the university. Zlotkowski et al (2006) had recognised the place of students as colleagues through student employment and volunteering in the USA and the change this placed in the relationship dynamic between staff, students and the institution. The evidence cited in that literature was reflected in the exchanges with staff at students at BCU.

This article will discuss the outputs from research into students working on campus and align it with a case study from academic staff and students engaged with the process. This will utilise a timeline that moves from SAP and the development of an institutional student engagement philosophy into the creation of an institutional student employment programme and the development of impactful school based interventions.

Evidence base for student employment

The SAP experience at Birmingham City University caused the leadership team to rethink the value of the scheme. The question arose as to whether there was more to gain for students and the University than just a SAP project outcome (Millard and Hargreaves 2015). If the employment theme and subsequent students kills development could be harnessed institutionally, could it have a more significant impact? Sullivan (2008: 9) in the report to the UK Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on student employment schemes in the USA identified that

> *"A point repeated many times by students in interview was, mostly, they believed that working as well as studying helps make them better students. This was a surprising finding. Students explained that they managed their time better because they had to. Students believed they had a better experience and led fuller lives than students who did not work"'*.

In addition to students thinking their performance improved, Pusser (2010) explained that *"the effect of work on student retention is also puzzling, with lower retention rates for students who do not work at all than for those who work between 1 and 15 hours a week"*. This supported the work of Astin (1993), King (1999) and Levin et al (2010) as the literature suggested that working on campus, for a limited number of hours, created more successful students. This was in contrast to working off campus where Lundberg (2004) and others revealed that students were not as successful and engaged less with peers and faculty if they were employed off campus, especially if they worked more than 20 hours per week.   Through such engagement, it appeared logical to the SAP creators that working on campus was also likely to impact on a student's sense of belonging (Thomas 2012). This could also support metrics around retention, which was becoming more important at the time through league tables and governmental measures.

Simòn et al (2017) reported evidence drawn from 23 countries that *"around 60% to 70% of students work in Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries and between 20% to 30% work in Southern Europe"*. Perna (2010) saw employment and working alongside their studies as being the norm for US students and challenged those institutions that that did not recognise this change as *"failing to recognise that higher education is generally not the primary life environment of working students" (2010,i)*.

For an institution with a widening participation brief, over 39% IMD Q1, 52% BAME and 60% commuter students, that had retention as a key priority there seemed to be a logical next step, the creation of an institution-wide student employment programme. In 2012, through the auspices of the HEA's Change Academy initiative, the University created its Opportunity Student Jobs on Campus programme. In the coming years this would see up to 1000 students employed in 18 job roles. These included students as research assistants, administrators, technicians and lab support, mentors and ambassadors. The initiative became embedded through human resources processes and the benefits of students working alongside staff became apparent through development of new relationships and the creation of more student-centred services.

Evidence of impact on students

Research around this new offer was necessary to establish the nature of the impact on students. A mixed methodology approach was taken in order to combine qualitative and quantitative measures and enable a breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration *(*Johnson et al 2007). This saw a survey (153 respondents) and three focus groups totalling 16 students. The findings were both challenging and encouraging.

Students were asked how working on campus had developed skills and behaviours. 86% of students stated that they felt they had a better relationship with staff and were more likely to ask questions as a result of working on campus. 64% of students believed they now worked harder at their studies as a result of working on campus and 76% suggested they were more motivated to succeed. This data was supported in focus groups, where for example, a student revealed that she "*felt like I had built a bond with them*" and another talked of "*becoming more connected to staff*". 89% of students said they had a greater sense of belonging to the university, which was echoed by 85% being more satisfied with their university experience and 80% being more understanding of the university when it made mistakes. Focus groups revealed students who talked of a friendlier and healthier relationship with the university and of becoming more aware as to how and why the university did what it did. When students highlight that "*the university became more a personal thing, something I represented, rather than something I attended*" then it would suggest that working on campus was having a significant impact on student attitudes to their university experience and is greatly enhancing that sense of community and belonging (Thomas 2012).

