

## **Report for Quality Enhancement and Assurance Sub-Committee**

**May 2014**

**Subject: Student Engagement – beyond the SSLC**

**Origin: Samantha Davis (Teaching Centre), Emma Dresser (LSU Student Voice)**

### **Executive Summary**

This case study explores the transformation of student engagement opportunities, effectiveness and impact in the Politics History and International Relations (PHIR) Department at Loughborough University. Qualitative and quantitative methods revealed a notable shift in the culture of students in the PHIR Department and a distinct increase in the active engagement of students with their academic life. This report recommends actions that could help to disseminate this good practice elsewhere across campus.

### **1. Rationale**

Practice, along with effectiveness, varies greatly in relation to student engagement across the institution at Loughborough University. Over recent years, staff at the Students' Union involved in working with Student Representatives have observed from an independent as some new practices, processes and even cultures were developed to enhance student engagement practices and effectiveness. One such Department where this culture appeared was the Department of Politics, History and International Relations (PHIR).

In an ever-changing environment within Higher Education, one in which student expectations are evolving and increasing, we were motivated to delve deeper into this culture within PHIR. We wanted to analyse if changes in practices within student engagement had improved opportunities for students to get involved in enriching educational experiences and whether this has resulted in more effective practices. Upon establishing whether our belief of these improvements were correct, we then wished to uncover how these changes had occurred. Has a culture of partnership truly been established? If this has occurred, just how did this happen and can it be recreated elsewhere, both within Loughborough University and elsewhere in the sector? Finally, is this newly created culture now self sufficient, or is it fragile, in need of constant commitment and possibly other factors crucial to sustaining this culture?

The project specifically examining student engagement opportunities and effectiveness in PHIR, how these were created, how to identify good practice, along with learning points that could be embedded elsewhere at the University was conducted by Samantha Davis, an Intern with the Teaching Centre, and Emma Dresser, Head of Student Voice at Loughborough Students' Union (LSU).

### **2. Background**

Student engagement is a widely used term in all education sectors and used in one of two ways. The term is utilised when referring to the levels of direct involvement students have with their studies, for example, attendance at lectures, seminars, independent study etc.

On the other hand, and for the purpose of this case study, when referring to 'student engagement' we are referring to opportunities for students to be active partners in shaping and enhancing their learning experience.

Coates (2007, 122) describes engagement as "a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience", comprising the following:

- active and collaborative learning;
- participation in challenging academic activities;
- formative communication with academic staff;
- involvement in enriching educational experiences;
- feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities.<sup>1</sup>

*'The role of students in the process of shaping the student learning experience (through formal institutional processes for assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching, and more informal mechanisms) has long been recognised in UK higher education (HE) and elsewhere.'*<sup>2</sup>

Further illustration of the growing significance and importance placed upon student engagement comes within the Quality Assurance Agencies (QAA) UK Quality Code for Higher Education in which the entirety of Chapter B5 is dedicated to the topic of student engagement. Chapter B5 sets out one overall expectation in relation to student engagement;

*"Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience."*

Indicators of sound practice outlined by the QAA to meet the above expectation include seven points. Of these, three are particularly pertinent to this case study, and dissemination of its findings at an institutional level;

#### Indicator 2

*"Higher education providers create and maintain an environment within which students and staff engage in discussions that aim to bring about demonstrable enhancement of the educational experience."*

#### Indicator 3

*"Arrangements exist for the effective representation of the collective student voice"*

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<sup>1</sup>Vicki Trowler, *Student Engagement Literature Review*, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University (November 2010) found at:  
<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/studentengagement/StudentEngagementLiteratureReview.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Brenda Little, William Locke, Anna Scesa, Ruth Williams, *Report to HEFCE on student engagement*, Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, The Open University (February 2009) found at:  
<https://www.open.ac.uk/cheri/documents/student-engagement-report.pdf>

