Students as Partners Scholarship Session for Student Hub Live

Karen Foley in discussion with Clem Herman, Diane Butler and Cath Brown.

Good morning and welcome to this Students as Partners scholarship session from the Student Hub Live here, and this is part of the eSTEeM Annual Conference 2019. My name is Karen Foley

and I'm a lecturer here at the Open University and I'm joined by some guests in our studio for this live interactive discussion. If you've just logged on to this in real time, you should be able to see some widgets and things that you can vote on. You can tell us where you are in the country, what you're studying, at what level you're studying and just press on the option that applies to you and fill

those in. If you've got a word cloud and you have three options, then you do need

to put three things in but if you can only think of one or two, that's absolutely fine just put a full-stop so that your results will submit. You can also talk to each other in the chat and, of course, ask any questions, and bringing those to the studio today is H Jay who is on our hot desk. Good morning H Jay.

Good morning, we've got lots of people starting off in the chat so if you are joining us in the main chat room just say hello and introduce yourself. As always with the chat anything goes so any thoughts, comments or questions for our fantastic guests, we want to hear them and I'm sure they want to hear them as well. Also be posting all the resources discussed today in our chat as well, so were all ready and excited to go here.

Excellent, well thank you H Jay and do put those questions to us. Well we're hoping to have a great discussion this morning. I'm joined by Clem Herman, Diane Butler and Cath Brown. Now Clem and Diane you are part of the eSTEeM academic team and you've just stepped away from your two-day annual conference to come and do this interactive discussion with students, and Cath are the President of the Open University Students Association, here to represent the student voice which is of course what we're talking about today. But I wonder if we could begin by talking about eSTEeM and if

you could give me an idea Diane about what it does and what it's all about?

Okay, eSTEeM is the STEM Faculty's Scholarship and Innovation Center. We've been around for about eight years now and our role is to support academics and other members of staff to fully investigate student learning. So, in order to try and improve the student experience, to find to set projects in train which fully investigate aspects of learning so students hopefully will benefit from the lessons we learn and the projects that we conduct.

Now, you've got a whole range of people involved with this from Associate Lecturers, obviously students, members of the academic team, so you've got a variety of perspectives, but you

work on a project basis don't you?

That's right, so people come to us with their good ideas, usually everything always starts with a great idea, so perhaps a member of a module team, or somebody is involved with student support, come to us with them with a proposal about how things could be made better for students, how student learning could be improved. We scrutinise the project and we sort of bring an academic rigour to it to make sure that it's going to deliver, and then we support people to fulfil their project and to report back to the rest of the University and usually if it's a great idea and the project works really

well, it will tell us some interesting things that we can then pass on to the

rest of the university to try and make the student experience better. So this can be a whole range of different things from assessment, through to student support, through to how to teach particular concepts in STEM subjects.

And as well as those bottom-up things you've also got a top-down way of looking at things, so you look at strategic priorities as well from the Faculty you do that twice a year. We look at what's important at the moment for students where issues are, where things need improving where developments could be made, and twice a year we call for project proposals and people align themselves with the strategic priorities that we've identified, come to us again with their ideas and then we set them set them going on and a whole variety of projects. And as one would expect from STEM you've got some frameworks as well that you work around don't you?

Yes, we make sure that we are actually aligning the projects with things that are particularly important to students, so we set specific frameworks around where we want the scholarship projects to develop.

Now, I wanted to go around scholarship because scholarship is one of these words we've been talking about a lot here, but what does the actual scholarship of learning and teaching mean, and why is scholarship important right now?

Scholarship is fundamentally important it means that we can learn from our students’ experiences and we can improve student learning and we now have a number of scholarship centres across all

the faculties in the University, so the University is really paying attention to this particular issue and making sure that the students are more fully involved in scholarship as well.

And there's a whole university-wide scholarship plan isn't there? Do you want to say something about that Clem?