For a broadly widening participation student population, where social mobility is seen as a significant challenge, the finding that 90% of students in the survey agreed that their confidence had grown as a result of working on campus was highly encouraging. The focus groups reinforced this outcome with students talking of not being intimidated when speaking to large groups and of developing the ability to voice their opinion in a professional manner. Cook-Sather et al (2014, 100) confirmed this finding as they reported that students who in engage in partnership activities exhibit "*enhanced confidence, motivation and enthusiasm*" and "*deepened understanding of, and contribution, to the academic community*". It may be that the development of confidence and the desire to work harder at their studies is influenced by the fact that 75% of students talked to their work colleagues about their studies. Students identified that the "*relationship with staff greatly improved while working*". These conversations may have been brief or in depth, but the opportunity for a mentoring relationship to develop through shared understandings is a welcome outcome for this area of work.

The next section exposes the BCU practice of 'students as colleagues' to the actuality of delivering this within an academic environment where quantitative measures of progress and student achievement are key.

Birmingham School of Media: Student and Staff Perspectives

Birmingham School of Media had developed several initiatives to build student belonging and identity embracing Cooper's (2009: 7) assertion that a '*sense of belonging is developed through a form of student engagement that is far more than mere participation and instead involves some measure of emotional commitment and investment*'. The School had engaged with SAP projects for many years and had embraced the students as colleagues approach.

In 2012 the creation of the School's *Level Up* programme would provide powerful evidence of the impact on students when they were employed to work alongside staff. The School's team of student *Level Up* mentors had worked with academic and professional staff to provide a range of pre-arrival and welcome week activities to support the social and academic integration of first year students. The ability to become a *Level Up* mentor had provided opportunities for those students employed in the role to become engaged on a more deep and meaningful level. This resonates with the ethos and purpose of *Level Up*. Rather than simply seeing themselves as recipients of an education, *Level Up* mentors were able to re-position themselves as active members of a school community. Motivated by a desire to help new undergraduates, mentors had been willing and enthusiastic participants in a support programme that they themselves benefitted from as first year students. As one student stated:

> "*Initially, working for and within the university was just a way of getting extra money. However, as I started to work more within the school, I started to develop a new relationship between myself and the staff members. Inherently, my sense of identity with the school increased and I didn't see myself as a student who was just working, rather a part of a community*".

Much has been written about the importance of nurturing academic and social integration and building a student's sense of identification with their School and wider university community. These principles are often enshrined in strategies to support effective transition in to higher education for first year undergraduates. The value of participation in *Level Up* mentoring by second- and third-year students has, however, helped to demonstrate that these principles are equally important throughout a students' course of study. Wenger (1998) asserts that an individual's sense of identity

is not fixed – rather it is something we constantly renegotiate. *Level Up* mentoring has embodied this, providing opportunities for mentors in the School of Media to reconstruct their sense of student-School identification, enabling mentors to develop new relationships with staff in a joint enterprise to help and support new undergraduates. This has enabled them, as returning students, to construct an enriched sense of identity based on a deeper level of involvement in the life and culture of the School of Media. The approach here has been emblematic of a principle espoused by Tinto (1999) in which "*effective programs reach out to make contact with students in order to achieve personal bonds among students and between students, faculty and staff members*" (Tinto 1999: 10). This social and academic integration has been key, and engagement has been enhanced by the mentors' sense of feeling part of 'something' (Bryson 2014; Thomas 2012).

When effectively embedded within the culture of a school or organisation this becomes an organic process. The idea of transiting from student to mentor and colleague becomes part of the academic calendar and occurs in different spaces at different times for different individuals. Students join the university, develop skills through being mentored, become mentors and continue the mentoring ecosystem by helping new incoming students. This process relies on students to constantly redevelop their own identity as they progress through their university life and develop the skills to enable them to participate. As one student stated, "*I think I knew from the first week of my university course that I wanted to do Level Up mentoring…because of all of the help I did receive from my mentor, I just thought that I want to be able to help people do that.*" However, this is just part of that transition to college. Rather than identifying just as a student working on campus, they begin to feel part of the staffing team. As another student stated: "*I think that all of the mentors said it last year to each other- you do feel like staff. You're not treated like a student…I think that is because to get to speak to members of staff in ways that you wouldn't…It didn't seem like a teacher/student thing, it felt more like you're a colleague and they respect the things you know as well.*"

The development of a sense of collegial identity rests on the creation of mutual respect between colleagues, whether they be students or staff. This changes the dynamic between the student mentor and the staff member, and it is this notion of respect which develops a sense of identity and belonging that makes it more than just a job on campus.