*at all organisational levels, and these arrangements provide opportunities for all students to be heard.”*

Indicator 7

*“The effectiveness of student engagement is monitored and reviewed at least annually, using pre-defined key performance indicators, and policies and processes enhanced where required.”<sup>3</sup>*

Here at Loughborough University, there are a number of vehicles through which students and/or their elected Representatives can speak on behalf of the collective student body and play a partnership role in enhancing their educational experience. One of the main examples through which this occurs at a School/Department level is through the Student Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC). The operation of this committee is guided by the ‘Staff-Student Liaison Committees: Code of Practice’ developed in order to share and encourage good practice in relation to the make up and operation of these committees.<sup>4</sup>

One question we posed when beginning this case study was whether SSLC’s and associated processes are sufficient in isolation to ensure that opportunities are given for all students to be heard. In addition, this study also explores the importance of an environment, for students, that enables discussions to create change and improvements in relation to the educational experience. Or if there is something in addition to the traditional SSLCs that creates these opportunities for students. We hope to delve deeper into this later in this report.

PHIR hosts a number of initiatives outside the formal SSLC, some of which are unique to this Department and which may well be closely linked to the increases in effectiveness of student engagement within the Department. Examples of these initiatives include:

- A peer mentoring scheme - led by one academic and a team of students. Operated via second year students ‘buddying’ first year students.
- An active induction day approach that seeks to engage students with the Department, the staff and the mentors as soon as they arrive which involves games and informal elements.
- A peer advisor scheme, established by an academic. This offers an opportunity for those students who have been on a year abroad to pass on their experiences to others considering choosing this option.
- Staff-led initiatives such as the ‘Social Study Space’, which after creation was handed over to Student Reps and the committee enabling students to feel they have ownership over a piece of the dept.
- The evaluation process carried out to establish the History Single Honours programme is a demonstration of the value of staff engaging students in addition to an SSLC.
- Student led initiatives also appear to have played a large role in the creation of a culture of partnership. Initiatives include a Department Day, the Student Led Teaching Award (PHIR Lecturer of the Year) and book sales.

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<sup>3</sup>QAA, *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*, (June 2012) found at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/B5.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Loughborough University Academic Quality Procedures Handbook <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/admin/ar/policy/agp/5/index.htm#SSLC>

### 3. Methodology

This study consists of qualitative data gathered through interviews, surveys and interpretation of recorded minutes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 members of staff and 2 Student Reps. A further 4 Student Reps completed surveys comprised of the same questions as asked within the interviews. The staff members interviewed had all had some contact with an SSLC or within some of the initiatives that exist outside of the SSLCs. The group of staff included those who had chaired an SSLC (had the role of Director of Welfare), those who had sat on an SSLC, the Head of Department and the Associate Dean of Teaching who could give an overall holistic view of student engagement within PHIR in comparison to other Departments and Schools. The Reps consisted of those who had been Representatives for all 3 years of their course (began in 2010) who would therefore have an overall view of any alteration in engagement, those who had been a Rep for 2 years and also first year Reps. The latter could bring a fresh view of the Department at the time of interview having been Loughborough students for only 2 months.

In addition to the interviews and surveys this report also studied the minutes of the SSLC meetings over the past 3 years. As seen in the results, minutes were coded into 'Points raised and actioned', 'Points raised and discussed', and 'Total points raised by Reps'.

The quantitative element of the case study studied the attendance figures for the SSLCs over the past 3 years and identifying any changes in attendance.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 SSLC attendance statistics

	2010/11*	2011/12	2012/13
<b>SSLC 1 % attendance</b>	48%	94%	90%
<b>SSLC 2 % attendance</b>	24%	76%	76%
<b>SSLC 3 % attendance</b>	24%	82%	81%
<b>Average attendance</b>	32%	84%	82%

\*2010-11 academic year was prior to creation of Programme President position.

