

Furthering the involvement of disabled students

Interim report

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Brunel University

Project team contacts

	Representative 1
Name	Martin Smith
	Representative 2
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Role of other staff and students involved in the project team

- Dr Stephanie Robinson is a Post Graduate Certificate lecturer in Brunel's Learning and Teaching Development Unit and is Disability Rep for that area.
- Yewande Akendele is the Equality and Diversity (students) Manager.
- Natalie Foster is the Student's Union Education and Welfare Officer (and will be President next year).
- Tanvi Vyas is a disabled students representative.
- Another interested party is Dr Beverley Crooks, Widening Participation Officer.

Rationale for institution's participation in the project

Brunel wants to learn from, and contribute actively to the project's aims. This should lead to an increase in the numbers of disabled students actively involved in planning policy and in monitoring the quality of university services.

Brunel hopes to see a growing partnership between students, their representatives and staff at all levels of the institution focusing on the quality of the student experience. This should extend the current good partnership model already operating for many years in some areas at Brunel (such as between the Disability and Dyslexia Service and Widening Participation services) to all academic and other administrative areas of the university.

Brunel hopes to be able to share with, and learn from, project partners and have the opportunity to inform the development of key guidance. The outcome of this guidance should provide a resource from which all institutions can begin to establish meaningful and valued ways of empowering disabled students to be engaged in the development of the life (policies and practices) of their universities.

Key aims and objectives of institution's involvement in the project

For the duration of the project period:

- To produce an Action Plan and to see progress in all the points listed in this.
- To contribute to the Project Group, working with partners, so that a useful resource is produced which will be of benefit to disabled students and institutions in the sector.

For the longer term:

- To see the Action Plan items continuing to have an impact with ongoing improvements in the inclusion of disabled students in the life (policies and practices) of the University.
- To work with project partners in the longer term and to make use of the project resource pack so that additional work, and actions to make improvement in disabled students inclusion, can be undertaken.

Progress made by project team so far

All 5 items for action in Brunel's Action Plan have seen good progress or been achieved as follows:

- A group of five disabled students representatives has been established after publicity of the role over the Spring period. This group will receive training and support from the Student's Union and Disability Service and others to assist them with their role of representing their peers and holding focus group meetings and other activities.
- Group meetings about access requirements with mobility impaired students have taken place, their views have been reported on and meetings with Estates have taken place to agree priorities for action based on this involvement
- A University Equality and Diversity Working Group has been re-established, chaired by the new 'Equality Champion' for the University. This has met twice and is currently considering its terms of reference and reporting lines. 'Disability' will be a key area within this groups sphere of influence and reps from all departments of the university and the student body will be involved.
- 333 international students responded to Brunel's survey about attitudes, awareness and the experiences of disabled international students. The

results have been collated and are being analysed so that the findings can be publicised to the sector. There will be a resource pack, including film material for distribution. The disabled students rep (Tani Vyas) is also working in the project team on this International disabled students project.

- Disabled students were involved in One World Week activities. A number of high profile events took place including the GB Wheelchair basketball team playing to raise awareness and promote positive images of disabled people. Disabled students worked on the information stall and assisted with the international disabled students survey, amongst other activities.

Benefits and challenges from involvement in the project

Benefits:

- To engage with similarly motivated colleagues from other institutions to share experiences and plans. The project has provided Brunel with a focus for their plans, with timescales attached.
- The resource pack that is ultimately produced by the project will be of value to us all (in the HE sector).
- The project should help bring about real and sustained improvement in the inclusion of more disabled students at both Brunel and other HE institutions.
- Selection to be a partner in the project has helped Brunel raise the profile of the importance of involving disabled students with colleagues, including senior managers.

Challenges:

- The issue of embedding this issue across the whole institution (as per the requirements of the Disability Equality Scheme).
- Engaging with a student body that is by its very nature transient and many may not regard this issue as a priority alongside studies and other activities.
- Raising awareness in a sustained way amongst the staff body so that ultimately the 'culture' of the organisation changes.
- Having sufficient time and resources to concentrate on this issue alongside conflicting priorities.

De Montfort University

Project team contacts

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Role of other staff and students in project team

De Montfort's Academic Quality team are currently interested in supporting initiatives on student voice.

