

# ***The Postgraduate Certificate & Master's in Student Engagement in Higher Education: A Professional Development Opportunity to Critically Examine and Influence Research, Policy and Practice.***

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## **Abstract.**

Every member of staff within a higher education institution (HEI), whether professional services or academic, holds the potential to contribute towards the student experience through the engagement of students. Indeed, there has been a growth in universities recognising the importance of student engagement as a priority area, with sector regulators endorsing such practices too (Office for Students, 2020). This is manifested through strategies that highlight the key role of student engagement, and numerous staff at HEIs tasked with meeting HE sector regulations in relation to student engagement and enhancing the student experience. Yet, there are virtually no student engagement professional development qualifications available for those working in HE beyond discipline specific or teaching and learning focused programmes. The University of Winchester, having recognised this gap therefore launched the Postgraduate Certificate (PgCert) and Master's (MA) in Student Engagement in Higher Education. This brings together sector experts to look critically at student engagement research, policy and practice. The University of Winchester validated the PgCert in 2018 and the MA was validated in 2019. This case study will provide an overview of the blended approach taken to running the first MA and PgCert in Student Engagement in Higher Education programme in the UK, through offering our reflections on the academic programme three years on from its inception.

Keywords:

## 1. Introduction.

Every member of staff within a higher education institution (HEI), whether professional services or academic, holds the potential to contribute towards the student experience through the engagement of students. Indeed, there has been a growth in universities recognising the importance of student engagement as a priority area, with sector regulators endorsing such practices too (Office for Students, 2020). This is manifested through strategies that highlight the key role of student engagement, and numerous staff at HEIs tasked with meeting higher education (HE) sector regulations in relation to student engagement and enhancing the student experience. Yet, there are virtually no student engagement professional development qualifications available for those working in HE beyond discipline specific or teaching and learning focused programmes. The University of Winchester, having recognised this gap therefore launched the Postgraduate Certificate (PgCert) and Master's (MA) in Student Engagement in Higher Education. This brings together sector experts to look critically at student engagement research, policy and practice. The University of Winchester validated the PgCert in 2018 and the MA was validated in 2019. This case study will provide an overview of the blended approach taken to running the first MA and PgCert in Student Engagement in Higher Education programme in the UK, through offering our reflections on the academic programme three years on from its inception.

### 1.1 Response to the UK context.

Due to the deep-seated shift in emphasis towards marketisation in UK Higher Education, the task of implementing concepts of student engagement has fallen on members of the entire HE community. The first was a growing move towards working with students in educational developments in Learning and Teaching teams, leading to a vast sum of scholarship on the topic (Bryson & Callaghan, 2021; Healey & Healy, 2018; Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014) and focus on national conferences by bodies such as RAISE<sup>1</sup>, the QAA<sup>2</sup> and Jisc<sup>3</sup>. The second was a clear push from students' unions for their representatives and elected officers to be taken

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<sup>1</sup> Researching, Advancing & Inspiring Student Engagement (RAISE), RAISE Conference 2022: <https://www.raise-network.com/conference-2022> (Accessed 1st February 2022).

<sup>2</sup> The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), Student Engagement: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/student-engagement> (Accessed 1st February 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Jisc, Change Agents' Network: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/change-agents-network> (Accessed 1st February 2022).

more seriously and participate in wider university processes (Shaw & Atvars, 2018; NUS, 2012), which has been particularly catalysed by the rise in tuition fees and the COVID-19 crisis. The final was universities themselves being quick to respond to these students' unions' pleas for partnership, as working with students as partners is far more desirable than students seeing themselves as fee-paying customers or activists, and offering an opportunity for co-designed educational development. From Pro-Vice Chancellors to Course Leaders, Student Services Managers to Recruitment Managers, and newly formed Student Experience Teams, it is now not only Educational Developers and Student Unions that prioritise student engagement in the UK. Ensuring students have an engaging experience in higher education is typically measured through government-led metrics, as well as the promoting of business models which prioritise both expansion and retention. By working with, listening to, and researching students' engagements in our institutions, Universities and Colleges are making strategic interventions and spending millions on ensuring student success. Finding sources of knowledge for student engagement 'practice', such as the pragmatics of engaging students in the shaping of student experience, has led to higher education providers across the UK and beyond demanding conferences, staff development opportunities, and publications to foster the growth of these activities in their institutions. The PgCert/MA in Student Engagement in Higher Education not only facilitates this growth, but ensures practitioners are equipped with the knowledge and skills to contribute to this effort.

