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The Centre for Student Engagement: A Research and Development Center for Students, Faculty, and Staff at the University of Winchester

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Introduction

As higher education (HE) policymakers increasingly encourage student engagement, learning, and success at universities and colleges in the UK, the University of Winchester recently established an innovative Centre for Student Engagement to research and enhance staff and student engagement and development at the university.

The buzzwords "student engagement" have come to mean many things to different HE stakeholders (Bryson, 2014; Dunne, 2016). Student engagement is associated with student engagement in curriculum and learning (Finn & Zimmer, 2012), student involvement in quality assurance through student representation (Owen, 2013; Stalmeijer et al., 2016), and student-staff partnership projects related to teaching and learning (Marie et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016). This has also inspired much research into the student experience in wider HE on topics such as belonging, employability, and accessibility to education (Nghia Tran, 2017; Thomas, 2012; Department for Education Office for Students, 2018).

Western HE has placed significant emphasis on the catch-all term of "student engagement" as a means of activity, discourse, and enhancement to ensure students thrive, succeed, and can access an ever modernized and

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marketized education sector which is increasingly accountable to their funders, including those who pay their tuition fees and the taxpayers (Frankham, 2017; Tran, 2015). The USA have also emphasized student engagement for decades in relation to their engagement in the curriculum and co-curriculum, inspired by Astin's *Student Involvement Developmental Theory* (Astin, 1984) and the research performed by Professor George Kuh encouraging multiple student engagement surveys worldwide, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (University of Indiana, 2018), the UK Survey of Student Engagement (Advance HE, 2018), the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (Higher Education Authority, 2018), and the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2018).

Student engagement in the context of the UK has gone beyond the curriculum and a measurable survey, with universities being asked by sector bodies to engage students as partners, both collectively and individually, in the enhancement of learning and teaching (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2012, 2018). This had led to a plethora of activities, research areas, networks, and roles at HE institutions (HEIs), with three active journals under the banner of 'student engagement' (the *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, *Journal of Educational Innovations, Partnership and Change*, and the *International Journal of Students as Partners*) and nationwide projects and networks such as the Researching Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement network (Bryson, 2015) and the Student Engagement Partnership and Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland agencies, creating a significant amount of activity and scholarship.

With this vast array of activity and demand in the sector for student engagement, the University of Winchester, with its ambition to be a sector leader in student engagement practices, was keen to establish a research center to benefit the sector and students and staff at the institution (University of Winchester, 2015). This chapter will cover the core activities of the resulting center, the Centre for Student Engagement, following its establishment in August 2017.

Background

Since 2012, the University of Winchester, in partnership with the Winchester Student Union, has prioritized student engagement research and practice (Lowe et al., 2017; Sims et al., 2016), commended for training by the UK

Higher Education Academy (2014) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2016) and a recipient of the Guardian University Awards (*The Guardian*, 2015). The university's student engagement practices include creating innovative opportunities for students to participate in student voice roles on new committees, such as the strategic Student Academic Council, management and decision-making committees, and enhanced student-staff liaison committees at the program level.

The University of Winchester has also championed supporting students and staff to work in partnership by conducting research projects through the Winchester Student Fellows Scheme, which engages up to 60 student-staff partnerships a year on enhancement projects (Lowe et al., 2017; Sims et al., 2014). The university has also previously led national practice in developing accessibility to student engagement activities in the years 2015–2017, by conducting the sector-leading Realising Engagement through Active Culture Transformation (REACT) project, which facilitated critical development days and delivered content surrounding student engagement practice at over 20 HEIs across the UK (Lowe & Dunne, 2017). The REACT project also brought a significant amount of additional prestige and reputation to the University of Winchester as a seat of knowledge exchange in student engagement.

When funding for the REACT project came to an end in 2017, the university was keen to maintain its sector-leading reputation, so the management founded the nation's first Centre for Student Engagement. The REACT project, which aimed to enhance inclusivity and accessibility to student engagement practices, identified several aspects for further research, projects, and staff development at University of Winchester and across the sector in areas relating to student engagement, which the Centre for Student Engagement saw as a critical priority from its outset in 2017. These areas for development were to:

1. Create a staff development program for HE roles and responsibility for student engagement, such as engaging students in enhancement activities and researching students' experiences in the sector (Dunne & Lowe, 2017)
2. Conduct further research in the area of student engagement, especially for non-traditional HE students such as distance learning or alienated students (Shaw et al., 2017)
3. Holistically map student engagement/opportunities at the University of Winchester in an accessible format so students may become engaged in extra/co-curricular activities (Shaw & Lowe, 2017)

4. Assist departments (both academic and professional) in engaging students with regards to their delivery of a service or as academic programmers of study (Jones-Devitt et al., 2017).

