Student–staff partnerships: a what, why, and how guide

The following is an overview of what we mean by student-staff partnerships (SSPs) and the role they can play in supporting student transition and progression. To discuss SSPs further, email Mark Van Der Enden (mv92@le.ac.uk).

What?

Student–staff partnerships are an increasingly common feature of Higher Education and represent an approach to student engagement widely adopted both domestically and internationally. The University of Leicester, in its Learning Strategy 2017-2021, prioritizes the creation of an institutional community of partnership between staff and students.

A comprehensive and useful definition of partnership in this context is provided by Allison Cook-Sather, Katherine Bovill and Peter Felten (2014: 6-7) and worth quoting in full:

‘[Partnership is]... a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis.’

Working in partnership enables students and staff to benefit from each other’s experiences, insights and expertise. It is a process in which students are enabled not only to share their views but also think with staff about how to address issues of concern and to help implement solutions. Working in partnership invites students to share in the responsibility of shaping their learning and teaching environment and therefore helps us to challenge the unhelpful positioning of students as ‘consumers’ (Felten et al., 2013: 64; QAA 2010). Inviting students to become active participants in their own learning and teaching can help us to build a community of practice in which all participants are actively engaged.

The Higher Education Academy have developed an widely-cited framework for working with students as partners (see Healey et al, 2014: 7) The framework (HEA, 2015) identifies the following areas (in learning and teaching) in which student–staff partnership can take place:

- Learning, teaching and assessment
- Curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy
- Subject based research and inquiry
- Scholarship of learning and teaching

Practical examples of partnership working in these areas can include initiatives in which students work with staff to:

- Improve assessment and feedback methods
- Gather and interpret module feedback
- Conduct pedagogic research
- Facilitate Peer learning
Co-design courses and curricula
Develop educational content and resources.

Partnership also refers to the creation of opportunities for learners to engage in research, peer learning and problem-based learning – experiences in which students take on greater responsibility for their own learning and that of peers.

Partnership can involve selected individual students or it can involve an entire cohort. It can range across a specific module or across a programme of department (e.g. in the context of curriculum change and development). Partnership can equally occur on an institutional level (e.g. the Students’ Union as a partner in driving educational change).

Why?

Recent research (Bell 201: 2) highlights how working in partnership with students has led to:

- Increased graduate employability attributes, confidence, leadership, and problem-solving skills
- Greater group cohesion and self-awareness
- Improved attendance, marks and performance.

By inviting students to share their views on their educational experiences and by empowering them to contribute towards shaping this experience, students will be better enabled to become engaged and active learners. Increased student motivation and enthusiasm and sense of community are all reported in the literature as flowing from partnership activities, as are enhanced and deeper learning (Broonan et al, 2015, 664; Bovill et al, 2011, 5; NUS, 11; Fieldsend-Danks 2016, 92). Students particularly value inquiry based/authentic research experiences (Butcher and Maunder 2014, 143).

However, by far the most important rationale for engaging students as partners is the experiences and expertise as learners they can bring to the table (Cook-Sather 2015: 7). Students have unique insights in, and direct experience of, learning and teaching in Higher Education (Bovill et al., 2011: 2; Bron et al., 2016: 1; Cook-Sather, 2014: 32). Working in partnership is about providing a platform for a meaningful engagement with these insights, a forum in which staff and students can share and benefit from each other’s varied perspectives.

Studen–staff partnership approaches to learning and teaching in Higher Education offer a highly practical approach to some of the major challenges facing current HE practice. It has been highlighted already how working with students as partners can increase student belonging, motivation and engagement. Co-design of assessment criteria or pre-class negotiation of assessment methods or course handbooks are practical examples of ways in which this might be accomplished.

The University of Leicester’s Learning Strategy 2017-2021 lays out the five key institutional commitments. These key commitments are about providing a vibrant, successful academic portfolio; assuring and enhancing quality; supporting induction and transition; providing transformative teaching and learning; and finally establishing a community of partnership. Working in partnership with students is thus a key institutional priority and one that has the potential, as illustrated in the above, to affect a range of other key institutional commitments and priorities. Engaging with students on all of these issues, and sharing the responsibilities for designing and implementing improvements, will provide the building blocks for a powerful academic community in which both students and staff are engaged, valued
and enabled to share and collaborate.

How?

As highlighted above, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting student–staff partnerships are a powerful way of working which can significantly engage students with their learning and teaching and address both practical and strategic challenges and opportunities. Setting up your own student–staff partnership project, however, might seem challenging. Below are a number of practical considerations for those interested in adopting student-staff partnerships.

There is no one-fits-all model for student–staff partnerships. Various frameworks and models of partnership working are in existence. The HEA framework for student engagement through partnership is, however, a good place to start, as is the accompanying publication (HEA 2014, 2015). The framework provides a general overview of some of the areas in which partnership working can take place and highlights various practical models which can serve as inspiration.

The starting point for your engagement with student–staff partnership approaches will mostly likely revolve around a perceived pedagogical challenge or opportunity. It is this pedagogical priority (e.g. increasing seminar interaction, or investigating engagement with feedback) that will decide the shape and form of your partnership project. Figure 1. raises a number of questions to consider beforehand. Module conveners or programme teams will want to take into account a number of factors including their students’ needs, the course structure and available resources when deciding on the design of their scheme. Of primary importance, of course, are the aims and intended outcomes of the project – what is it that the initiative attempts to do and how will it achieve this? Equally important are the following questions:

- What type of partnership activity would be appropriate?
- Is the initiative to be a one-off project looking at a specific area of practice, or a more formally embedded activity that becomes part of the mainstream curriculum?
- Will partnership working be credit bearing or not?

If partnership working is already an established practice within your educational setting, this may significantly impact the design and scope of your initiative. Both staff and students may need some time and/or training to get accustomed to a new way of working. There might initially even be resistance. Below we have identified a four step (adapted from JISC) action plan which can serve as a starting point for designing your own project together with details of how the LLI can help and support this plan.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Step in developing SSP activity</th>
<th>How the LLI can help and support you</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 Identify and develop a student–staff partnership project idea relevant to your own teaching context.</td>
<td>By working with you to devise relevant student–staff partnership models.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Establish the aims and goals of your project: why working in partnership is appropriate in this context, and how the project aligns with departmental and institutional strategies.</td>
<td>Supporting the design of your project and identifying the most appropriate partnership model for your purposes. We have extensive experience of working with students as partners and have appropriate models readily available. We can also help identify</td>
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3. Establish how students and staff are going to be recognized and rewarded for their participation. Identify why they would be willing to engage. By helping you set up a reward and recognition scheme. We curate several student accreditation schemes which might suit your particular context. We can also offer your project a platform for dissemination through our workshops, conference events and the *Journal for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (JLTHE)*.

4. Identify how you would like to recruit students and consider any training that needs to be provided. Supporting you in recruiting students and in devising and providing relevant training.

Additional to these five steps Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten (2014) offer the following key advice:

- Start small
- Be patient
- Invite students to participate rather than requiring participation
- Cultivate support
- Learn from mistakes

The LLI is on hand to support you in this and set up your own student–staff partnership project. Our team is available to work with you to design a scheme which works within your department and context and can support you in its implementation and evaluation. We will also guide you (if required) through the requirements of obtaining HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Report) accreditation for your student partners and/or obtaining digital Open Badge accreditation.

If you are interested in setting up a student-staff partnership within your department, or would simply like to find out more, please contact Dr Mark van der Enden (*mv92@leicester.ac.uk*).
Figure 1. Working in Partnership: practical considerations
References