## **2. Programme overview.**

The programme team consists of: Tom Lowe (Programme Leader), Maisha Islam (Programme Administrator), Maria Moxey (Teaching Fellow), Dr Cathy Bovill (Visiting Fellow), Prof. Colin Bryson (Visiting Professor), Prof Mike Neary (Visiting Professor) and Dr Jill LeBihan (Visiting Fellow), alongside Paula Green as a Visiting Lecturer. The programme is run primarily through the Centre for Student Engagement with quality support from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. The programme builds directly upon the University of Winchester's sector reputation for innovative practice in Student Engagement in Higher Education (Lowe et al, 2017; REACT, 2018). It is built on the fundamental principle that staff in all roles and on all contracts are well-equipped to support the growth and development of all students from diverse backgrounds. The programme is aimed at all staff working in Higher Education who engage students, whether academic or professional services.

Each module begins with a two-day retreat co-facilitated by the programme leader, module leader and a Visiting Fellow/Professor. The retreat has many benefits, for both the programme team and students. Firstly, for students, it is a great way of meeting peers and forming the basis of important cohort relationships (Felten & Lambert, 2020). This enables students to work well together in subsequent online work during the modules and has proven to be invaluable for developing a sense of community. Secondly, the retreats also offer the programme team the opportunity to build relationships with students, which in turn can lead to a greater depth of critique and discussions in online sessions. The decision to hold in-person retreats was underpinned by the research that identifies the importance of early encounters for developing a strong rapport among staff and students, which is vital for effective learning (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Bovill, 2020). The retreats also help to develop shared understandings of the complexity of student engagement and the team are able to offer guidance on the upcoming sessions and assessment. This is exemplified by the following comment received in a mid-module evaluation feedback following the first retreat:

*'This retreat was essential for bringing the group together, the distance sessions would not work as well without this. Very interactive, got us thinking and sharing. Good to see the campus and the city too to gain some connection with the Uni wider than just the course.'* (Student quote from mid-module evaluation form).

## **2.1 Module 1 (PgCert/MA Year 1): Student engagement: Theory into practice.**

In year one semester one (autumn semester), students are introduced to the breadth of student engagement practice in the module '*Student Engagement: Theory into Practice*'. Dr Cathy Bovill joins for the first retreat and brings her wealth of experience and insight into student-staff partnerships and provides a clear and concise introduction to the development of student engagement as an academic area of study. The session content includes: student staff partnership, co-design, peer assisted learning schemes, extracurricular activities, as well as student voice mechanisms and the importance of closing the feedback loop. It is anticipated that many students on the course will be mature students (over the age of 21), who may have been out of education for some time or new to the social sciences. Therefore, the first assignment requires students to present and engage with literature in relation to a chosen area of student engagement practice at their home institution. This provides the opportunity to become familiar with literature while focussing on a familiar context, and more importantly,

allows students to receive feedback on a developmental piece of work. For the second assignment, students submit a project plan in which they propose to implement a new student engagement practice informed by contemporary practice, policy and literature, which some students on the course have proceeded to execute in their respective institutions. Both assessments are therefore highly relevant to the students' professional lives and allow students to build on their experience in alignment with andragogical principles (Knowles, 1980).