#### 4.2 SSLC engagement statistics

	Points raised and actioned	Points raised and discussed	Total points raised by Reps
08/12/2010	0	1	1
09/02/2011	1	3	4
16/03/2011	3	1	4
<b>Year 10-11</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>
09/11/2011	5	3	8
29/02/2012	1	11	12
16/05/2012	0	7	7
<b>Year 11-12</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>27</b>
31/10/2012	7	10	17

20/02/2013	6	9	15
01/05/2013	8	4	12
<b>Year 12-13</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>44</b>

### 4.3 Interviews

This report firstly notes the context of activities in the PHIR Department. Many of the staff interviewed set the scene of a changing Department, for example, with the expansion of the Department. This growth, in conjunction with other factors, has meant an extra effort was needed for staff to engage with students.

Five out of the six staff interviewed stated that there had been a change in the way that students now interacted with the Department. One staff member reported that in the past it had been difficult to recruit student Representatives and also challenging to get them to attend Staff Student Liaison Committees which are held termly. A student who had been a Representative for 3 years stated that in the past:

*“There was a general feeling that anything the students raised was not going to be dealt with and as such the students and the Reps did not attend”.*

In addition a staff member reported:

*“It’s pretty obvious that the relationship between staff and students has changed dramatically and that we in our own interests need to get away from dividing lines and listen to students”*

It is the past feelings evidenced from students in conjunction with a changing higher education environment that has been recognised by the Department’s staff. Their actions as a response of this change are investigated subsequently in this report.

#### 4.3.1 Formal elements of the SSLC

Staff referred to the formal structure of the SSLCs that make it effective, for example the minutes taken that are made available to students on the Learn page but also sent to the Students’ Union. Issues raised in SSLCs will then be taken back to the Department’s Learning and Teaching meetings but also the School’s Learning and Teaching committee.

A change in the way that SSLCs run was noted by two staff members who commented, SSLCs have become more effective because they have been ‘tightened up centrally’ referring to the SSLC Code of Practice. It was also noted by a staff member that the SSLCs were once seen as a formality whereas now they are used much more to engage with students as partners.

Five out of six members of staff said the SSLCs had improved, however some also commented that it is a long term effort to get the feedback processes right and to make sure that students know they are being heard.

A recent adaptation of the Code of Practice has seen the formalisation of how Module Feedback and the NSS results feed into the SSLC meetings. The sharing of this information assists in empowering students to create change. Little reference was made to this throughout interviews however which indicates this is not being utilised and entrenched as successfully as it could be.

#### **4.3.2 Director of Welfare**

The Director of Welfare is a Departmental position that encompasses the role of lead personal tutor in the Department, the module leader for the compulsory first year module Academic Studies and also the Chair of SSLC.

In addition to the required minutes the previous Chair of SSLC chose to send Interim reports to Reps in between SSLCs. The Director of Welfare reported that this was implemented because he felt that due to SSLCs only being once a term there was a long period of time between meetings. Therefore he wanted to find a way for students to learn more about the action occurring on their concerns before their module had ended. When interviewed the students referred to the Interim Reports as a positive thing and appreciated having the contact between meetings.

Students stated one of the factors that made the SSLC successful was the atmosphere in the meetings and also the Chair of the SSLC. Students said that feeling like they could speak freely and having a Chair who wants to listen created an effective SSLC. One student said:

*"I feel I can come forward and say what I think and what the students have told me because it's quite a relaxed environment."*

The position of Chair received praise from students as a useful role and when asked 'what do you think works well in your SSLC?' one student commented:

*"Being chaired by the Director of Student Welfare, this provides a cohesive relationship between students and the chair in between SSLCs and an awareness of topics discussed".*

#### **4.3.3 Communication and Openness**

Staff also reported on the benefits of forging an environment in which students feel comfortable in raising matters. They noted the importance of being approachable enabling students to come forward and articulate where there are issues or concerns. You have to be approachable to students as it encourages them to come forward and let you know what is not working. One staff member noted that in the past they had heard that students did not think what they were saying was making a difference. There has therefore been extra effort put into trying to communicate back to students what is being done. As one student commented, if nothing can be done about an issue they would like to hear a justification of 'why what we were asking for was unlikely to change'. Another student did comment that they still felt they needed to know more about action on an issue which could suggest regular updates are required once an issue has been raised (Recommendation 5).

