Get Ahead: Promoting student success with a conference by and for students

Students and their learning are at the heart of the three CETLs (LearnHigher, Write Now and RLO-CETL) at London Metropolitan University. We work with each other and with staff across the university to encourage a whole range of learning activities, which in turn is said to drive the Learning and Teaching agenda throughout the university (Deputy VC Paul Lister in Key Note at Get Ahead). This year we hosted our second student conference designed to promote the academic and employability success of London Met’s students and to showcase the work of the three CETLs.

The conference itself is now an annual event and is designed to bring students from diverse backgrounds together to celebrate learning and teaching. Our reflections upon the conference, including presenting at the Student CETL Network conference in Plymouth July 2008, are designed to illustrate how learning development at its best harnesses student energy and motivation in active and emancipatory ways – and shifts learning development and support dramatically away from a ‘remedial’ backwater.

Our conference, as well as involving staff from the CETLs and many other academic departments, is an event for students, organised by students and supported by students themselves. A recent London Met alumnus took a lead role in organising Get Ahead – he has contributed to this case study and also to our presentation at the Student CETL Network Conference; his report upon that student conference concludes this case study (see below).

For a brief overview of what our conference consisted of, please go to:

http://www.youtube.com/user/adm111

The CETLs supported the conference by providing a free lunch and ‘goody bags’ containing memory sticks loaded with LearnHigher and RLO-CETL resources and with links to many useful websites. The conference offered academic presentations on various aspects of writing, reading and note making, to more technological sessions, such as using a mobile phone for study – with many of the sessions delivered by students, including our writing mentors. Where students felt that they lacked the confidence to present, we trained them in successful presentation strategies and helped them to develop and deliver dynamic and engaging sessions.

Subsequent evaluation deemed the conference a high quality, high level event:
Our Get Ahead conference directly impacts upon the students who attend on the day. Further the conference demonstrates to subject academics and to senior management that there are creative and innovative ways of supporting students – and that so much is achieved when students are actively involved rather than silenced. If you want more information on how to run a student conference or if you would like to be involved in our next conference (planned for 11 February 2009) please contact:

s.sinfield@londonmet.ac.uk
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Please find below:

- Sample of Conference publicity
- Extract from Report on Student CETL Network Conference, including an illustration of our conference planning toolkit
- Link to power point presentation upon the Conference
- Link to PDF of conference planning toolkit.

Sample of Conference blurb (the conference was supported by a website and offered online booking)

Get Ahead 2008: Achieving Success at University

Please invite your students

A conference for students with the title ‘Get Ahead: Achieving Success at University’ is going to be held on 13th February, 2008 at the Graduate Centre, North Campus of London Metropolitan University.

The event is organised by the University’s three Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), namely, LearnHigher, Write Now and Reusable Learning Objects (RLO-CETL).

The Conference aim is to raise students’ awareness of strategies and resources for study success and the role of the CETLs within the university. As well as the academic sessions, the University support services are keen to share information about what they can do to help students make the most of the additional services on offer throughout their time at University. The University Library Services, the Career Development and Employment Service, Reach Volunteering, Learning Development Unit and the Students Union will be hosting stalls to offer advice and information throughout the day.
We have invited publishers along, and a variety of text books will be available on the day at very attractive rates.

The outline of the day is anticipated to be as follows:

- **10.00 – 10.30** Registration & refreshments
- **10.30 - 10.45:** Welcome – by the CETL Directors
- **10.45 - 11.00:** Keynote from Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Development) Paul Lister
- **11.00 - 13.00** Parallel sessions on areas such as ‘Writing for Success’, ‘How to achieve good grades’, ‘Reading for Success’ and ‘Employability’
- **13.00 - 14.00** Lunch and London Metropolitan University Choir
- **14.00 – 16.00** Parallel sessions on areas such as ‘How to use PowerPoint’, ‘Getting a First’ and ‘Planning your Dissertation’.
- **16.00 - 17.00** Plenary session - Guest speakers
  Entertainment from the ‘Capoeira Society’
  Closing remarks

For more information contact:
Andy Mitchell: [a.mitchell@londonmet.ac.uk](mailto:a.mitchell@londonmet.ac.uk)
Bookings via website: [http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/getahead/](http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/getahead/)

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**Raising the student voice: Get Ahead at the CETL Student Network Conference, Plymouth - June 16th/17th 2008**

Three of us (Andy Mitchell, Tom Burns & Sandra Sinfield) presented on Get Ahead under the banner of ‘Raising the student voice’ at the Student CETL Network Conference. It seems appropriate to end this case study with a report on a student conference presented at a student conference, written by our student organiser:

**Short Report**

By Andy Mitchell (CETL Student Rep)

The academic conferences I have attended previously have tended to be hurried affairs, with delegates rushing around from workshop to workshop or taking in the poster presentation whilst consuming whatever buffet is on offer. Some of those conferences have also included strands with the word ‘student’ somewhere in the title. However, on closer inspection these sessions are generally led by academics reporting their interpretation on something students have been involved in.

Probably the most important aspect of this conference was the opportunity it afforded students to present first-hand, in their own voice, a project they have been involved in during the past year. On occasion the presentations were delivered with an academic staff member, supporting the idea of collaboration and partnership. Students were encouraged to lead each workshop and supported throughout. It was sometimes difficult to tell who the staff member was and who the student was. And it was clear that the students and staff were very enthusiastic about what they were doing.
The conference itself followed a traditional shape (similar to our own one day event), with 16 workshops spread over two days. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, but more importantly it was not rushed which left time for delegates to digest what they had heard and learnt and share observations and thoughts. It also left us with plenty of time to build ideas for our own CETL work.

Our own presentation, which discussed the Get Ahead Conference held in London Metropolitan University on February 13th 2008, was attended by the representatives from both the HEA and NUS. All expressed an interest to attend our Get Ahead conference next year. In fact, we received quite a few offers from academics to either present or to attend, which is excellent news.

Feedback on our presentation was also positive, with one student saying that "Your enthusiasm for students shone through...".

Another feature of our workshop was a simple conference planning resource – in the form of a laminated A3 ‘poster’ (see Figure 1) - that we had designed to support the event.

![Conference Planning Resource](image)

**Figure 1 – conference planning resource**

I was surprised how well such a simple design had been received by those who used it. We ended up giving most away, notably to the HEA; for others to use in their own institutions, which I found puzzling but brilliant at the same time.

We also embedded a two minute promotional video of the Getahead conference into our presentation that I have now uploaded to You Tube. It can be watched here:

[http://www.youtube.com/user/adm111](http://www.youtube.com/user/adm111)
To end, I would say that this conference, like our own Get Ahead conference, was a really positive experience which demonstrates what students can achieve if they are given the opportunity – and how positive it is for staff and students to collaborate actively. The CETL Student Network is something I believe we should all be supporting in the future, as its aims and objectives are something that not only enhance the student (and staff) experience, but can also play an important part in developing education.