## **2.2 Module 2 (PgCert/MA Year 1): Critically reflecting on student engagement.**

Students are welcomed back for the second module (spring semester, year 1), '*Critically Reflecting on Student Engagement*', and are joined by Prof. Colin Bryson who has published prolifically in the area of Student Engagement practices embedding a partnership approach, and the transformation of students into active learners (Bryson, 2014). In this module students are challenged to consider how student engagement practice can be improved and enhanced. Students explore what changes can be made to make higher education more accessible and inclusive so that it is meaningful for the diverse student body that make up today's HEIs (Sykes, 2021). For this assignment, students are encouraged to create a presentation on an area of student engagement covered in the module such as: race and diversity, accessibility, or students' sense of belonging. This gives students choice and enables them to teach and learn from their peers; taking responsibility for their learning and that of the cohort. The final assignment of the PgCert is an essay that critically reviews an area of student engagement in relation to themes covered in the module. Therefore, students are expected to demonstrate their ability to critically reflect on student engagement practice in relation to current challenges and agendas in HE, informed by contemporary policy and theoretical thinking. Students are provided with a wealth of recommended reading, one to one tutorials on request, as well as time to conduct their own independent reading, ensuring students are well equipped to embark on the essay. As such, it works well as a capstone assessment, drawing together the students learning from across the programme. Following the completion of this module, students can exit with an award of Postgraduate Certificate in Student Engagement in Higher Education.

The contemporary nature of topics discussed on the course, and the high quality of work produced by students, enables the programme team to encourage students to share their knowledge further. Therefore, the programme team offer a session on "*writing to publish and disseminate in student engagement*", leading many students to have work accepted for national

conferences and journal articles based on their assessed work from the programme. This helps to induct students into a wider community of scholars interested in student engagement and to increase the professionalisation of the field.

### **2.3 Module 3 (MA Year 2): Advanced student engagement: Theory, policy and settings.**

In a context where much of Western HE is highly marketised, and students among other stakeholders are continuously concerned with value for money (Lowe & Hakim, 2020), the purpose of the Master's year is to extend students' thinking around the purpose of the university within wider educational theory. Therefore, for the third two-day retreat (autumn semester), students are joined by Dr Mike Neary who has published in the intersecting areas of critical theory, higher education and politics (Neary, 2020). The module entitled 'Advanced Student Engagement: Theory, Policy and Settings', challenges students to apply theoretical perspectives on education to areas of student engagement practice, thinking and policy. This module features a group assessment where the cohort work together to create an academic resource for future studies on the course, which is a community owned annotated bibliography. Students have reported how this assignment helps to embed a sense of student-led ownership in the module, as well as generating an invaluable resource. With a sociological underpinning, the assignment that concludes the module is an essay which challenges students to critically debate core concepts, limitations, comparisons and considerations of a theoretical perspective on education, in relation to an issue in HE. Example sessions and theorists covered in the module include Paulo Freire, bell hooks and Bourdieu, and contemporary issues discussed consist of areas such as social class, race and inclusivity, and lessons learnt from Covid-19. By providing a wider theoretical grounding to students' work in student engagement, students have reported a greater sense of confidence in their university setting when debating such topics as academic autonomy, positionality and power dynamics.

### **2.4 Module 4 (MA Year 2): Researching and evaluating student engagement.**

In the penultimate module, '*Researching and Evaluating Student Engagement*', the focus is on providing students with the skills to research and evaluate student engagement practice and interventions – an increasingly important skill within UK HE (Inside Government Higher Education?, [2021]). The module covers research design and methodology and challenges

students to consider their own positionality, research philosophy and potential biases, as well as ethical considerations in research (Macfarlane, 2009). The module is designed so that the assignments feed into the final module which is a 15,000-word research project and dissertation. Assignments consist of a research proposal and ethics approval submission, so that when students embark on the dissertation module they have already planned and received substantial feedback on their proposed ideas. Core texts for the module include Thomas (2017) and Luker (2008) as they provide accessible and diverse guides to completing a research project in the social sciences. Students are encouraged to write their assessments on their proposed dissertation project to give them, as part-time students usually in full-time HE roles, time to develop their thinking, planning and structuring, so that they can take on feedback and refine their thinking and thus feel ready to embark on the dissertation module.