In regards to the feeling of openness in the formal meeting setting a student said:

*“It’s less of a kind of dictatorship but more of a conversation”.*

Another student added:

*“I think everyone can speak freely and they aren’t afraid to speak (...) I like that I can come forward and say what I think and what the students have told me because it’s quite a relaxed environment. I know it’s a formal structure but it doesn’t feel stiff and awkward and you don’t get criticised for saying something bad about the Department”.*

#### **4.3.4 People**

Throughout interviews, personnel of the Department, along with drive from key individuals were mentioned as a highly influential factor. One staff member reported:

*“Very often it depends on key individuals who are proactive and are prepared to give time to get things (student engagement initiatives) going”*

Another staff member said:

*“The kind of staff members that are recruited play a role in this student centred Department”*

With this comment in mind see Recommendations 2 and 3 in reference to how we could aim to sustain a group of proactive individuals.

The role of Programme President (PP) was referred to as a positive factor on the Department by all of those interviewed. This is the lead Programme Representative and this role has enabled the Reps to function as a team. One student referred to the benefit of having somebody to lead the team:

*“The PP could organise the Reps prior to meetings so the feedback was given in a more co-ordinated and succinct way. Further to this the PP could hold Reps accountable and as such attendance improved a lot”.*

Another student added:

*“The relationships within the Rep team and between the Reps and staff have improved with the introduction of the Programme President”.*

Staff members also commented about the benefits of the introduction of a Programme President.

#### **4.3.5 Sense of belonging**

It is evident that a sense of belonging and ownership is crucial in this case; the factors involved in generating feeling are discussed below. All interviewees agreed that an SSLC cannot stand alone in developing active student engagement and creating a Departmental identity. One staff member said:

*“I don’t even think they (SSLCs) play that huge a role in creating an identity in a Department. I think they play an important role in terms of an official feedback mechanism”*

Both staff and students interviewed referred to the Introduction to a wide range of factors which, on analysis, all play a part in creating a sense of belonging for students in the Department. There were a range of additional projects within PHIR that all combine in creating this sense of belonging. The five most influential projects were:

- Small Group Teaching
- Peer Mentoring
- History Single Honours
- Student Led Teaching Award
- Student Space

These projects are discussed in more detail below.

### ***Small Group Teaching***

Students collectively referred to the Academic Studies module that is compulsory for first year students in semester one. This module is taught by all Personal Tutors to their tutor group, thereby creating an effective point of contact with other first year students and a member of staff. These early links were cited by four of the six staff interviewed as helpful in building up connections within and to the Department. One of these members of staff said,

*“Introduction to Academic Studies with your Personal Tutor is a nice way of getting to know a member of staff through teaching”.*

When referring to this module, respondents emphasises the importance of academics and students getting to know one another in a small group setting, and the positive impact this has had on the Department’s identity (see Recommendation 4). Five out of the 12 respondents suggested that an increase in small group teaching could be a way of improving engagement within the Department.

One student observed

*“Small teaching groups and seminar groups also help to make a connection better with staff”.*

In addition one staff member answered a question based around whether an increase in small group environments would improve engagement:

*“Small group setting might make them feel more comfortable about raising an issue with a staff member”.*

This belief was supported by the History Joint Honours students commenting that they felt they had built more of a relationship with their History tutors in comparison to the tutors leading the non-History modules. Interviewees reported this was due to the fact that the History course had a small cohort with some lectures exclusively being delivered for History students.