Yes, shall I answer that one. So, as Diane said the University is now prioritising in a formal way the scholarship of teaching and learning right across the University, but actually scholarship has always been sort of key to the approach that we've had at the Open University, in the sense that being

able, as teachers, being able to reflect on our learning, being able to innovate and bring new technologies and new kinds of approaches to learning has been there over the fifty years that we've existed actually. We were the first University that was university of the air, we then moved into other kinds of new technologies as we progressed. So, a lot of we what we do is to look at how we can apply new kinds of technologies into our learning, but then also evaluate those in a very robust way to make sure that they produce really effective teaching and learning. So, scholarship we apply our scholarly lens to our own practice.

Because there a number of different ways, and you've mentioned quite a few things there, the University of the Air you know there's this whole technology aspect as well, and also this idea of practical applications that researchers got a purpose to it and that you're actually doing something and

pushing something forward and that's really what this is about isn't it?

Yes, it is. I mean scholarship really is a form of research, but it's the research that we do that focuses on our teaching and learning practice. So, we are as academics and higher education professionals interested in how effective we can be and how we can bring the best results for our students and,

therefore, a scholarly approach is central to that. So, the University then has a number of scholarship centres. eSTEeM is in the STEM Faculty, but we also have centres in the other faculties that are doing the similar kinds of things.

And as well as generating knowledge which has a really important application, it's also about developing our practice as teachers isn't it? And about developing that sort of personal side of things so that we can go on to produce better outputs for the students in that way, so scholarship is also important for the people doing the scholarship.

Yes, indeed so scholarship there's really three aspects of that. First of all, and first and foremost, it’s the students. We want to make sure that our products, if you like, our teaching and learning is something that is highly effective and produces the best kind of environment for student success. Secondly, it is as you say it's about our own professional practice we want to improve and continually develop our own professional knowledge and learning, especially as things change in terms of teaching opportunities using technologies. And then, thirdly it's for the Open University itself. We have a

reputation as an innovator in all sorts of ways and therefore, we want to remain

at the cutting edge of all of these kinds of scholarly activities.

Well, this all sounds great and you came on Diane saying we've had all of these brilliant ideas, so I'd like to hear about some of them because, since you started the first call in 2011 you've had over a hundred thirty of these projects going. So, could you mention all of them, no! What are some of the highlights and what are some of the things that that have worked really well can you tell us about the projects?

Yes, I mean we have such an enormous variety of different sorts of projects some ones that stand out was some prize winners from last year where we have had a team working in maths and statistics

who wanted to try and find a way to make graphical material within their module more accessible to students with visual impairments. So, they found a way to sonify graphs, so to turn a graph, which somebody with a visual impairment wouldn't be able to appreciate, to turn it in to sound which they could hear. Wow! So, that was that that was a classic eSTEeM project which looked at a way of

making material more accessible to students with additional requirements. We have other projects that focus on the development and practice of associate lecturers, that help them improve their practice. We have others that focus on assessment or on tutorial delivery. So, all sorts of all aspects of the student experience are investigated through different scholarship projects which try and unpack issues and problems and then improve our practice to make things better for our students.

Those early start ones were really good I thought weren't they?

Absolutely, yes. I mean that was another classic case, again in various modules across the Faculty but starting in maths and statistics as well, where module teams offered students, particularly who was studying more than one module at the same time, the opportunity to start one of their modules three or four months early. So, they could get ahead that would reduce the difficulties of trying to study concurrent modules. That was tried out for a couple of years now and students have found this to be a really beneficial practice that really helps them manage their study time.

So, can you tell us some of the feedback about that one then?

Oh, amazing feedback from students who took up the opportunity to start early. They found that they what they could they could plan their study better, they could start in the summer months where they were perhaps weren't quite so busy or they had some time, they could start one module, have early access to the material, get ahead so by the time the second module that they were studying started in October, they were already two or three months ahead of the calendar of the previous module.

They got to know each other as well didn't they?

They did, that's right.

Some of my friends were doing S294 which had an early start and they really appreciated that they could get to know some of the tutors and some of the fellow students before they before one started. So, that was a classic case of one module trying something under the auspices of an eSTEeM project, evaluating it rigorously, checking that there were no deleterious effects and for the students it was it was a good option, and then it being rolled out to other modules in the Faculty where we realized that there might be issues where students were studying that module alongside others and it was it would be a difficult module and they needed more time.