## **2.5 Module 5 (MA Year 2): Dissertation module.**

Dissertation students are given the freedom to research or evaluate any student engagement practice they wish. This module is innovatively designed in a blended approach so that students attend a two-day retreat scheduled in June, which is one month after the module commencement, when it is anticipated students will have made a reasonable start to their research project to allow them to maximise the benefits of the sessions and time to write. While the programme team have some suggested content, students are given the opportunity to co-design and contribute to the retreat sessions, and request what they would find most valuable to discuss. Sessions consist of motivating students with writing, discussing data analysis, recruiting participants and structuring the dissertation. Each student is allocated a supervisor who offers guidance and support throughout their study.

## **3. Innovative practices.**

As a programme that is centred on student engagement, it is fitting that the course models good practice in this area. The programme features both institutional and innovative practices to ensure students feel ownership of their programme, especially as they are distance learners. Below are some examples of engagement activities conducted with students:

- **Diversity of Visiting Fellows:** A main innovation feature is the way in which the programme makes use of visiting fellows as part of the teaching team. This ensures that the programme is informed by a range of institutional perspectives

(e.g. Russell Group – Newcastle University; Scottish – The University of Edinburgh; post-92, large metropolitan – Sheffield Hallam University); and by practitioners who have different learning and teaching backgrounds.

- **Blended approach to delivery:** offering a blended approach to delivery where in person attendance is only required at the introductory retreats, with weekly sessions delivered online is a distinctive feature of the programme. It allows the opportunity for developing a student community, as well as ensuring the course is accessible for colleagues at institutions across the UK and beyond.
- **Retreat sessions:** Incorporating a group 'thinking walk' at the dissertation writing retreat is an important feature for community building as well as sharing and developing ideas. Additionally, offering students the opportunity to request sessions and co-design the second day of the dissertation writing retreat ensured sessions were tailored specifically towards students' current needs. During the Covid-19 pandemic when it was not possible to deliver sessions in person, staff facilitated social opportunities such as an online quiz, a 'bring and tell' session and opportunity to share photos and experiences. These were important for overcoming the challenge of developing social bonds in a virtual environment, demonstrating a flexible approach and commitment to ensuring community building.
- **Workshop approaches in taught sessions:** Every session, whether at the retreat or online, features at least one creative activity or discussion where the group are able to share their perspective with one another. This is crucial to ensure each student is engaged and to endorse that, in the area of student engagement, each HE context is different and perspectives are ever-evolving.
- **Ideas, concerns & expectations (ICE):** At the end of day 1 at each of the module two-day retreats, the programme leader runs the ICE activity to gauge students' current ideas, concerns and expectations of the module. The programme leader then responds to the concerns on the following day of the retreat and builds in the expectations and ideas throughout the remainder of the course.
- **Co-facilitated sessions:** During the first retreat, Dr Cathy Bovill facilitates a co-created session with all students invited in advance to contribute. Some students

will present or facilitate discussion about either: a student engagement activity/plan they wish to test out; a student engagement idea they would like to share; or a question about student engagement they would like to explore in more depth. These are often related to current projects they are working on, and other students often then help co-design and suggest ideas through group activities. In the second retreat, Professor Colin Bryson runs a co-design session consisting of a collective discussion on the challenges that surround student-staff partnership, based on what the student cohort wish to discuss.