### **Peer Mentoring**

Students that had experienced the mentoring scheme as a first year said they liked having a mentor, *“I did go to mine and found her useful”*. Staff were also very happy with the peer mentoring scheme, one staff member said it *“gives a sense of belonging”* whilst another said *“it works extremely well in those first few weeks, the mentors are much appreciated by first year students”*.

In terms of the part peer mentoring had to play in building an identity, one of the staff members comments frames this action:

*“Peer mentoring where it really works, it identifies keen students early on who can become mentors, then a social event being held with the mentors happens and these things together create more of a feeling of belonging to the Department”*.

### **History Single Honours Curriculum Design Project**

This project was initiated by a staff member funded partly by the University’s Teaching Innovation awards but was led by a group of students who conducted research and helped design a new Single Honours History undergraduate degree programme. This project enabled a group of History students to work closely with Department staff building a collaborative partnership to inform the curriculum design. One student commented:

*“I did the curriculum design project and now I think we (student researchers) have a much better relationship with those lecturers”*

This project is indicative of the partnership between staff and students and the mutual trust developed. Without this partnership and trust being established this project is unlikely to have been a success as unengaged Reps are unlikely to have involved themselves in the project. This is evidence of a clearly positive and engaging relationship between staff and students.

### **Student Led Teaching Award**

In the interviews staff vocalised their appreciation of the PHIR Lecturer of the Year award, three of the staff noted how it was refreshing for students to want to celebrate the teaching in the Department.

*“It was very touching, it’s something that staff really treasures, and the whole idea is wonderful”*.

This is something Representatives organise and run but it calls on every student in the Department to write a nomination and play a part. The involvement of the whole cohort of students demonstrates their appreciation to staff. This helps build a strong partnership between staff and students as both recognise the value of the other and reinforces the positive relationship. The Awards were created by the former Programme President in 2012. This was also the first year of the student space and the year that the mentoring scheme began to take shape. It is apparent that the awards were part of suite of activities in 2012 that led to the Department becoming what it is today, regarded as a place of engaged students as is illustrated throughout the interviews.

### **Student Space**

The student space is a change of which PHIR staff are justifiably proud of and gives students a physical place to identify as theirs, which enhances a feeling of attachment to the Department. The students interviewed emphasised this and the Reps try to use the space for as much of their interaction with students as possible to build on this ownership.

Comments from both students and staff illustrate that the more the students feel a part of the Department the more they will invest in feeding back to the staff and getting involved in any improvements and enhancements they feel they can make to the Department. The schemes cited clearly build a bond within the Department early in the student's academic life. This finding suggests a positive effect on the general culture within a Department by encouraging students to engage and play an active role from day one.

### **5. Impact**

Strong SSLC attendance was referred to as a factor in effectiveness of student engagement in the PHIR Department. Staff commented that students will attend if they feel the meetings are useful and that they are making a difference. It is clear that throughout the 3 academic years running from 2010/11 to 2012/13 the changes in culture, receptiveness, partnership and in creating a sense of community has resulted in a huge impact in terms of both attendance and effectiveness of one of the key portals for academic representation, SSLCs.

Attendance at SSLCs has seen an average increase from 32% in 2010/11 to 82% in 2012/13. In addition to this, it is clear that there was a commitment from the University members on the SSLC to be clearly responding and acting to points raised. With 2010/11 only seeing 4 points raised and actioned and 5 further points raised, the few students in attendance seemed to have little to input.

2011/12 saw a small increase in points actioned to 6, and a significant increase in the number of points raised with there being 21 points raised by students. This illustrates how the focus on developing and sustaining an open and receptive atmosphere helped students feel confident that their voice would be heard.

The most significant change occurred in 2012/13 where there was a clear and marked determination from the Department to listen and act on points raised by students. This academic year saw 21 points raised and actioned and a further 23 points raised and discussed. All of these figures illustrate the significant impact of the positive changes in the culture towards and opportunities for students to engage with the enhancement of their Department and their education.