The Centre for Student Engagement was not built into any pre-existing and established academic or professional service department, and instead reported directly to the deputy vice chancellor (deputy principal) of the university, allowing the center's manager to have free movement across the institution and the sector and, most importantly, quick access to decision-makers and key committees to have an impact quickly. In the first year of the center, the small team focused on three areas, including ensuring accessibility to student extracurricular opportunities (which included many of the student engagement practices outlined above), researching students' sense of belonging at the university, and validating a Postgraduate Certificate in Student Engagement in HE.

The team consisted of a manager (a full-time academic), a graduate intern who was then promoted to administrator from August 2018, and a selection of casual student/graduate interns and visiting fellows throughout the lifespan of the new office on campus thus far. See Figs. 17.1 and 17.2 for diagrams of the reporting structure for the center.

The significant emphasis on student engagement in UK HE has had complementary aims with the center's aims at the University of Winchester. Local missions include the University of Winchester's aspiration to be "sector leading in student engagement practices", which follows one of the university's three core values, "Individuals Matter". By valuing students' views and participation through student engagement activities, such as learning and teaching enhancement, quality assurance processes, and participation in student voice, the center aims to lead the university in fostering these practices through reflection, research, endorsement, and advocation of good practice.

Measures (often colloquially referred to as pressures) set by the UK HE sector also provide external aims for student engagement, such as the targets set out by the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2018), the emphasis on student voice and feedback loops in questions 23–25 of the UK National Student Survey (Department for Education Office for Students, 2017), and governmental policy that asks HEIs to place students at the heart of the system as learners (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011); in addition, more recently, pressures have been applied by customers who want to receive value for money in their education via high-quality teaching (Department for Education Office for Students, 2018; Department of
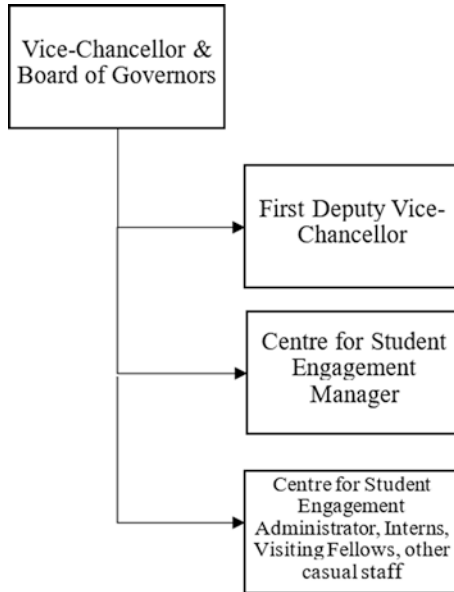
Fig. 17.1   Reporting structure for the Centre for Student Engagement
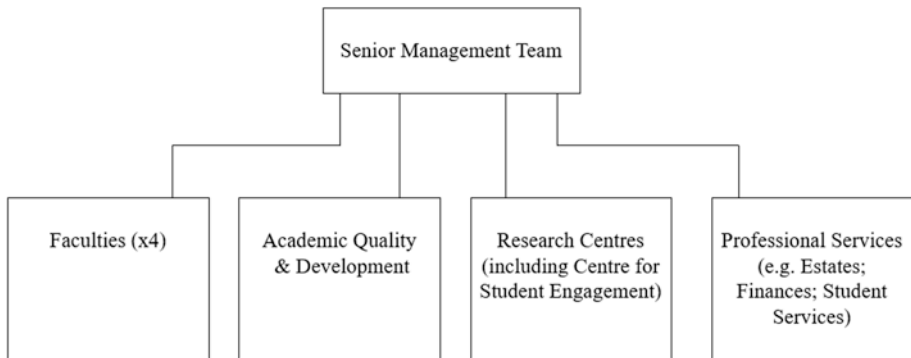
Fig. 17.2   Placement in the organization of the Centre for Student Engagement

Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011). These push factors have led student engagement, in its variety of forms (i.e., educational, developmental, feedback), to become a priority for all universities. The activities outlined below will further explore University of Winchester's practice in the area.

Creating a Staff Development Program for HE Roles and Responsibility for Engaging Students in Enhancement Activities/Researching Students' Experiences in the Sector

Following two years working on the externally funded REACT project mentioned previously, the center manager identified a desire and need in the sector for a new staff development postgraduate program for HE professionals who engage students on a weekly basis. Several new roles, strategies, working groups, and projects were appearing across HEIs, both small and large, including an increased number of publications in an emerging subdiscipline in its own right within HE studies, referred to as student engagement. Universities were investing hundreds of thousands of pounds into this area of activity, and the only learning opportunities for colleagues tasked with these targets were the emerging conferences and networking events throughout the year.