And aside from the sort of study intensity issue that having two modules together can bring, did something like this lower stress for students who took part in it, so that they were able to sort of approach things a bit more...

Yes, I think that's definitely a case isn't it. It was just that feeling of perhaps being in more control, when the students were available to study, they could get on and study if they wanted to, but it wasn't compulsory, lots of students joined the module at the normal time and studied it at the normal rate without any difficulty. It just provided that a little bit more flexibility and control for the students.

I think for a lot of us, obviously as a part-time student, you're very aware that that's conflict with other aspects of your life and for a lot of us being able to get a little bit of a cushion so that you can get ahead, means that you feel more relaxed about the whole thing and this was really providing a cushion on the ground scale so to speak.

So, that was a very simple project. There are others that look at particular applications. So, for

example we use that we use something called OpenStudio which is an application that's widely used across STEM and we've had a sequence of projects that have really rigorously evaluated the use of that particular tool, and looked at ways in which it's used across different modules in the Faculty, and that was a recent prize winner this time wasn't it.

That's right, yesterday we have as part of our conference, we have an annual prize for the Scholarship

Project of the Year.

Oh, tell us more!

So, the prize winner as Diane said, in one of our categories, was a project looking at OpenStudio and the different uses across different modules. So, OpenStudio is a tool where, many students will have

experienced on different modules, where they can upload for example photos or other assets, it's been used in design courses for example where people being able to upload kind of visual projects that they've been working on, and we looked at how students have responded to that across all sorts of different modules. So, that was a very interesting project and that got the prize!

Wow, and what was the prize?

They got a lovely plaque that they can put up and nice certificate so yes, you know I think they were all very, very chuffed.

And how lovely to do that at the conference as well a very important thing to recognise.

I wanted to mention another one, another prize winning project yesterday was the

one on labcasts. This was one where the one of the courses included labcasts which is a live event in the evenings, and the project itself was looking at how do students feel about that and how is that enhanced their learning? And they found that over two-thirds of the students on this particular module felt much more engaged with the student team, with the with the module team, and with the

University itself rather than feeling kind of remote and I think that's a really important finding actually. How we bring students to feel part of the University by using these kinds of things.

Generating that sort of academic community is so important and it was lovely reading the results of that project because anecdotally I'd heard that from so many students and it made a real difference that was lovely to see that it was working everywhere like that.

Now, it strikes me that these ideas, I mean you've mentioned the two of the ones that Karen Vines and Chris Hughes was the one that you started talking about the novel approaches to hearing numerical data and then of course there was the Carol Calvert's one which was about the advanced starting

modules, those ideas I mean they have such a massive impact but they are ideas you can imagine somebody sitting there going you know I wonder what if we did this you know it's all about starting with those good ideas which returns to this point you initially mentioned about how many ideas they were in the first place. And I guess it's that point about having this whole community together associate lecturers, students and everybody combining thinking how can we make this all better and then coming up with a way of researching it.

That's it exactly, I mean we need to listen to all those voices to make sure that everybody gets an equal say, to say where the issues are in teaching and learning. The associate lecturers are particularly important because they're obviously the front line and they're the people who interact with our students are you know on the most regular basis, and they come to us with really interesting ideas. We've recently launched a call for projects for associate lecturers so they can lead their own scholarship projects supported by eSTEeM. So, we're trying to bring them much more to the front and centre of our eSTEeM activities.

But the student voice is so important because, this is one thing and this is what we had to talk about today, which is often you know it's such a different level. But sometimes students might think "well I can't come up with an idea of a comparative use of OpenStudio or something" but like you say it's that early start, that's an idea that is something that could be very, very practical and then worked through. So, tell us about the student voice and why that's so important and what areas you're really missing out on that the student voice addresses?

I think the people that we work with in the Faculty and in our Student Support Team, we're all really

expert at delivering teaching, we're not really expert at being students anymore. It's been a while, so we really need to learn from our students where the problems are first-hand, where the issues are, and allow them to help us set the strategic priorities for projects. So, we make sure that they're fully included in the whole process and that it's not just us thinking "well that sounds like a nice idea let's research that". Cath and I recently asked a small group of students last week what would be their priorities for scholarship projects and within about five minutes we had a list, huge long list, some of the things we were doing already but there were some really new things. Some things that were really innovative and that we hadn't thought of. So, getting the student voice those people who are experts in studying at a distance in our institution that was really, really fundamental.

