# Student Engagement Framework: *Students as Partners in Scholarship*

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## Introduction

This report presents a framework for engaging OU students as collaborators in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Engaging students in scholarship offers opportunities for student insights and expertise to inform teaching and learning (Bryson, 2014; Healey et al., 2014). The diversity of OU students requires a tailored approach that considers each student's circumstances as well as the research objectives of each project. Therefore, this framework provides a collection of activities, procedures and guidance, which can be applied and adapted as required. As part of the Scholarship Steering Group's workstream on student engagement, this framework has been developed through discussions with students and the scholarship centre directors and managers (i.e., eSTEeM, FASSTEST, Praxis and SCiLAB).

## Approach

The University's Scholarship Plan sets out three main ways of involving students in scholarship: "as participants in scholarship projects, helping to set priorities for scholarship activities and projects, and students as researchers" (The Open University, 2018, p. 8). This framework focuses specifically on involving students as researchers, rather than their involvement in advisory groups and reference panels (which help set priorities for activities and projects) or as research participants. Our approach within the student engagement workstream has been to develop an activity model, procedures and guidance in eSTEeM (the STEM Faculty's scholarship and innovation centre), which have been shared and further developed with the three other scholarship centres (i.e., FASSTEST in FASS, Praxis in WELS and SCiLAB in FBL). This report synthesises these resources as a framework to facilitate the involvement of students as researchers in SoTL.

## Student Engagement Framework

This framework has been developed over the last four years with contributions from a range of staff and students:

- The activity model was developed in 2019 by Diane Butler (eSTEeM Director) and Cath Brown (President of the OU Student Association).
- The student scholarship register was developed by Diane Ford (eSTEeM Centre Manager) in 2020.
- The guidance on recognition and reward, support and training, and communication and engagement were developed by the eSTEeM student reference panel and management team (in 2020-2021).
- The "Student Partner in Educational Research" digital badge recognising students' participation in SoTL was designed by Diane Butler and Diane Ford and is awarded through OpenLearn.

- Finally, the mapping of the OU's Employability Framework to the scholarship activity model was developed in 2021-2022 by Carolin Decker-Lange (SCiLAB Deputy Director) and Trevor Collins (eSTEeM Director).

## *Student Scholarship Activity Model*

This model, developed by Diane Butler and Cath Brown, describes anticipated scholarship activities that students could engage in, arranged as three tiers (see Figure 1). Tier 1 activities are small, well defined tasks (like checking survey questions) that could be undertaken without prior scholarship experience or training, and which could be managed through a student scholarship panel. Activities requiring more time, that would benefit from prior experience or training (like facilitating focus groups and interviewing) are grouped under tier 2, and typically involve contributing to a specific project. Finally, more open-ended activities, involving students in the development and running of SoTL projects are grouped under tier 3, and involve students as partners on projects.

We expect the number of opportunities and availability of students to participate in these activities are likely to decrease at each tier, as the level of engagement and prior experience required increases. Students could engage in any activity across the tiers at any time, according to their knowkedge and skills. The three tiers represent categories of tasks and are not intended to align with the student's module level (which are also labelled 1 to 3 for undergraduate modules).



| Tier 1. Student scholarship panel | • Provide feedback on priorities<br>• Sense checking proposals<br>• Comment on  surveys/interview scripts<br>• Recruitment pool for greater engagement |
| Tier 2. Contributions to specific projects | • Running student focus groups<br>• Conducting student interviews<br>• Moderating student forums<br>• Providing specific expertise to project team |
| Tier 3. Students as full partners on projects | • Co-developers of the project proposal<br>• Co-creators of project methodology<br>• Co-researchers on the project team |

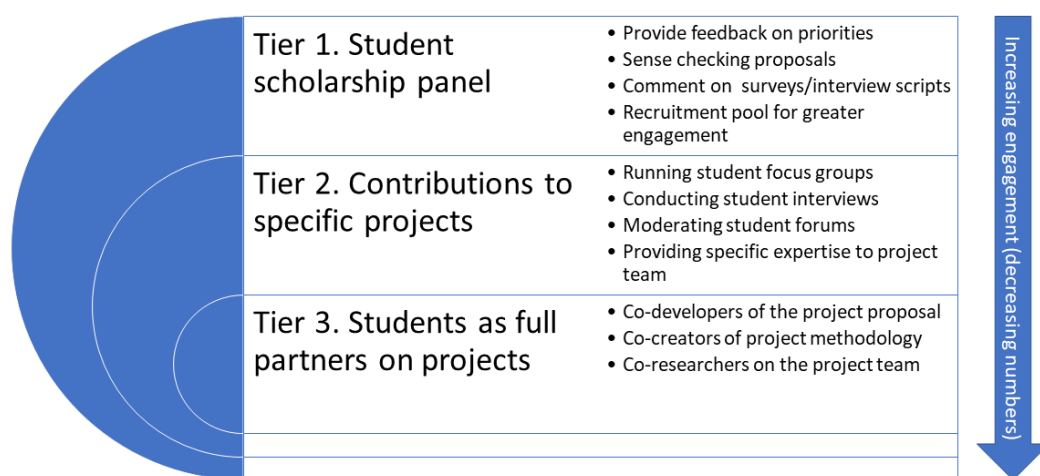Increasing engagement (decreasing numbers)