The Estates Department have long recognised a need to have a dialogue with disabled people. The Estates Department are both represented on the steering group for the project and are prepared to involve the disabled student group in discussions on future plans.

The elected Deputy President of the student union provides the link between the the institution and the union.

Rationale for institution's participation in the project

De Montfort University has been developing its involvement and engagement strategies and operational practices with all appropriate diversity groups.

The institution's rationale for joining this project was to share its understanding and learning with others and to learn from the development work of partners in the project.

They wanted to develop best practice for De Montfort University, in the context of the experience of other institutions.

It was also important that its approach was meaningful and avoided both being tokenistic and creating consultation fatigue.

De Montfort have also had wider objectives for engaging with this project and these included its desire to develop an inclusive strategy on engagement and to take account of multiple identity.

Key aims and objectives of institution's involvement in the project

De Montfort's key aims and objectives for this project were to:

- To identify and initiate a disabled student involvement strategy and approach that is developed by disabled students themselves.
- To involve disabled students in preparation of DMU's next Disability Equality Scheme.
- To involve disabled students in an equality impact assessment of the recruitment and enrolment process.

Progress made by project team so far

De Montfort have developed an internal steering group consisting of the core project team, representatives across the student services team which includes transitions, disability support and counselling, estates and academic quality, student union and recently an elected representative from the disabled student group itself.

The steering group have met three times.

To ensure sustainability beyond the life of the project a senior manager from the Student Support Directorate has been allocated the task of chair and project management.

There have been three meetings of disabled students since the project began.

The students have identified a number of themes that they would like to discuss in some more detail. These include estates and car parking issues and learning and teaching matters. Key University personnel are being invited to have a two way dialogue with the students on these themes.

It is intended that the outcomes of these discussions will contribute to the development of the new Disability Equality Scheme that is due for publication in December 2009.

The elected disabled student representative has a place on the top level University Equality and Diversity Committee, which was reconstituted last year to ensure that representative groups had a membership place.

The Equality and Diversity Committee has requested regular updates on the progress of this project.

Progress will also be reported to the Deputy Vice Chancellor through the Operational Review Group which is the internal senior management meetings of the support departments directors.

Benefits and challenges from involvement in the project

Benefits:

- De Montfort have achieved higher levels of involvement with disabled students than in any previous approaches.
- De Montfort have had the opportunity to try different communication approaches in reaching and recruiting disabled students.
- Sharing of approaches with the other universities involved in the project.
- The students represent all faculties, younger and mature students, undergraduate and post graduate courses.

Challenges:

- De Montfort are concerned to ensure sustainability and to keep the momentum of the work going with students. Particularly they are aware of succession planning and recruitment particularly to take over from third year students.
- They also want to continue exploring how it encourages ownership of the group by students themselves and increasing move from staff member facilitation to becoming staff member guests.
- They are also keen to increase involvement of future students.
- De Montfort are also mindful that those students who have engaged are likely to be high engagers anyway. They recognise that they have a large diverse student body and that it needs to continue to explore alternative methods of communication / engagement to reach those who are less inclined to engage. This therefore remains one of the key aspects of the group's remit.

University of Derby

Project team contacts

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Role of other staff and students in project team

- Richard Harris - Disabled Students Officer (Elected Student)
- Clare Foyle - Statistics (Team Leader)
- Neville Wells - Head of Campus Services
- Lynn Howe - Support and Advisory Service (Team Leader)

Rationale for institution's participation in the project

To analyse its current practice and procedures and embed mechanisms to ensure the ongoing engagement of disabled students in change processes.

Key aims and objectives of institution's involvement in the project

To further the involvement of disabled students in planning and policy development. Key areas have been identified for improvement and development which will impact directly on the disabled student experience. These include disabled student support plans, estates issues, Student Union clubs and societies, and research into student feedback mechanisms.

Progress made by project team so far

The Project Steering Group has been established and meets monthly to monitor progress. The Group reports into the University's Equality and Diversity Committee.

Sub-groups of staff and disabled students have been established to take forward each objective as set out in the action plan.

A Support Plan Forum is scheduled for 27th May, when disabled students will have the opportunity to feedback on the effectiveness of their Support Plan. Feedback will be used to inform planning, improve procedures and create a more effective and on-going dialogue with stakeholders including disabled students and academic staff.

