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The Emerging Landscape of Student–Staff Partnerships in Higher Education

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What Is a Student–Staff Partnership?

Within the context of higher education, students as partners is a way for students and staff to work together to enhance learning and teaching (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) offer this useful definition, where partnership is:

staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement...partnership is a relationship in which all participants are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process. (p. 7)

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Of course, students may be “engaged” in a variety of different ways, including quality assurance, research strategies and even institutional governance (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016). Deeley and Bovill (2017) argue that students should be involved with designing assessment and feedback processes to enhance their learning experience and assessment literacy. Students may take on a number of different roles such as consultant, co-researcher, pedagogical co-designer and representative (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016), and partnerships could be situated within a module, or across an entire programme of study, as well as outside or within course curricula (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Matthews (2016, pp. 2–3) explains that, crucially, this engagement is underpinned by a new mindset, that the:

students as partners discourse focuses on student-academic partnerships as a process for engaging with rather than doing to or doing for students. The linchpin of partnership is a relational process between students and academics/staff underpinned by a mindset – and an institutional culture that values the collaborative interaction between all members of the university community.

In today’s marketised higher education environment, universities are under increased pressure to engage their students (Carey, 2013). However, researchers have suggested that within this increasingly economically driven higher education context, including students in student–staff partnerships has the ability to offer space for an alternative institutional culture (Gravett, Kinchin, & Winstone, 2019; Kandiko Howson & Weller, 2016; Matthews, 2016).

Benefits of Student–Staff Partnerships for Students

In their systematic review, Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) reported that 92% of their reviewed papers reported positive outcomes for students as a result of partnership, and the authors found that over half of the papers mentioned increased student engagement or motivation. In

addition, students also reported having increased confidence and self-efficacy, increased understanding of staff and an enhanced relationship between students and staff. A literature search in this area has shown four main benefits for students including enhanced engagement and learning, personal development, positive relationships and skill development/employability.

Enhanced Engagement and Learning

Students have commented that engaging in partnerships can have many positive outcomes including enhancing others' learning, having a deeper understanding of their learning and the teaching they receive, as well as feeling more responsible for their learning (Jarvis, Dickerson, & Stockwell, 2013). Deeley and Bovill (2017) found that including students in assessment and feedback processes can have positive outcomes for students' engagement. The students in their research felt that they had a level of autonomy within their work, which led to responsibility, enhanced engagement and to the students adopting a deeper approach to learning and increased confidence. Partnerships may also allow students to feel empowered and to develop an increased sense of belonging (Moore-Cherry, Healey, Nicholson, & Andrews, 2016).

Personal Development

In their qualitative analysis, Curran (2017) found that personal development was one of the most prominent benefits of student–staff partnerships. Curran (2017) reported that students and staff felt that their self-knowledge had greatly improved, and that students and staff had gained new ways of thinking, new skills and increased confidence. In addition, students have reported that taking on a consultant role in a student–staff partnership increases their confidence and communication skills as well as enabling them to be more aware of the university's teaching and learning approaches (Jensen & Bennett, 2016). This is supported by Mihans, Long, and Felten (2008) who found that, through working with staff in partnership, students gain confidence in themselves which is transferred

to other areas of their lives. Likewise Bergmark and Westman (2016, p. 37) found that co-creating the curriculum enabled the “transformation of students’ views on teaching and learning”.

Positive Relationships

Although there is evidence that issues of power are still present in the relationships between staff and students working in partnership, research has shown that staff and students often report positive changes in these relationships. Maunder (2015) found students and staff valued the opportunity to work in a new collaborative way. Students have reported that working with staff in consultancy roles allowed them to feel more equal by creating a space where students and staff can work together outside of traditional roles (Jensen & Bennett, 2016). Students have also reported that working in partnership can reduce the barriers between staff and students and create a friendly and interactive environment (Curran, 2017). Staff also reported that partnership allowed them to get to know their students better (Maunder, 2015). From the perspective of the student, researchers have found that students also value the professional contacts they receive as part of working with established researchers (Ahmad et al., 2017).

Skills Development/Employability

Research skills and experience are often cited as important benefits of partaking in student–staff partnerships for students by learning through doing (Bovill et al., 2010; Diaz et al., 2015; Maunder, 2015). Maunder (2015) suggests that working in partnership with staff allows students to gain valuable research methods skills. These research skills are thought to be “valuable CV material” (Maunder, 2015, p. 4). In addition, Jarvis, Dickerson, and Stockwell (2013) suggest that engaging in a partnership can increase employability skills for both students and staff. This is shown by students’ success in achieving interviews for new roles after taking part in a partnership project.