An interesting demonstration of the impact of this change in the PHIR culture was mentioned during a staff interview which highlighted student involvement at the 2013 Student Staff Forum to report on the History Single Honours project. Both students and staff were invited and over 30 students attending it was considered a great success. This was a two hour session with information that will be feeding into the new Single Honours History course therefore the students were not actually gaining anything substantial from attending. However they knew the purpose of the event and attended.

This evidences the bond within the Department as students are interested and involved in the development and future of the courses.

## 6. Conclusion

Research conducted into student engagement in the PHIR Department charts a journey within the Department.

This journey has resulted in a culture of partnership and trust that has created an environment in which students can feed into their educational experience and shape how this is delivered. As illustrated throughout this case study, this culture is fragile and requires time, energy and effort to be inputted from all partners to ensure that it continues to flourish.

Some key challenges to the sustainability and impact of student engagement are the ever changing 'members' of this partnership. With students continuing to graduate and to move on to new fields and academic staff changing roles within a Department the ever changing make-up creates great opportunities with new ideas etc. but also creates risk with new personalities and individuals endangering the partnership and culture embedded in the Department.

As is stated, this changing membership is both an opportunity and a risk. Through yearly training, induction and agreed objectives being set each year it is possible for these risks to be negated as much as is possible.

A further challenge identified through interviews is that of ensuring that the student voice is truly Representative.

In spite of these challenges it is unquestionable that the time and support required in creating a trusting and effective system for student engagement is worth the benefits that it creates as one student stated:

*"The relationship between staff and students is vital for students to get the best out of their degree."*

This case study illustrates how one Department have worked to embed such a culture and the benefits this has created. There is no reason why other Departments within Loughborough University and other Universities cannot look at this transformation, the lessons learnt, the recommendations and therefore also go on a similar journey within their Department.

## 7. Recommendations

**Recommendation 1 Election and Training of Reps:** The Representatives reported the challenge of gaining a true picture of the student voice. This paper recommends that the Programme Reps are elected every year in a consistent manner across Schools, they should be trained annually by the Students' Union and the Students' Union should therefore be provided with the appropriate resources to do so.

**Recommendation 2 *Recruitment and induction of staff:*** In regards to the issue of sustainability of the schemes and the culture within a Department the recruitment and induction of staff should also be taken into consideration. This recommendation reinforces the Students' Union Education Priority of involving students in the interviews of staff. This paper notes that PHIR have in fact had student Reps involved in the presentation stage of an interview in this academic year.

**Recommendation 3 *Reward and recognition of staff:*** Once staff are in post there is a need to recognise and reward them for their efforts. This may be considered in the newly formed groups 'Reward and Promotion' and 'Academic Roles' but also in a continued support of the Students' Union's Student Led Teaching Awards.

**Recommendation 4 *Small group teaching:*** We should highlight and promote the importance of small group teaching and the impact that the inclusion of more personal teaching can have on students' feelings about the Department. Also recognising the key part Personal Tutors have to play in building a student's connection to the Department from the first day of their studies and therefore enhancing their experience.

**Recommendation 5 *Communication of actions:*** There should an increase in methods of communicating to the wider cohort as well as the Reps regarding what has been done as a result of feedback from students. This may be in the format of the Interim report to the Rep team but for the wider student group we could use Learn Department pages to show a short bullet pointed version of actions after an SSLC.

**Recommendation 6 *Promotion of the Reps:*** Invest in the promotion of student Representative and their importance. Work to engage the Reps to increase their involvement and incentivise their participation.

**Recommendation 7 *Initial student induction activity:*** Recognise the importance of the first week at University and how bonds made with the Department then will help the students' relationship with the Academic side of their student experience. This could be achieved with strong Students' Union committees and a dedicated Department social day or evening within the Fresher's week to tackle the hall led activities that delays relationships building within peers in the Department.