Could be a future prize winner there!

It could be! It'd be nice to have a student prize wouldn't it going forward?

I mean that's the other thing that we're looking the student voice is hearing the ideas, but there's also the next stage which we're really interested in is getting students as partners in our projects and getting students more actively involved, I mean you might want to say something about that.

Absolutely, I mean I think this is really exciting opportunity for students to get involved as co-researchers and we've been looking at ways they can do that from a small scale, such as sense checking your questionnaire, having student facilitators at a focus groups could be really good because obviously students will feel rather differently about being open with other students. So, we've

been working out kind of a ladder of engagement and on a a personal basis I'm really excited that I'm involved in the couple of the ones that we're starting this year.

And you work in lots of various roles Cath, what are some of the benefits that you get from participating and some of these things and why do you think other students should get involved?

I think there's many reasons other students should get involved. Firstly, obviously there's the personal development aspect, that the chance to actually be involved in something like this is something that they might well find very fulfilling, very satisfying and indeed in many cases that's something they can put on their CV, as something they've done as well as their studies. I think understanding that the teaching and learning is something that is actually researched and thought about so deeply, is very helpful for students to understand that it's not just arbitrary that someone's just decided to do it like that, to understand that there was a process of continuing improvement, and obviously as Diane was

just saying to feed in their unique perspective the point is that the student is as we said an expert in being a student so that they can feed that in. We're really happy that in eSTEeM we've been moving, over the last few years, to increasing student involvement haven't we. I joined as a student on the Advisory Group back in December 2017, something like that, and we've recently just formed a Student

Reference Panel and we've got a student facing website so and we go looking at having a student facing event as well aren't we?

That's right we want to have a mini version of the conference that's just taking place at the moment but online in Adobe Connect so students can listen to some of the projects that have been reporting at this conference, find out how they can get further involved and we're really looking, as Cath says, for

people who don't just want to listen to what we're doing they want to come and get involved as well so they want to support the work that we do. I think it's really fundamental that we include people and

and I think they can add enormous value to projects. We've just inducted some new projects which we've made a focus that students should be included on the team of people and we've got a number of really interesting projects where we're using students who have successfully completed modules to advise on how new assessments are written for the next set, the next presentation of the module.

So really using students’ expertise to help other students who come after them on the module that they've just completed.

So, there's a whole different range of elements that you wanting to include. You want, on one hand some of the ideas, on the another hand, some of those students to actually take forward those ideas in addition with other people, but also there's this aspect of listening and just asking students to come along and maybe come to these Adobe Connect sessions and say what they think about certain things so students can get involved without necessarily having that big idea or an agenda it's all about just being there and having some sense of feeding into something isn't it?

Definitely, it's just contributing thoughts and ideas about the things that are already in train. Making

suggestions they don't have to have a huge idea for a massive project at all. That's difficult enough for lots of us to come up with so but within certain areas of the curriculum that students do become expert in, they will have lots to add to any scholarship project that we set going so we would really value that.

I think another thing as well is obviously OU students are a very varied bunch and although obviously for most cases our students will be recruited for their expertise in being students, we have people have a whole lot of other professional skills we may have some one part of their day job is doing

research possibly or writing questionnaires or facilitating focus groups and it would be although they're going to be very much in the minority, we want to leave it open to using those sorts of skills as well don't we?

There's this aspect of reflection that I think is very useful I mean Cath, you say you know the benefits are you know contributing and being involved and finding out more and I guess having a nose around and meeting some of the academic team.

I think nose around is a big one!

Oh yeah! It's all really great, but there is also this thing of coming along and often I find when I'm participating research sometimes I think "Oh I don't really have the time to do that" but when I'm there I often think these questions are really promoting thinking about something that maybe I

haven't thought about before and they you know they really have a value at the end of it to think "how am I behaving as a learner? What might I do differently?" and there's that element of participating in

research and being involved that can allow you that space to think about yourself as a learner in addition to feeding into that community.