A researcher was employed specifically to analyse existing data held in respect of various feedback campaigns and to identify the preferred engagement mechanisms of disabled students.

Two mapping process have been conducted to:

- review disabled involvement with Student Union clubs and societies, and;
- explore disabled student experiences of the Support and Advisory Services Unit.

Benefits and challenges from involvement in the project

Benefits:

- That there has been increased engagement with disabled students in support of the project
- Communications across the institution, particularly with key central departments, faculties and the Students' Union have improved as a result of participation
- The project has laid the foundation for the longer term engagement of disabled students in influencing University policy and procedures which impact upon their student experience.

Challenges:

- Finding time to participate in the project; particularly co-ordinating staff and student working groups
- Staff commitment in certain areas to drive through the project aims
- Being too ambitious in setting initial objectives
- Timing of the project has overlapped with conflicting priorities for students from Easter onwards.

University of Staffordshire

Project Team Contacts

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Role of other staff and students in project team

There are 3 other members of staff involved in the project team.

- The Dean of Students and Academic Registrar has acted as the senior staff member on the team and has demonstrated senior management commitment to the development of the project.
- A Faculty Based Academic, who is also the Faculty Disability Coordinator, and a member of University' Diversity Team have also contributed to the work.
- The key involvement of these staff has been in helping to steer the development of the Action Plan, acting as "critical friends" and in providing information to the mapping exercise, along with other colleagues, that has helped Staffordshire reach the stage where they can plan future actions.

Rationale for institution's participation in the project

The key drivers for involvement in the project have been the stated commitment to involve and engage disabled students in the development of the University. This is clearly linked to the University's strategic aims and is demonstrated through the key strategic aim of furthering widening participation. Staffordshire have also made commitments through its Disability Equality Scheme to engage with disabled students. It is hoped that participation in this project will allow the opportunity to focus more clearly on this issue and develop new and innovative ways of engaging with disabled students.

Key aims and objectives of institution's involvement in the project

The overarching aim is to empower disabled students to engage with the University in a way that ensures the disabled student voice is influential in the development of the University's future.

Staffordshire's objectives have changed as the project has developed. The current objectives are:

- to map existing opportunities for involvement across both the University and Students' Union Functions.
- to determine current involvement levels of disabled students in these opportunities.
- to maximise existing involvement opportunities for disabled students.
- to market opportunities for involvement to all disabled students.
- to undertake a training needs analysis for those disabled students who indicate a desire to become involved.
- to organise and deliver relevant training packages, involving disabled students in the planning and delivery of the packages.

Progress made by project team so far

The project team have had an interesting journey up to this stage. It was recognised that the initial action plan was over ambitious in its scope. After much discussion, it was decided that there needed to be a change of focus and that a more systematic approach needed to be taken to the implementing of the action plan. As a consequence, the plan was completely rewritten, reflecting that the original plan was too aspirational.

Staffordshire's action plan runs beyond the project finishing date into next academic year but we have started the process and have mapped the majority of the existing opportunities for engagement across the University.

What has surprised the project team so far is that there is actually more engagement with disabled students than had previously been thought. It was simply that information was not being gathered in any meaningful way. It was identified that in Faculties and Schools, disabled students were already being encouraged to engage in Disabled Student Forums. These were relatively well attended and enabled information to be channelled directly onto Faculty Management Teams, in Staff Student Liaison Groups, in Dyslexia Groups and also in the mainstream consultation groups operated by the Faculties and Schools.

Within the Students' Union further opportunities for engagement were available as Part-Time Officers, specifically the "Students with Disabilities Officers", and as Student Ambassadors and Welcome Week Representatives, as well as through various employment opportunities offered by the Union.

Staffordshire have a good platform to move onto the next stage in the action plan, which is to market these, and other opportunities to all disabled students before the start of the next academic year. A number of disabled students have already indicated a desire to become involved in the later stages of the project and this will also be actioned in due course.

The marketing phase will occur during the University's Welcome Week and the levels of involvement will then be determined.

Benefits and challenges from involvement in the project

The main benefits of involvement with the process so far have been:

- allowing Staffordshire to develop a systematic approach to the engagement of disabled students.
- giving opportunities to share these ideas with the Project Team and, with the assistance from the Equality Challenge Unit and HE Academy, develop a workable action plan.
- understanding the whole University context of what the project team have set out to achieve.