Conclusion

When students work on campus, they feel that they become part of the university. They develop relationships with staff, professional and academic, that can support their academic studies, and which motivate them further to succeed on their courses. The membership of the University leads to an enhanced sense of understanding of and belonging to the university (McMillan and Chavis, 1985). In addition, the attitudinal changes to the university are further enhanced by the impact on the individual student who becomes more confident in their abilities and sees important professional skills development in such areas a time management, prioritisation and organisational skills.

The hybrid of relationships that have been created between universities, staff and students can mean that a student switches identities from being a customer for their accommodation, a partner/researcher within the classroom and an employee in the administrative office

2277 words

Bibliography

Astin. A W (1993) What matters in college? Four critical years revisited. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Bryson, C. (2014) *Understanding and Developing Student Engagement*. Abingdon: Routledge

Cook- Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Cooper, R. (2009) *Constructing Belonging in a Diverse Campus Community.* Journal of College and Character, 10(3) pp. 1-10

Curran, R. and Millard, L. (2015) Engagement through partnership: the realities for staff and students and implications for academic development –International Journal of Academic Development (156) – Student Engagement special issue 2015

Freeman, R. Millard, L. Brand, S. and Chapman, P. (2014) Student Academic Partners: student employment for collaborative learning and teaching development Innovations in Education and Teaching International

Johnson, R.B., Onwuegbuize, A. J and Turner, L.A (2007) Toward a Definition of Mixed Methods Research, Journal of Mixed Methods Research. Vol 1, issue 2 (112-133)

King, J.E. (1999) Helping students balance work, borrowing and college. About campus, 4,4, p17-22

Levin, J. Montero-Hernandez, V. Cerven, C. Overcoming Adversity – Community College Students at Work, within Perna (2010) Understanding the Working College Student, p43-66

Lundberg, C.A. (2004) Working and learning: the role of involvement for employed students. NASPA journal, 41(2), 201-215

McMillan, D.W. and Chavis, D.M. (1986) Sense of Community: a definition and theory Journal of Community Psychology Volume 14.

Millard, L. and Hargreaves, J. (2015) Stretching funding to support innovation. Innovations in Education and Teaching International (163), Vol 52, No3, June 2015

Nygaard, C., Brand, S., Bartholomew, P. & Millard, L. (2013). *Student Engagement: Identity, Motivation and Community*. Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing.

Perna, L. (2010) Understanding the Working College Student – New Research and its Implications for Policy and Practice. Stylus publishing. Virgina, USA.

Pusser, B. (2010) Of a mind to labor – Reconceptualising student work and higher education within

Simón, H. Díaz, J, M. Costa, J, L. (2017) *Analysis of university student employment and its impact on academic performance.* Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology [on line], 15 (April-September)

Sullivan, P. (2008) Report of the HEFCE Leadership, Governance and Management Fund supported project LGMF 101 "*Managing a substantial increase in on-campus student employment. A forthcoming challenge for HR management and leadership*". HEFCE. Bristol.

Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme.* [pdf] Higher Education Academy. Available at:
https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/what_works_final_report_0.pdf
[Accessed 6 November 2019]

Tinto, V (1999) *Student Success and the Building of Involving Educational Communities.* [pdf] Available at:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228541701_Student_success_and_the_building_of_involving_educational_communities [Accessed 6 November 2019]

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* Cambridge University Press: New York

Zlotkowski, E., Longo, N.V. and Williams, J.R. (2006) Students as Colleagues: expanding the circle of service learning leadership. Providence. Campus Compact