Benefits of Student–Staff Partnerships for Staff

Key benefits for staff, as cited by Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) are thought to be an enhanced relationship with students, development of new approaches to teaching and increased understanding of students' experience. This is echoed by Conner (2012), and Charkoudian, Bitners, Bloch, and Nawal (2015, p. 7) who describe partnership as leading to “mutual understanding and admiration”. Gravett et al. (2019, p. 10) explain how partnership can lead to “a vibrant exchange of ideas” and a more “flexible pedagogic culture”. Cook-Sather (2016) explains that opportunities for new academics to engage in dialogue with students outside of the standard teacher–student relationship can help staff to develop their academic identities. Notably, Gravett et al. state that the benefits of partnership for all go beyond individual practices: “partnership is not simply an individual practice but an ethos: a dialogic and values-based approach to learning and teaching” (2019, p. 13).

Challenges to a Successful Partnership

Although there is much evidence to suggest that student–staff partnerships are beneficial, there are of course also potential challenges to successful partnership practices. Our literature search has found a substantial amount of literature discussing the challenges, with the majority of research conducted from a staff perspective. It is possible that there is less published material reporting the more undesirable outcomes of student–staff partnerships from students' perspectives as they may feel unable to openly discuss these challenges. In Mercer-Mapstone et al.'s (2017) review of literature in this area, the authors found few students reporting negative outcomes such as issues relating to power, lack of improvement in the desired area and decreased motivation, engagement or ownership for learning. On the other hand, although also in the minority, some staff reported that partnerships caused feelings of vulnerability and increased stress, and reinforced the issues of power in the relationship.

Power Relations

Due to the nature of the traditional roles that students and staff occupy, a prominent theme in the literature is the difficulty of power relations. Deeley and Bovill (2017) argue that the roles students and teachers traditionally adhere to are socially constructed. These traditional roles may be reinforced by our interactions as well as our social practices, where the power is more often held by a lecturer rather than a student (Allin, 2014). Ultimately, staff wield power in terms of students' grades, and degree outcomes (Deeley & Bovill, 2017). Students have argued that the traditional student–teacher model in higher education is “rigid, hierarchical, and dismissive of student contributions and expertise about how teaching and learning should be conducted” (Matthews, Dwyer, Hine, & Turner, 2018, p. 961).

In Mercer-Mapstone et al.'s (2017) systematic review, the authors found that students suggested that partnerships reinforced existing hierarchical structures. Furthermore, staff were also concerned that partnership with students reinforced pre-existing inequalities. When involved in curriculum design meetings with staff, Carey (2013) found that students often felt outnumbered, uncomfortable and occasionally threatened as a result of intrinsic power imbalances, and that students needed further support to be able to successfully contribute to meetings. From the perspective of staff, Murphy, Nixon, Brooman, and Fearon (2017) found that handing over power to students challenged staff members' perception of their professional legitimacy. Academics could perceive student partnerships to be threatening and may be more reluctant to share power with students (Bell, 2016). Staff have also reported that working in partnership with students can make them feel overwhelmed and vulnerable (Cook-Sather, 2014a), perhaps due to the fact that they have to share aspects of their teaching and learning with students.

A further consideration is the differences that may arise in partnerships with postgraduate, rather than undergraduate students. For example, in case studies of student–staff partnerships in undergraduate and Master's programmes in geography, the students enrolled in a Master's programme had entirely different demands placed on them, perhaps due

to the assumption that their partnership possessed more merit than those including undergraduate students (Moore-Cherry et al., 2016).

Curriculum Design

Another emerging theme in the literature is the challenges of including students in the design of curriculum in higher education. Bovill and Woolmer (2018, p. 419) explain that the principles of partnership “provide a set of values that could guide co-creation *of* and *in* the curriculum”. However, academic staff report that the idea of sharing control with students in terms of creating curriculum can be threatening, risky and nerve-racking (Bovill, 2014). Staff may also be under pressure from institutions to deliver programmes within a specific time frame and budget, which could increase their reservations (Bovill, 2014).