The Challenges are:

- to maintain the enthusiasm in taking forward the action plan to a conclusion, and that in the longer term, embed what is achieved into University practice.
- to develop with disabled students a bespoke package of training that meets their needs and fulfils the project aim.

University of Sunderland

Project team contacts

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Role of other staff and students in project team

- Paul Andrew - Equality and Diversity Manager
- Shell Young - Disabled Student representative
- 20 disabled students covering a range of impairments and years and modes of study; including PhD students

Rationale for institution's participation in the project

The University of Sunderland celebrates and values the diversity of all students and staff. Its mission is to provide higher education to a wide range of the population, and it recognises the importance of promoting positive attitudes to diversity within that mission.

Its recently launched new Academic Strategy : Enhancing the Student Experience, has reaffirmed its institutional commitment to listen to the student voice and to provide students with the best possible experience. Within this is an implicit promise to disabled students that they will be involved at all levels in the institution's processes and decision making; and Sunderland will listen to their voice, hear it and act upon what they are saying.

Sunderland is passionate about working with, and supporting its students and, through its new Academic Strategy, is building a positive and supportive culture which is student, and diversity, centred. The institution see this project as a great opportunity to embed consultation with, and involvement of, disabled students in every aspect of the University from the strategic to the operational level.

Key aims and objectives of institution's involvement in the project

Key aim:

- To explore ways of hearing the disabled student voice and to involve disabled students in shaping the future of their university.

Objectives:

- To explore ways of linking disabled student voice to its committee and management structure
- To promote disability equality in University-wide communication and marketing
- To involve disabled research students in shaping the postgraduate research student experience for the future
- To review its student "promise" to ensure it addresses the needs of disabled students
- To increase student participation in its Disability Equality Duty Working Group.

Progress made by project team so far

Sunderland has set up student groups around the following themes:

- The student experience; the student promise
- Marketing and inclusivity
- Sports and disability
- Disability equality duty
- Research student needs

The institution has held a number of very positive and useful meetings with disabled students.

It is also setting up a social networking site to discuss issues of interest to disabled students.

Sunderland is exploring the best mechanisms of aligning these groups with its academic committee structure

It is pursuing linkages with its students' union.

Benefits and challenges from involvement in the project

Benefits:

- Has enabled direct contact with a group of very active and enthusiastic disabled students

- Is gaining a much better perspective of the views of disabled students and the issues which they feel are important.

Challenges:

- To maintain the enthusiasm of the students
- To engage in a meaningful way with its committee and management structure so that the students see that their voices are heard and that the work is making a difference.

Swansea University

Project team contacts

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	Representative 2
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Role of other staff and students in project team

Students have been invited to share their University experiences with the team. The aim of the Disabled Student Forum is to collect examples of good and bad experiences from the student body and to offer the students an environment in which it is hoped they can feel comfortable enough within to suggest more appropriate, disability specific solutions to the issues that arise.

It is anticipated that this group will grow to become a powerful forum within which future proposals for changes to regulations and development of programmes can be discussed openly in the best interests of the student body.

- Prof Alan Speight - PVC Student Experience
- Anita Davies - Quality Office, Academic Registry
- Leoni Munslow - Women's Officer Student Union
- Adele Jones - Disability Office Manager, Student Services
- Derya Kul - Equality & Diversity Officer, human Resources.

Rationale for institution's participation in the project

Whilst Swansea University considers it's the services and support that it provides to disabled students to be of a high standard, it is considered equally important to continue to develop and improve.

Key aims and objectives of institution's involvement in the project

As an institution Swansea University wants to empower and support disabled students to take ownership of their own student experience and to encourage them to share these experiences to allow Swansea to develop a more inclusive and accessible curriculum.

To engage students in order to identify needs and develop suitable policy and mechanisms to provide appropriate solutions to these needs.

To produce guidance for the development and validation of new modules and programmes and update/amend the associated proformas accordingly.

To identify staff training and development and where appropriate pass to the Staff Development Unit for development of an appropriate programme of courses. Training courses to be available in time for the 2009/10 academic session.