This was a new developmental area of activity and discourse for HE, and there were few experienced colleagues or scholars to provide advice in this area or who could draw together the vast amount of practice, research, and scholarship for a broad audience. There was also a gap in staff development for many in HEIs, who previously would have to study more general topics like education and philosophy or enroll in scholarship/practice of teaching and learning programs or business-related programs at the postgraduate level to advance their knowledge and careers. The University of Winchester chose to create a new program for those who engaged students in the area of student experience and develop and draw in a new audience to collaboratively learn across a year about student engagement outside of the curriculum in an accessible format for full-time professionals in the field.

The Postgraduate Certificate in Student Engagement in HE was validated in March 2018, offering a staff development part-time qualification for stakeholders who work in, or are researching, students' engagement in the HE community beyond the curriculum. A total of 10 students were recruited in 2018, followed by 17 in 2019, and 25 in 2020, from a diverse range of staff members who were a mixture of professional services, faculty, or employed in students' unions/associations. There is significant demand for the learning of best practices, creating spaces to assess practice critically, and gaining accreditation for colleagues working in this area.

The course was delivered in a 'blended' approach (part distance, part in-person); each of the two modules began with an in-person two-day retreat at the University of Winchester to create a cohort identity, which was then

followed by distance learning across the semester via weekly evening lectures. The course had to fit around the participants' full-time HE roles, so the program assessment was made to be authentic, flexible (i.e., fit in with their work), and programmatic (thus one assessment fed into the next). The student cohort identity was one aspect that made the course a success, as the students were collaborative learners from small to large institutions who brought new perspectives and were open to learning from one another. Rather than only attending conferences a maximum of three times a year, with four- to six-month gaps in between, students were learning and collaborating weekly, which saw a staggering development in their student engagement practices and knowledge. This visible outcome was truly rewarding for the program team involved. In 2019–2020, due to its popularity, we validated the program to become a full degree program, a master's in Student Engagement in Higher Education. The first two years of the program (2018–2020) saw great success and satisfaction, with all students reporting themselves to be either satisfied or highly satisfied with the program. Here are some quotes from the students involved below:

> I was worried about feeling a part of a community and staying engaged from a distance, but it's been really good. (Participant 1, Postgraduate Certificate in Student Engagement in HE)

> Excellent knowledge of the staff. Very engaging even in the strange environment of an online lecture! (Participant 2, Postgraduate Certificate in Student Engagement in HE)

> [The] Retreat was great, and teaching at a distance was much better than anticipated. Lots of group work, which was useful and interesting. (Participant 3, Postgraduate Certificate in Student Engagement in HE)

> This is fantastic. The retreat kick-started this, allowing us to all get to know each other quickly and form this community of students. (Participant 4, Postgraduate Certificate in Student Engagement in HE)

> This course is great for networking opportunities! (Participant 5, Postgraduate Certificate in Student Engagement in HE)

> Loved getting to know everyone, I didn't expect this course to have such a great community feel. (Participant 6, Postgraduate Certificate in Student Engagement in HE)

The best award-bearing learning experience ever, and I have had a few. (Participant 7, Postgraduate Certificate in Student Engagement in HE)

Holistically Mapping Student Engagement Opportunities at the University of Winchester in an Accessible Format

As identified earlier, previous student-staff partnership projects at the University of Winchester had outlined the need for a single available space for students to access student opportunities at the university (Shaw, 2016). "Student engagement" as a term had created some momentum at the university; however, there were still differences in how the term was used, and there was a lack of consensus regarding which student engagement, extracurricular, and employment, and so on opportunities were perceived to be included under this term. A mapping of all student engagement opportunities beyond the curriculum was conducted in 2014, which paved the way for an online platform for student opportunities.

Once the senior management team had agreed it was to be part of the Centre for Student Engagement, the project began. However, it did not start without some initial turbulence. Politics from some of the over 160 opportunities coordinators initially critiqued the project, cautious of losing their individual opportunity's identity on campus. A Task and Finish Group of key stakeholders was set up to alleviate some of these concerns, and, further to this, the center manager prioritized close connections with key parties across the university, from the student union to careers, volunteering, and sports facilities, to ensure all parties felt represented and engaged along the way. The center recruited a graduate intern who had the time-intensive role of auditing all 150+ opportunities, interviewing each coordinator, and writing them up as case studies in a familiar tone of voice to be accessed by students in an internal database. This project has been disseminated across the sector and is recognized as being no easy undertaking across an HEI. The politics alone were slow and complicated, and the auditing of opportunities took over five months.

