Student–staff partnerships: Frequently asked questions

This resource highlights some of the most frequently asked questions when it comes to working with students as partners. The questions and answers are based on Alison Cook-Sather’s, Catherine Bovill’s and Peter Felten’s book on students as partners in learning and teaching; and Uppsala University’s active student participation website.

To discuss these or other questions further, contact Dr Mark Van Der Enden (mv92@leicester.ac.uk)

**Question:** Why work with students as partners? Why change my practice?

**Answer:** Student–staff partnership is about developing and evaluating your practice in collaboration with your students. Students have valuable insights and perspectives to share on their own learning – insights and perspectives which can enable staff to address some of the pedagogical challenges and opportunities facing not only their own teaching but HE practice as a whole.

**Question:** What is in it for me?

**Answer:** As a member of staff working with students as partners you can benefit from student perspectives on their own learning and incorporate these, where appropriate, in to your teaching. Given greater responsibility and ownership of their learning, students are likely to develop into more engaged students.

**Question:** What kinds of expertise do students possess?

**Answer:** Naturally, this will be highly context-dependent and will differ depending on the students concerned. All students, however, do have direct experience of studying, attending classes and seminars, undertaking assessment tasks, interpreting feedback etc. on their prospective courses of study. As such, students’ insights and experiences can offer valuable perspectives and can significantly enhance our understanding of learning and teaching in HE.

**Question:** Does working in partnership mean that students take over?

**Answer:** In short, no. Partnership is not about students taking over, it is about staff and students learning from each other’s different perspectives and taking joint responsibility for improving the learning and teaching environment.

**Question:** Is working in partnership with students’ very time consuming?

**Answer:** Partnership working can involve substantial inputs of time in the shorter-term, but it can also save time in the longer-run. Enabling students to take greater ownership of and responsibility for their learning leads to more engaged and active participation which facilitates increased understanding and deeper learning. The initial time investment can be offset, therefore, as students become more engaged with learning outcomes.
**Question:** How do I convince students to participate and take greater responsibility for their learning?

**Answer:** Students participating in student–staff partnership initiatives can/should be offered tangible benefits. If the partnership working engages the whole cohort within the context of the curriculum students will typically receive credit for participation. Working outside of the curriculum or with a small group of students staff can consider paying students for their input and/or acknowledging participation through accreditation schemes (in the context of the University of Leicester this might be the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), Leicester Award, or a Digital Innovation Partnership (DIP)).

Students may, at first, be unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with this new way of working and may need support and encouragement in the initial stages. A good place to start is by establishing a common understanding of the aims and goals of the partnership and the roles of students and teachers in it. Clearly identify what you expect students to contribute and be responsible for. Making sure that the partnership relationship is authentic, and student input is not only valued but also acted upon, is equally important in demonstrating to students that you are serious about enlisting their collaboration.

**Question:** Is working in partnership with students suitable for large group teaching?

**Answer:** Yes, it is. Working with larger groups can present specific challenges but these do not preclude possibilities for partnership working. The LLI can advise on questions of scale and help you design a project that is suitable to your specific pedagogical context.

**Question:** Will students not think they are part of some kind educational experiment?

**Answer:** Working in partnership is not about experimenting on your students. It can often be about experimenting with your students. If students are genuinely invited as partners in developing their learning and teaching experience they are more likely to respond positively to partnership activities.

**Question:** How can the Leicester Learning Institute (LLI) help?

**Answer:** The LLI can help you design your student – staff partnership project. We have extensive in-house experience of student – staff partnership working and are able to advice on student – staff partnership models most suited to your pedagogical needs. We also offer support in evaluating the impact of your project and can facilitate student accreditation (e.g. through HEAR or DIP).

**References**