Some staff have reported that students should not get involved in particular aspects of curriculum design, such as subject content, as students are not perceived to have the expertise to contribute (Murphy et al., 2017). Furthermore, researchers have suggested that students do not have the ability to gauge whether teaching is effective for their fellow students or whether the content of the course is correct (Kandiko Howson & Weller, 2016). However, Brooman, Darwent, and Pimor (2014) conducted a study with staff and students regarding the value of students’ input in curriculum design and found that students’ collaboration created tangible benefits such as improved mean marks and pass rates, improved perception of the module from students, increased attendance and more interest in pursuing a career in the course topic. Similarly, Bunnell and Bernstein (2014, p. 5) found that: “including undergraduates in the design conversation did not lower the level of discourse, but instead it illuminated aspects of the learning experience that were not visible to faculty members”. Lubicz-Nawrocka’s recent study (2018) suggests that co-creation of the curriculum can be a collaborative and rewarding form of teaching and learning that can benefit both staff and students.

Therefore, the literature shows that students can have a positive impact on curriculum design in higher education, depending on their level of knowledge in the specified area. It may also depend on the requirements

of professional bodies, for example, the British Psychological Society in Psychology requires universities to include certain course material and research methods in order for the course to be accredited. This is important for students when they are applying for jobs or postgraduate courses. Due to requirements from professional bodies, it may not always be appropriate for students and staff to work in partnership to co-create courses. Professional bodies may require institutions to teach students specific knowledge and skills which may hinder their ability to take part in co-creating curriculum (Woolmer et al., 2016). Staff may need to take the lead in certain areas to ensure that they adhere to regulatory bodies' guidelines and that their course will be accredited by the professional body (Bovill, 2014).

Transience/Time

Some research has suggested that time is regarded as a key barrier (Bovill, 2014; Murphy et al., 2017). For example, Marquis, Black, and Healey (2017) suggest that funding and time are two of the biggest challenges of a successful partnership as the project is likely to consume substantial time and energy, partly due to the fact that it takes time to build a relationship between staff and students. Students mention that trying to find a good balance between spending time on their studies and taking part in partnership opportunities, such as co-developing curricula, are a challenge to partaking in partnership activities (Woolmer et al., 2016). Students may have other responsibilities such as family commitments and paid work which may limit the amount of time they have available to spend on extra projects (Huxham, Hunter, Mcintyre, Shilland, & McArthur, 2015). In addition, Little (2016) suggests that a number of the issues relating to successful development of student–staff partnerships can be attributed to the issue of transience. As students are only enrolled in a University course for a limited amount of time, it is likely that some projects will not be completed by students by the time they leave, which could cause some frustration from both the students and staff (Little, 2016).

Students may also take more time to become comfortable enough within the student–staff relationship to engage with partnership activities. Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten (2011) suggest that if staff view a partnership as too time-consuming, they should start with smaller, more manageable projects and increase their level of involvement to a point where they feel comfortable. Furthermore, researchers have argued that to undertake an inclusive partnership, it requires staff and students to work differently rather than consuming more time (Moore-Cherry et al., 2016).

Capability

A recurring theme in the literature is that students may lack confidence when working with staff, which could be attributed to their view of staff as an authority figure (Little, 2016). However, students have reported that working with staff and being given responsibility, such as organising a conference, had increased their confidence year on year (Little, 2016). Furthermore, Bovill (2014) found that when students and staff co-create course curriculum, students' performance increases due to improved motivation and confidence.

Students being included in higher education teaching practice and pedagogical conversations contradicts norms and prevailing notions that students do not have the experience, nor understanding to inform decisions (Cook-Sather, 2014b). Cook-Sather (2014b) suggests that as a result of the preconceived ideas of students' capability, the partnership may become threatening, disappointing and even disruptive. A few students enrolled in an institutional bursary scheme expressed that they felt staff talked down to them and under-estimated their competence (Maunder, 2015). Maunder (2015) also reported that some students felt as if their capabilities had been over-estimated by staff and therefore questioned whether the level of guidance provided could result in dissatisfaction with the student's contribution. In contrast, Ahmad et al. (2017) raise an important point with regard to students' capability of working with staff on research projects. The researchers suggest that staff should raise their expectations of students; in their particular programme, it was

found that staff were surprised by the students' level of competence. This research suggests that it is important for staff to gauge students' capabilities and provide them with opportunities which are manageable but challenging. Students should also take some responsibility in terms of their capability and ensure they are honest about their abilities before commencing a partnership.

Although some of the literature around students' capability is negative, other research has found that staff are very positive about the value of students' contributions, due to their lack of disciplinary and pedagogic expertise, perceived naivety, jargon-free insights and non-expert views (Kandiko Howson & Weller, 2016). Kandiko Howson and Weller (2016) discuss how the unique perspective of the student enabled the staff to understand the students' learning experience in more depth and in this way, they were seen as an "expert" in this area.