Progress made by project team so far

Students have been invited to join the Disabled Student Forum, attendance at these meetings has been lower than anticipated. Discussions are considered around appropriate times, locations and formats are being discussed. Further to the face to face meetings a Facebook group has been established through the Students' Union and further discussion and interaction has been possible through this approach.

Existing practice has been gathered and considered and whilst current support is appropriate it is agreed that there are areas where the institution will benefit from student input related to experiences and actual rather than perceived needs. It has also become clear that the wealth of information designed to support staff and students is held across the institution in a number of different publications. As there is currently no single publication holding all of the guidance, consideration is being given to developing a more appropriate solution to how this information is packaged and provided to users.

Benefits and challenges from involvement in the project

Benefits:

- Involvement in the project and access to the expertise of the team running the project has and will continue to help Swansea to raise the profile of the project, and more importantly the needs of the students across the campus.
- Initial discussions with disabled students indicate that much of what is already offered is working and that this approach is proving to be a welcome enhancement.
- Discussions with like minded colleagues from across the sector have been invaluable. The 'protected time' away from the office in project meetings where the Swansea are able to focus their thoughts, without interruption, has been invaluable.

Challenges:

- Engaging disabled students has been challenging and it has been important to work with students to establish methods of engagement with which they are most comfortable with. Retaining enthusiasm will also be challenging though the number of students within the core of those involved who will be returning following the summer break is promising.
- Over ambitious targets/unrealistic time frames caused some initial concern but this has been corrected with the realisation that the project can and should run over the longer term to be successful.

University of the West of England

Project team contacts

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Role of other staff and students in project team

For the purposes of this project the institution has adopted a team approach to the allocation of tasks. In addition to support from senior management, the Disabled Students' Group, the Equality and Diversity Manager and Student Services, there are representatives from the faculties of Health and Life Sciences and Environment and Technology. The involvement of a representative from the Students' Union, who is also Chair of the newly formed Disabled Students' Group, has also been critical to the work that has so far been undertaken, as she has direct access to disabled students.

Each individual involved in the team has carried out tasks as agreed at team meetings. This has proved a useful approach to maximise the extent to which the principles behind the development of increased involvement strategies can be disseminated, although the principal contacts and the disability service have been the most active members of the team.

Rationale for institution's participation in the project

The institution is emerging from a period of considerable change which has involved changes to senior management and a complete reorganisation of the structure of the faculties. New posts have been created and roles and responsibilities have changed. The move towards the development of an equality and diversity strategy that embraces all the equality strands has also been part of the changing environment. For these reasons it was considered to be a good time to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the existing mechanisms that are already in place to ensure the involvement of disabled students and to determine the extent to which there may be a need for reinforcement or amendment of these mechanisms.

Key aims and objectives of institution's involvement in the project

- Develop an implementation strategy to put into effect the recommendations of the institution's Disability Working Group and ensure student involvement in the implementation strategy.
- Increase awareness of both students and staff of the mechanisms for the involvement of disabled students at the institution.
- Increase the awareness of the newly created faculties of the importance of ensuring the representation of disabled students on the various committees held by the faculty.
- Develop the involvement of disabled students in staff training using the training undertaken in health and social care as an exemplar.
- Ensure the involvement of disabled students in the design of the master plan for the extended campus.
- Increase the involvement of dyslexic students in the development of support for this group of students.
- Develop the Disabled Students' Group so that it becomes a sustainable resource.

Progress made by project team so far

The Disability Working Group was set up by the institution and has met on several occasions. The chair of the group has been encouraged by project team members to invite students from the Disabled Students' Group to attend the meetings and participate in discussions and to also send representatives to the two sub-groups – the Strategic Implementation Group and the Finance Group. This invitation was extended to the student group, but the response in terms of student involvement has been poor.

In an attempt to increase the likelihood of student involvement the chair was encouraged to provide a pre-meeting briefing and to ensure that students received the minutes of the meeting in an accessible format. An attempt has been made by the team to find out why the attendance has been low. This implementation group has now reported its findings and made further recommendations. Students have been kept informed, but the extent to which the students have been genuinely involved in the development of the implementation strategy has been rather disappointing.