- **Co-design opportunities:** In 2019, during the process of validating the PgCert into a full MA course, current students were invited to a co-design day at the University of Winchester to help shape the modules that are now embedded within the MA, following co-design principles outlined by (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011). The Writing Retreat in the Dissertation Module is also co-designed on day two based on students' interests for the day.
- **Module evaluation responses:** As part of institutional policy, the programme runs two module evaluations each semester, with the mid-module evaluation being a 'Start, Stop, Keep' survey, and the end of module evaluations employ a Likert scale survey adapting National Student Survey questions. Following each mid-module evaluation, the module leader will respond to each individual student's anonymised comments and post these to the virtual learning environment to close the feedback loop.
- **Sector-wide dissemination opportunities:** Current students and graduates of the course have been invited to present their scholarly work and practice to the wider sector via Centre for Student Engagement symposiums and 'micro-conferences', bolstering their own reputation and professional development. Invited presentations have centred on: data analytics; the role of extra-curricular engagement opportunities; and race equality for black staff in HEIs.

## 4. Impact of the programme.

This programme is viewed as a staff development opportunity for HE professionals and academics who wish to expand their thinking and gain accreditation in the area of student

engagement. This programme is relevant for staff members seeking Level 7<sup>4</sup> accreditation needed for promotion (professional services and Student Unions) or for academics seeking to enhance their practice as programme leaders. Out of the graduates of the 2018-19 PgCert/MA Year 1, 6 out of 10 of the students have received either an internal promotion or external promotion, and 7 out of 17 in 2019-20. Students have cited the programme as helping to develop their experience, knowledge and confidence in relation to student engagement in HE. Furthermore, students and graduates of the course have advised that participating in the course has made them feel more confident in meetings with senior managers due to their ability to support their ideas with academic theory and literature. Further impact is demonstrated as students have published assignments both by presenting their work at conferences which include Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement (RAISE,2019), Association of University Administrators (AUA, 2019), Student Partnership in Quality Scotland (Sparqs, 2021), Generation Z in Higher Education Conference (2021) and Change Agents' Network (CAN, 2019;2021), as well as written publications in journals such as the International Journal for Students as Partners (Varwell, 2021; Islam, Burnett & Collins, 2021).

Evaluation processes in place to ensure the course is as impactful as possible include an external examiner report who assists in ensuring the quality and rigour of programme delivery and accreditation, frequent mid and end of module evaluation forms, as well as a robust student rep process in which students have the platform to feedback at designated committee meetings. The programme team also ensure an open dialogue for feedback between staff and students. In addition, the programme team will soon conduct an evaluation and research project to gather a more detailed understanding of the impact of the course, and ways in which it could be enhanced.

## 5. Conclusion.

This programme has built upon the University of Winchester's sector leading student engagement reputation and has attracted international attention with course enquiries from Australia and visits from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Denmark. The course continues to grow in popularity, and the programme team continually update teaching material. For example, this academic year sessions were introduced which provided the opportunity to

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<sup>4</sup> This is a postgraduate level; equivalent to level 9 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

discuss the impact of Covid-19 on HE and consider potential solutions for reintegrating students into the '*rich engagement*' opportunities as we embark on a new academic year post-Covid-19. This is an area which the programme leader, Tom Lowe, discussed in his keynote presentation at this year's CAN conference (Lowe, 2021). Furthermore, the programme is also designed specifically to enable students to build confidence in their knowledge and practice, empowering them to think critically about their student engagement practices, write for publication, and disseminate their work at conferences.

The cross institutional collaboration on teaching delivery and sharing of best practice, adopted by the programme, challenges the notion that institutions should see themselves as competitors. Rather, the PgCert and MA in Student Engagement in Higher Education demonstrates a radical model of delivery in which the study of student engagement could indeed test the pressures of a market-driven model of education. Furthermore, the PgCert and MA in Student Engagement in Higher Education programme has proven that blended programmes can facilitate a sense of belonging and student community, draw in international expertise through a sustainable model, and offer professional development opportunities that can maintain student engagement throughout the programme. Finally, the programme has proven to be impactful in both personal and career development for graduates, as well as students being able to bring new and sector leading ideas of best practice back to their respective institutions, demonstrating the value of the programme to the HE sector. The programme team welcome enquiries from potential students and educational developers keen to set up similar programmes at their institution.

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