*Figure 1. The students as partners in scholarship activity model illustrating three tiers of example activities requiring increasing levels of student engagement from tier 1 (lower engagement) to 3 (higher engagement).*

## *Registering Student Interest in Scholarship*

When discussing the involvement of students as researchers with the eSTEeM student reference panel (a group of six student volunteers), the panel members offered to help us form a working group to develop the framework. Through a series of working group meetings, we explored four key areas: registering interest in scholarship, recognising and rewarding student scholarship, support and training for students, and student communication and engagement. This and the following three sub-sections include summaries from the discussions and recommendations.

Having identified a range of SoTL activities that would benefit from student engagement, we developed a procedure for students to register their interest in scholarship based on a model

previously used with Associate Lecturers. A form[1] to record a student's contact details and interests was developed and made available through the eSTEeM website for students to return by email. This has been used for a few years, resulting in a student scholarship register of around 30 students. To date, the availability of students within eSTEeM has exceeded the demand from project teams.

## Ethical Considerations

The ethics of undertaking research about our teaching and learning practices with students requires careful consideration to avoid any sense of coercion and ensure students are able to give their informed consent to participate[2]. For example, the careful use of language can help position students as participants in a study (rather than the subjects of a study) and a focus on investigating the teaching and learning processes (rather than the teachers and learners) can help establish an ethos of constructive inquiry.

When engaging students as co-researchers the power dynamics of the institution and the roles of educator and student can be a further source of pressure that warrants careful consideration. For example, asking a student to undertake research involving their own cohort of students should be avoided, as it could introduce a potential conflict of interest. Establishing a partnership with students within the context of the formal university structure requires a recognition of the value of the students' perspectives and what they bring to the project, with fair and equitable forms of recognition and reward.

## Recognising and Rewarding Student Scholarship

Alongside the development of the student scholarship activity model, Diane Butler and Diane Ford designed a digital badge to formally recognise student participation in scholarship. The "Student Partner in Educational Research" badge[3] is awarded in recognition of eight hours of participation in research activities related to scholarship. These activities may include: writing/trialling student surveys, conducting student interviews and running focus groups, or other research related activities to support the successful completion of a scholarship project.

The badge is delivered through the OpenLearn platform, which provides a secure way of awarding and authenticating each badge. The badge can also be shared on social media, such as LinkedIn. In practice, as a student participates in SoTL activities these are logged, and on completion of eight cumulative hours across one or more projects, the awarding group (e.g., eSTEeM) sends them an email with a link to their digital badge and a summary of their activities.

The students on the working group welcomed the opportunity for students to gain a digital badge and encouraged us to include specific details of each student's activities, to help them demonstrate their skills and experience. We also discussed forms of payment, which may be appropriate for activities requiring more engagement from students (e.g., tier 2 and 3 activities). This was one area where sensitivity to each student's circumstances was considered essential.

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[1] https://www5.open.ac.uk/scholarship-and-innovation/esteem/working-with-us/students-partners-scholarship

[2] For a further discussion of students as partners and ethics see Session 4 of the 'Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in STEM' Badged Open Course on OpenLearn. Available online at: https://www.open.edu/openlearn/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=109324

[3] For further information on the 'Student Partner in Educational Research' badge see the description provided on OpenLearn. Available online at: https://www.open.edu/openlearn/science-maths-technology/student-partner-educational-research

It was felt strongly that a 'one-size-fits-all' payment policy would be impractical. A range of options was identified, including vouchers and direct payment (see Table 1). For individuals where a payment would be appropriate the Living Wage[4] was considered a suitable level of reimbursement for common tasks. For tasks involving higher level skills and expertise, which students may bring from their professional backgrounds, it was felt payment should be commensurate with the task (up to the day-lecturer rate for Associate Lecturers).

Other forms of recognition were felt to relate to each student's level of participation, consistent with any other project contributor. For example, it would be appropriate to acknowledge a student's contributions to tier 1 activities in reports and publications, whereas for students that are more involved in a project, it may be more appropriate to include them as project team members and as authors in reports and publications in line with their contribution. The underpinning principle being to recognise and reward each contribution fairly.