Authorship

Authorship is often a source of tension when staff and students are working in partnership with the aim of publication. Power dynamics are often present within discussions about who should be given authorship and at what level (Ahmad et al., 2017). To highlight this issue, Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) found that although students and staff may work collaboratively on a project, this does not always result in co-authorship. They found only a third of the papers in their systematic review included students as authors, with the majority of first authors being staff. This questions the perceived value of students' contributions.

Representation

Another issue highlighted in the literature is how representative the students selected to take part in partnerships are of the student population. Frequently, those chosen to participate in partnerships are top of their class, are from a privileged background and take part in similar activities more regularly than other students, biasing the representation of these students of their fellow students (Marquis et al., 2017). Furthermore,

students nearing particular milestones (e.g. final degree year) may be less likely to engage in student–staff partnership projects due to their focus on their results, grades and portfolios rather than gaining skills and creativity through time-consuming projects (Moore-Cherry et al., 2016). The partnership could also simply end when the student finishes their degree programme (Marquis et al., 2017).

Bovill et al. (2016) discuss the importance of a transparent selection criteria in establishing and maintaining trust in these relationships to ensure that the partnership is effective and the views of the whole class or cohort of students are heard. Bovill (2014) suggests that clear criteria for selection of students for partnerships need to be adhered to, to ensure that there is limited impact upon those students who are not selected. A solution could be to include all the students the collaboration could have consequences for, but this is not always possible and is logistically challenging (Bovill et al., 2016).

Another challenge which often faces partnerships in education is funding. Although students may have the opportunity to be paid for their work with staff, volunteer positions may cause disparity in students' ability to complete the partnership. Some students may not be in a financial position to work on a project without getting paid, thus giving certain students an advantage and creating a partnership which may not be representative of the student population. This is especially important when students are involved in projects involving curriculum design, as they are representing the views of the rest of the enrolled students.

However, although the above evidence discusses the negative aspects of including a limited number of students, some research suggests that partnerships create a “ripple effect” which describes the effect students have on other students after working with staff (Curran, 2017, p. 8). It is thought that engaging in these relationships could increase other students' attendance, engagement and participation in the classroom due to the influence of staff through students (Curran, 2017).

Implications for Future Practice of Partnerships

Little (2016) has suggested that a key contributor to the success of student–staff partnerships is an “educational developer”, who acts as a constant anchor point for staff and students and helps to deal with any issues relating to student transience. In addition, Murphy et al. (2017) suggest that to diffuse any potential issues related to power in student–staff partnerships, a student facilitator is key to a positive outcome. This research highlights the importance of an impartial party in the success of student–staff partnerships where issues can be raised that students or staff may not want to raise directly with each other.

Authors have also suggested that in order for a successful partnership to develop and reduce students’ concerns in assessment processes, both students and staff should be open and honest and the staff member should be clear about the intentions of the partnership from the very beginning (Deeley & Bovill, 2017). In relation to this suggestion, Woolmer et al. (2016) have also suggested that staff and students should explicitly discuss their expectations of both the partnership process and final product before embarking on the relationship to ensure a successful partnership. To summarise, Marie and Mcgowan (2017) suggest that uncertainty about staff and student roles in a partnership can be paralysing, leading to staff feeling uncomfortable about trying to redirect the project and students feeling unable to challenge staff on the path they take with the project. Before entering into a partnership, staff and students should work together to create a project plan to ensure that the project runs smoothly (Bovill et al., 2010).

Reflective Vignette

Lucie

Having been an undergraduate, Master’s and now PhD student, I can see how my relationships with staff have become more collaborative since beginning my academic career in Psychology. Working collaboratively with Karen

and other members of staff in the Department of Higher Education on this project has been great experience for me. From the very beginning, I knew exactly what was expected of me for the project which enabled me to utilise my time and skills to our advantage. Throughout my time working on the project, Karen always treated me as her equal and our meetings were always more of a conversation, rather than Karen taking the lead as the staff member. When I felt behind where I wanted to be with the project, Karen was supportive and encouraged me to keep going. Her feedback was always positive and made me feel more confident in my ability to write a good book chapter.

Karen

Working with Lucie has enabled me to benefit from her insight as a recent student, together with the skills she has amassed during her studies, and she has brought great expertise to the project. We have worked collaboratively, and shared responsibility to write and edit this chapter. Lucie has brought perspectives that I would not have considered to the work. This experience has inspired me to seek more partnership opportunities with students in my work due to the value that a plurality of perspectives and a more recent higher education student experience can offer. One significant challenge of our partnership was time as it would have been great to have spent longer working more closely with Lucie. This challenge reminds us of the practical difficulties that can occur with short-term partnership projects, as we have explored in this chapter.

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