

RAISE Conference Reflection

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Alison Lyle joined CENTRIC at SHU in 2017, after 11 years with West Yorkshire Police and contributed her policing knowledge and legal expertise to various research projects. Now in her fifth year as Senior Lecturer in Policing, Alison is particularly interested in developing creative and inclusive teaching and learning methods.



Introduction

Earlier this year I became aware of a funding opportunity: T&L Conference Attendance Fund 2024 (SSA) and was fortunate enough to benefit from a share of it. The conference I chose to attend was the RAISE Conference, which was a hybrid event held at the University of Leicester in September. I opted for online attendance over the two days; a choice made with the aim of reducing cost but which in itself provided unexpected learning points.

The RAISE Concept

RAISE (Researching, Advancing & Inspiring Student Engagement) was founded in 2009 and while familiar to many, was new to me. As the name suggests, the whole concept is based on a community network sharing best practice, new ideas and research about ways to involve students in their own higher education experience. A key element is that students are an integral part of the RAISE network, allowing them to have a voice and influence, as well as collaborating with a range of professionals and academics. I was excited to hear about this approach; involving students in their own experience and enabling them to be fully involved in shaping their learning certainly resonated with me. I had, in my own small way, been attempting to do this in my role as Senior Lecturer in Policing. During the event I recognised some of my own approaches, which was reassuring, but I also realised how much more there is to learn.

Sessions and Topics

The title of the conference was 'Equity in Attainment and Student Success', which is what first attracted me to it. The concepts of both equity and success can be fluid and subjective; I was intrigued to discover different perspectives and how these might be translated into effective learning designs.

The programme incorporated an extensive range of topics and issues to be explored and I found that the number of ways in which students can feel excluded or face challenges was simultaneously enlightening and concerning. The different formats of the sessions, including presentation, workshop, campfire and storyteller, perfectly demonstrated the value of incorporating different experiences and perspectives. A negative aspect was that the online attendees were not always accounted for. In some sessions I felt as though I was standing behind a slightly open door, straining to hear and not seeing what others were doing in the room. In others, the presenter could be clearly heard but questions from the room were not audible, making the responses less meaningful.

However, this also presented learning opportunities: I experienced, albeit in a transient way, the sense of being excluded and not feeling valued as a participant. I also learned that there is much more to creating a successful hybrid event than putting a Teams link in an in-person session. The second day was a huge improvement in this regard; the presenters were aware of the online participants and a separate facilitator ensured that comments and questions in the chat function were heard in the room. The audio equipment and cameras enabled remote attendees to see and hear what was going on. In short, I felt involved.

Case Studies

There were a number of sessions that I found particularly interesting. One of these presented an incremental approach in which students became increasingly involved as co-creators. While the scale progressed from student engagement all the way to student-staff partnership, at the core was intrinsic motivation and the methods addressed various aspects of this. Promoting competence by relating the learning to everyday experiences, reserving a session for topics chosen by students and providing the chance for students to write “things I wanted to say but didn’t get the chance...” after sessions, were interesting.

There were discussions about what ‘success’ means and how this should not be assumed when referring to student outcomes. Student engagement was analysed during sessions in which students themselves participated. It was recognised that there can be differences between how students experience engagement and the ways in which it is observed or measured.

In one session, the different needs of students was discussed. One autistic student explained that for them, small-group work was never an effective way of learning and that when this was an assessment method, it created a disadvantage. However, a SHU student in the session explained that on his course the group-work assessment was designed so that all students had an equal chance. A proud moment!

Key Takeaways

Student engagement is a complex issue, affected by a range of factors that reflect changing social, environmental and economic circumstances. This means that it is more important than ever to recognise and understand students’ needs and perceptions and to seize the opportunity to adapt in creative ways. I realised that the RAISE approach is not about box-ticking or paying lip-service, it’s about creating real opportunities for students to engage in ways that are most meaningful to them.