It is intended to investigate in more detail the reasons why students have not attended to explore whether this might lead to the need for new ways of

conducting meetings or whether students need more support prior to meetings so that they do not feel intimidated by the rather formal environment of this and similar future meetings. The Disability Working Group is likely to continue to meet for at least the next academic year and it is intended to set up regular opportunities for discussions with the Disabled Students' group so that their issues can appear on the agenda.

Other actions that have progressed are:

- A new structure diagram which shows the links between the various groups and committees has been produced and discussed by the Diversity Committee. There remains scope to disseminate the details of this structure more widely.
- An audit of faculties has been undertaken to determine the extent to which the new structures ensure the involvement of disabled students and the development of adequate opportunities for students to obtain information and support from within the faculties. There remains a need to undertake more work in this area of activity.
- Steps have been taken to develop effective training for faculty disability contacts. The Disability Working Group has identified the resources required to develop this training and to involve the Disabled Student's Group in the development and delivery of this training. This has not yet been achieved as a decision on the finances has not yet been made. Difficulties that have been encountered include the relatively small numbers of students who attend the Disabled Students' Group which places too much of a burden on this small group of people. There is a need to increase the number of disabled students who engage with this group.
- A series of consultative sessions for staff and students on the proposed master plan for the design of the extended campus at the institution have been held and a team member attended to assess the extent to which disabled students were involved in the discussions. The team are currently awaiting a response from senior management about how this ongoing participative process is going to be carried out.
- A focus group for dyslexic students has been held. This proved to be a positive experience for staff and students. Students came up with some creative ideas for improving the current service. While some students were happy to participate in a group session, others preferred to make individual comments and were offered the options of an interview or submitting comments by email. Their ideas have been fed back to the learning support tutors and are being incorporated into an action plan for

developmental work that will take place over the summer with the aim of improving the service for dyslexic students.

- The Disabled Students' Group has met regularly during the period of the project and achieved a number of positive benefits. For example Feel Good February, which is a promotional series of activities to encourage sport and recreation amongst students and staff, included a disabled person's basketball training session and informal tournament. This was the first time specific sports suitable for disabled people have been offered by the institution.

The group has been supported by the Students' Union sabbatical officer, who has acted as convenor and chair of the group. The current chair of the group will complete her term of office at the end of this academic year and this is a cause for concern as she has acted as a champion for disabled student involvement. The challenge for the sustainability of the Disabled Students' Group is that a new chair will provide the necessary support to ensure that the group continues. The current chair intends to brief her successor and ensure that this role continues beyond her term of office. The Students' Union received an award for their efforts in supporting disabled students, and this is encouraging for the ongoing sustainability of the group.

A further challenge is that the current membership of the group is small, although meetings have taken place roughly every two weeks. Attempts will be made to inform students of the opportunities for mutual support associated with membership of the group at the time of each application for Disabled Student's Allowance. The significance of the chance to influence the institution's policies and procedures will also be stressed to disabled students as they enter the institution.

Benefits and challenges from involvement in the project

One of the most significant benefits of the project is that it has raised the profile of the importance of involving disabled students in the institution's community. It provides an opportunity for team members to ask legitimate questions of senior staff and management about how disabled students will be involved in various institution activities. This in turn has motivated the existing champions and enthusiasts who have also been rewarded and inspired by the opportunity to meet and discuss the project.

The work undertaken has added value to other research on student involvement in higher education that is being undertaken at the institution, e.g. the RIBA project on Supporting disabled people in architectural education and practice.

Data collected from the project activities has been able to influence the work of other groups and committees, for example, the findings from the focus group of

dyslexic students were reported to the institution's Student Literacy Working group and have influenced their final report.

The Student's Union involvement in the project has been very productive and opened up channels of communication as well as achieving the benefits already discussed above.

Obtaining replies to questions on aspects of student involvement from senior management can be challenging, particularly during the time of change associated with faculty mergers and reappointments of senior staff.

The challenges for the project relate to the fact that the participation by team members is voluntary and takes place as an addition to normal workloads. This does limit the amount of work that can be achieved.

The time period of the project over one academic year is rather too short to enable some matters to be implemented. For example, students tend to become preoccupied with exams and coursework deadlines from March onwards and to disappear at about the end of May and so some things that staff would like to implement must be put on hold until the students reappear in September.

In addition, some of the actions require financial support and this cannot be approved until the summer with the resources available for 2009/10.