*Table 1. An example of a Students as Partners payment structure.*

| Student involvement | Type of activity | Duration | Remuneration |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Student Reference Panel* | Consultation and discussion on matters of engaging students as partners in STEM scholarship<br><br>Provide feedback on priorities for project calls<br><br>Provide advice/guidance on student as partners activities | 3 x 1 hr meetings per year over 2-year period = 6 hrs | Digital badge / certificate |
| | | Preparatory work for meetings/reviewing calls over 2 years = 3 hrs | |
| | | Attendance at eSTEeM Conference and Online Student Conference = 10 hrs | |
| Tier 1.<br><br>*Student scholarship panel* | Sense checking proposals | 30 mins – 2 hours | £10 voucher |
| | Comment on surveys/interview scripts | 2 hours – 4 hours | £20 voucher |
| | Recruitment pool for greater engagement | 4 hours – up to 8 hours | £30 voucher |
| Tier 2.<br><br>*Contributions to specific projects* | Running student focus groups | 1 hour – 2 hours | £20 voucher |
| | Conducting student interviews | 2 hours – 4 hours | £30 voucher |
| | Moderating student forums<br><br>Providing specific expertise to project team | 4 hours – up to 8 hours<br><br>8 hours or more | £40 voucher<br><br>Digital badge |

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[4] https://www.livingwage.org.uk

| Tier 3. *Students as full partners on projects* | Co-developers of the project proposal  Co-creators of project methodology  Co-researchers on the project team | 12 hours or more | Remuneration at living wage hourly rate / consultants' rate, where applicable / digital badge / certificate |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |

When sharing and discussing this work with the other scholarship centres, SCiLAB expressed an interest in aligning the student scholarship activity model with the OU's Employability Framework (The Open University, 2020). This resonated with the student working group's support for a transcript as part of the digital badge. Through discussions with the SCiLAB student reference group, students from the Faculty of Business and Law indicated they would find such a mapping helpful. Carolin Decker-Lange (SCiLAB Deputy Director) then worked with us to produce a spreadsheet mapping the activity model to the categories and levels of the Employability Framework, demonstrating each case with a descriptive example.

The filtering features of the spreadsheet and descriptive examples, make it relatively straight forward to select the most applicable category from the Employability Framework for each student scholarship activity. The aim is to include the Employability Framework category as a way of clarifying the role description when seeking student researchers and recognising students' contributions when logging their activities. We also shared the spreadsheet with the OU's Academic Lead for Employability (Mick McCormick), who was supportive and encouraging of this initiative.

## *Support and Training for Students*

Each of the four faculty scholarship centres organise community events and workshops to support the professional development of staff involved in scholarship, and which could be made available for student researchers. When discussing support and training for students with the student working group, we noted that students' capacity and opportunity to engage in synchronous (online or face-to-face) events can be limited, and that complementary asynchronous resources could be easier to access (and also beneficial to staff). These could include how-to guides and bite-size video resources on specific topics.

During the last two years, we delivered our training programme online (through Microsoft Teams), which has made these events more accessible to home workers and staff based in the national centres. Holding our events online, has also made it easier (and more socially acceptable) to make recordings available to colleagues that were unable to attend. As the scholarship centres expand the intended audience for their training programmes to include student researchers, it will be beneficial to consider how our synchronous offer can be complemented and extended by asynchronous tools and resources.

## *Student Communication and Engagement*

The student working group highlighted the challenges of communicating with students through email and encouraged us to consider the use of social media (specifically Twitter and Facebook). To attract new students into scholarship, it was suggested that we time our offer when students are most likely to have the motivation and time to respond, such as at the beginning of a module, between the final assessment and their results, or in the time between modules.

There was a recommendation from the group to work in partnership with others. For example, to include SoTL information in school and faculty media campaigns, on subject and module websites, and cascade messages via module teams or Associate Lecturers. Topics that were thought to interest and attract students, included employability, teaching careers, educational research and research methods.

In addition to attracting new students, we need to consider how to maintain engagement and interest of existing students that participate in SoTL. This could be through regular newsletters or updates written for students, student community events, and invitations to attend SoTL events (e.g., training workshops, seminars and conferences).

## Conclusion

In developing this student engagement framework, we have explored how a 'students as partners' approach could be applied to engage OU students as researchers in SoTL. To conclude, we offer the following recommendations for engaging students as researchers in SoTL to the scholarship centre management teams and pan-university scholarship management team:

- At the proposal stage, encourage project teams to consider whether and how the project could benefit from involving student researchers.
- Establish procedures for students registering their interest in SoTL and inviting students to participate in SoTL projects and undertake specific research tasks.
- Apply the student scholarship activity model and OU Employability Framework to prompt project teams to consider and clarify role descriptions for student researchers and help establish mutually beneficial and ethical partnership working.
- Take account of individual student's circumstances and opportunities to participate and ensure their contributions are recognised and rewarded fairly (e.g., through a digital badge and transcript, vouchers and/or direct payment).
- Consider how the inclusion of student researchers enhances and expands SoTL, and the implications this has for training and community events, where the intended audience are studying and may have employment and family commitments.
- Target communications to students at appropriate times and through specific channels to maximise the likelihood of engagement, and through these demonstrate the benefits of SoTL and student research.

## Acknowledgements

As noted above, this framework was produced over a four-year period by a range of OU staff and students engaged in supporting SoTL. In particular, we would like to thank the members of the eSTEeM student reference panel that formed a students as partners working group to develop this framework: Cath Brown, Charlotte Hancox, Colin Pritchard and Katie MacFarlane.

## How to Cite This Report

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**Contact**

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