

Title: **Students as Researchers**

Presenters: **Elisabeth Dunne and Derfel Owen**
University of Exeter

Abstract:

Session Learning Outcomes

The overall aim of the session is for delegates to engage with the concept of Students as Change Agents, to gain a picture of how pedagogic action research led by students has developed at the University of Exeter, and to be well-enough informed to transfer ideas and practices to their own institutional context.

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Deliberate on new ways of working in collaboration with students as researchers;
- Engage in informed argument about the benefits and difficulties of engaging students in staff development and pedagogical change;
- Cogently link ideas about students as Change Agents to their existing conceptualisations and practices;
- Promote the concept of students as change agents and engage students in a Change Agent's initiative in their own institution;
- Disseminate ideas and issues of practice amongst their institutional colleagues.

Session Outline

Recent arguments on the role of students in Higher Education suggest that institutions should move away from considering students as customers, to practices where students take on the role of 'engaged collaborators' (Ramsden 2008). To support this approach, the University of Exeter has developed an innovative student-led action research initiative with students leading improvements in learning and teaching. Over the past three years, over thirty 'Students as Change Agents' projects have allowed students to take responsibility for promoting evidence-based change. Students select aspects of teaching and learning that are of concern to them, develop a research question, plan their own methods of data collection and analysis, and use their data to provide recommendations or instigate solutions. Projects have involved students in almost all subject areas, investigating topics such as assessment and feedback, seminar provision, personal and peer-tutoring, and learning spaces. Outcomes have included research reports and student-led conferences, students running a buddy system or writing skills sessions, and acting as technology champions to support academic development; students have also produced study guides on what to expect from high quality seminars and on academic writing skills. Overall, many hundreds of students have participated in the various projects and will gain from the outcomes.

This session will provide an overview of the initiative and consider how students take an empowering journey into a world where they become part of an academic community making a proactive contribution to their learning environment and institutional change (see, for example, Rubin and Makeba, 2007). Examples of issues to be discussed are: whether students can be both customers and collaborators; the extent of impact that students can actually have on institutional change and provision amidst concerns over quality within the new fees regime; means of fostering an ethos where students can actively support educational enhancement.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

A 20 minute input, which is both descriptive and analytical, as well as theoretical and highly practical, will be followed by a 25 minute discussion encouraging active participation through the use individual opinion-gathering, along with group responses and reflective plenary discussion. (Responses can be fed back to participants after the event, in order to promote continued motivation and understanding. The number and quality of responses will allow qualitative evaluation of the session).

Questions will focus on practical and theoretical dimensions, as suggested in the context of the session outline above. Indicative questions will also include consideration of aspects such as: 'What is the relationship of student-research to institutional change?'; 'To what extent should students gain reward and recognition for involvement in research initiatives to promote changes in pedagogy?' 'Does the concept of a 'community of change agents' have any meaning?' or 'How important is the research element in students bringing about effective change?'

References

Rubin, C. and Makeba, J. (2007) *Student Action Research: Reaping the Benefits for Students and School Leaders*, NASSP Bulletin, Sage Journals online, vol. 91 (4)

Ramsden, P. (2009) *The Future of Higher Education Teaching and the Student Experience*. Available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/policy/paulramsden_teaching_and_student_experience