After six months, the 'Get Involved Project', originally named the 'Signposting Service for Student Opportunities', was completed by the launch of an accessible online platform for all student opportunities beyond the curriculum at the University of Winchester. This 'one-stop-shop' aimed to raise awareness of opportunities and overall student involvement by providing information and signposting to appropriate contacts. The project was desired by the university, as it was perceived to be in alignment with sector policy and

research that brought together student involvement/engagement activities to enhance students' experiences, sense of belonging, integration into HE, and employability (Astin, 1984; Humphrey & Lowe, 2017; Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1993). The 'Get Involved Button', the chosen name for the online platform, has now been in operation for over a year, bringing together activities from across the university.

As a platform to communicate with students directly, intentions for the Get Involved Button were to increase awareness and participation at the University of Winchester, which was understood to be mutually beneficial for both staff and students. It is placed on the top right-hand side of the university's internal virtual learning environment and allows students to "browse at their leisure" to gain access to opportunities at any time, showcasing employability benefits by listing skills gained and, most importantly, showing equal value between all occasions. The Get Involved Button project was a key output of the Centre for Student Engagement, which has led to the university requesting additional projects related to student employability and experience at the University of Winchester.

Assisting Departments (Academic and Professional) with Engaging Students in Regard to their Delivery of a Service or Academic Programmers of Study

Academic professional development centers have emerged across Western HE to provide staff development, leadership, research, and peer support in the development of course delivery, following an increased global emphasis on learning through excellent teaching (Lea, 2015). The University of Winchester has an active Learning and Teaching Development Unit, which had been established for over a decade by the time the Centre for Student Engagement began in 2017. Questions could have arisen as to why another supportive center, with a focus on student engagement, was initiated alongside an established learning and teaching center. However, the Centre for Student Engagement has proven to operate in new spaces, predominantly focusing on the aspects covered in this chapter, but also providing advice and guidance to any departments (professional or academic) who wished to review their engagement with students for enhancement reasons. The broad title of 'student engagement' allowed flexibility to focus on diverse projects and variety. The work of the Centre for Student Engagement at the University of Winchester is comparable with other centers for student engagement and

development already established at the University of Calgary, which focuses on student leadership development (University of Calgary, n.d.), and California State University, which focuses on departmental development and student body research (California State University, n.d.).

In the first two years of its operation, the Centre for Student Engagement has been a point of consultation for many departments, and the team has met with 12 different directors and managers to assist them in making strategies for how they may gain student feedback or engage students as partners to review their activities. It was important that the center did not appropriate or replace the students' voices; instead, it aimed to enable and empower colleagues at the university to engage current students in order to gain their feedback. Many of the departments the center worked closely with were professional service teams who had a significant impact on students, but who were also struggling to gather student feedback on their experiences of these services. Such departments included the timetabling, library, campus chaplaincy, and student services departments. The manager of the center was also asked to sit on several university committees such as the Student Experience Committee and Employability Committee so these and any relevant research projects could be shared in strategic decisions. The team would also be called upon frequently to deliver sector talks on changes or developments in the HE sector to inform colleagues on policy developments. The center found its place through close communications between the center manager and other key stakeholders across the university, which ensured strategies aligned and portfolios did not cross. Although a new presence on campus is exciting, it is essential to take the time to embed the center within the institution, moving gently with projects to prevent political disruption.

Conclusion

In the years since the Centre for Student Engagement was established, the center manager and team members have conducted various projects at the University of Winchester with tangible outcomes. Alongside these projects, the center manager and team have also ensured that the university has remained engaged with the sector via publishing and presenting at international conferences on new research and reflections relating to student engagement in HE. Looking ahead to 2020 and beyond, the center now finds itself providing a catalyst service for institutional projects alongside running a new postgraduate program, which enrolled 10 students in its first year. Balancing portfolios with staff capacities is a continuous challenge, as while the team

wishes to help and be involved in enhancement, it must also recognize the limitations of a small group.

Already from the 2018–2019 academic year, the center has been asked to assist with employability initiatives, assessment and feedback projects, and enhancing the student voice at the University of Winchester. Where 2020 and beyond will take the center remains unclear, but exciting. What is clear is that student engagement in HE—as an area of activity, discussion, debate, and even critique—is evolving, and in response, so must the center. A center for enhancement at any HEI must remain cutting-edge in its practices, scholarly in its work, and have impact which is measurable. All of these factors ensure it highlights the need for the center and provides demonstrable outputs in return for the time and money invested by management. The Centre for Student Engagement hopes to continue to show value and to help others (either individuals or departments) as it develops as part of the community of the University of Winchester.

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