Yes, absolutely and I think, as Cath said, you know there's the benefits of participating it's also developmental, so you learn skills, you learn new things, it's opening up the possibility of a possible research that some students might want to move into you know as they progress in their academic life.

And very often students will have to do a research project of some sort and so it's very useful to see how they've been briefed, how they've been debriefed and you know all of those considerations that they're then subject to as a participant in that research, can then have a value in terms of their own learning.

Yes, exactly so it's sort of on-the-job experience that they can then draw on for future research projects.

Now you've mentioned the Adobe Connect rooms but there's also a website and a space students and go to because they're going to want to find out more about some of this so can you talk us through how they connect?

Okay, so it's an eSTEeM and community website we call it a eSTEeM &amp; Co... and it's a typical module type website so we have forums, we have an Adobe Connect room we have some resources and links through to lots of video and we have a YouTube channel which has videos of lots of our successful projects from the past. So, the students could go look at those videos and see the sort of work we've done and get a real flavour for the sorts of things that eSTEeM does. There's a forum so we've always liked to see people contributing on the forum, there's some threads that people can join in, set up by the Student Reference Panel who Cath mentioned, we just started working with. So, that's the space for people to come with their ideas just to find out more about the work of eSTEeM and to sort of fully understand how seriously the STEM Faculty takes teaching and learning and making

teaching and learning as best as we possibly can for our students.

And the links have gone in a chat for that so if you'd like to click on those H Jay put them in so you can find out more. Okay, you also as part of the conference today, you've mentioned that you're having a parallel conference for students but as part of today's conference and you also have a Students as Partners workshop.

Yes, quite exciting we should be starting in an hour or so. We'll be rushing over there! We've got a guest facilitator who's an expert in doing work on Students as Partners globally, he's run all sorts of workshops in Australia and Canada and so on, so we're very excited. So, we're sort of leaving in his hands is to run how this is going to run but the idea is that we're going to be generating lots of ideas. We've got quite a number of students who are attending that and what we want to do is just explore whatever ideas come forward as to what are the issues that we must be considering as we grow this bit of our work? What are the ways we can really engage with students in a meaningful way rather than just sort of superficial? What are the what are the ways that we can actually make some of

those ideas happen in a real sort of dynamic way? So, we're just waiting to see what's going to come out of this particular workshop.

No, that will be great and Professor Mick Healey's certainly got a lot to add on that and it's a big buzzword this whole idea of Students as Partners coupled with all of these power dynamics as well but it sounds as if you know there are various ways to really integrate students both in terms of the concepts as well as the pushing those through into actual research projects.

Yeah, absolutely and I think obviously it's the Open University we have challenges because our students are dispersed everywhere across the country and wider. So, we have different

challenges to, let's say a campus university, where a lot of these initiatives are taking place. So, I think it's quite exciting for us to be exploring this and actually I think Mick's very excited as well because it's

one of the first universities, distance universities that's really trying to tackle this head-on really.

Brilliant, and let's just finish then for people watching on the catch up again with the ways the people can get in contact so, Diane in addition to the website and that you've talked about, students can

also email if they'd like to find out more.

Yes, we have an email address which is a esteem@open.ac.uk. Drop us a line, come and talk to us through the email, raise any issues that you have with us. If you're interested in getting further

Involved drop us an email and we will get back in touch with you.

Brilliant, so that email if you're interested in finding out more is esteem@open.ac.uk. Well, Clem, Diane and Cath thank you so much, that's been a really interesting session. Are there any things that we haven't included that you'd like to include before we go?

Scholarship of teaching and learning is fascinating, get involved guys!

Says it all!

Well I hope the rest of the conference goes as well as it already has been and I'm sure people are going to really look forward to finding out more. So, do check out the website, do get involved as we've been

talking about there were so many benefits to and participating and of course the Open University really

appreciate and value the student voice it adds so much insight to our teaching which were constantly trying to improve and develop and a great opportunity to get involved for you also as Cath has mentioned. So, you can find out more on the website and that just leaves me to thank our guests for participating and wish you all the best for the rest of the eSTEeM conference this year.

Thank you all for watching today, see you at another event soon. Bye for now.