Student-Staff Partnerships to Shape Higher Education

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We cannot radically reimage the student experience without forging an active partnership between students and teaching staff. (NUS 2014, 10)

Defining students as partners

Partnership is framed as a process of student engagement, understood as staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement... It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself. Healey et al., 2014, p. 7

Strictly defining students as partners is difficult because approaches cover a wide range of activities. As Healey and colleagues (2014) suggest, successful approaches leverage shared engagement between students and academics seeking to learn together and enact changes to enhance student learning alongside academic teaching.

Partnerships are based on respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility between students and faculty (academics). These qualities of relationship emerge when we are able to bring students’ insights into discussions about learning and teaching practice in meaningful ways – ways that make learning and teaching more engaging for students and ourselves. Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, p. 1

Students as partners in practice

What student as partners activities look like in practice vary considerably but are beginning to be documented, published, and synthesised.

See case studies from Australian roundtable on students as partners.
See case studies from Mick Healey for international examples of partnership.
See The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change for case studies and original research articles specific to students-staff partnerships for educational change at the higher education level.

Terminology of partnerships

Students as partners approaches cover a range of practices. As such many terms are used to refer to such initiatives including: student-faculty partnerships, student voice, student engagement, student perceptions, student-centered initiatives, learning-centered initiatives, co-creation, co-design, co-inquiry, student leadership, and students as change agents.

References


Case studies: Sourced from Kelly Matthews’ Fellowship and Mick Healey’s work.

SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING, INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH & POLICY

Case study 1: Students as Partners on Teaching & Learning Grants, Faculty of Science at The University of Queensland

The UQ Faculty of Science Teaching and Learning Committee offers an annual grants scheme of approximately $400,000 to advance innovative teaching practices in the sciences. The application requirements have always required a section on evaluation with the expectation that students will be a source of data in determining the effectiveness of funded innovations. Recently, the Faculty of Science Teaching and Learning Grants scheme policy has been revised to encourage greater student involvement, moving students from being a source of evaluation data to being more active participants in the development, design, and implementation in teaching and learning projects. The new policy begins from 2016, and reads: Student Involvement: The faculty wishes to encourage increased student involvement with teaching and learning projects, so projects which incorporate student participation in project activities may be given priority. Potential examples could include students partnered as consultants on the design of new innovations, student advisory groups or students as named collaborators. Funding could include student scholarships and catering to encourage student participation.

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Case study 2: Students are engaged as partners in shaping and leading their own educational experiences through the ‘students as change agents’ initiative at the University of Exeter, UK

The key concept is that students themselves take responsibility for bringing about change, based on their own research on aspects of learning and teaching. The approach enables students to be actively engaged with the processes of change, often taking on a leadership role. They are engaged deeply with the institution and their subject areas, and the focus and direction is, to a greater extent, decided by students. A small amount of funding was originally available from the University’s learning and teaching budget to support this initiative, but it is now largely embedded and funded within Colleges with support from a centrally-based Student Engagement Manager. There are no payments directly to students. The most important aspect is the focus on research, and building change on evidence-based foundations. Students from across the university have contributed to this initiative, carrying out a series of research projects on their learning and teaching environment, selecting concerns raised through student-staff liaison committees, and providing recommendations and solutions to improve their experience. Students work as apprentice researchers; their research methods include focus groups, informal interviews and questionnaire surveys. Outcomes have been presented at annual student-staff conferences, resulting in institutional engagement with key research findings. Around 500 projects have been undertaken since 2008 though, overall, thousands of students have been involved. Student research has driven organisational change, contributed to student engagement in shifts of policy and practice within the University, and supported students’ graduate skills in the areas of research, project management, presenting outcomes, leadership and understanding of organisational development. For example, student projects in the Business School on the benefits students have gained from implementation of technologies in the classroom have contributed significantly to streamed video being now far more widespread, and 7,000 voting handsets being distributed to undergraduate and Masters students. A project on well-
being developed by Psychology students has led to changes in student support and has informed the Personal Tutor system.

*Further information: Kay et al. (2010); Dunne and Zandstra (2011); Sandover et al. (2012a); Kay et al. (2012); Dunne and Owen (2013a); Annual Reports of all projects 2013/4 and 2014/5 at [https://issuu.com/studentsaschangeagents/docs](https://issuu.com/studentsaschangeagents/docs)*

**Case study 3: Students undertake educational development projects as academic partners with staff at Birmingham City University, UK**

Launched in 2009, this partnership between Birmingham City University and Birmingham City Students’ Union aims to integrate students into the teaching and pedagogic research communities of the University to enhance the learning experience. Staff and students are invited to propose educational development projects in which students can work in an academic employment setting in a paid post at the University, on a more equal footing with their staff partner. Students negotiate their own roles with staff and are paid for up to 100 hours of work. Each project is designed to develop a specific aspect of learning and teaching practice. Typically, these may result in new learning resources, developments in curriculum design or the evaluation of innovations and changes that have already been made. It is key to the scheme that students are employed as partners not assistants, co-creators not passive recipients of the learning experience. Some projects are initiated and led by students. The Students as Academic Partners (SAP) scheme is part of a wider University initiative to create a greater sense of learning community at the University in which students and staff view it as the norm, not the exception, that they are engaged in academic discussion about the nature of their courses and the way they are taught. The University supports up to 100 projects each year and this internal quality enhancement mechanism is now seen as a staple of the university with bids being received at three points across the academic year. SAP also now offers a mentoring arm through our Student Academic Mentoring (StAMP) programme.

*Further information: Birmingham City Students’ Union (2010); Brand et al. (2013); Curran and Millard 2016; Freeman et al. 2014; Nygaard et al. (2013); [http://www.bcu.ac.uk/about-us/celt/student-engagement](http://www.bcu.ac.uk/about-us/celt/student-engagement)*

**Case Study 4: The Winter Research Scholarships for Teaching and Learning, at The University of Queensland**

The Institute of Teaching and Learning Innovation (ITaLI) has started hosting students for a Winter or Summer Research Scholarship – leveraging an institutional scheme that offers scholarships for students to be involved in research projects. The goal of the project is to explore the topic of students as partners by involving students themselves in teaching and learning projects. This approach was specifically designed to uncover points about student interaction that might not be immediately obvious to academic staff and other non-students. In 2015, five students were involved. Each of the students set out to explore a particular niche subject, such as employability of international students, which included drafting a survey to find out more about the students’ perceptions on employment in Australia. Similarly, the problem of low response rates to course evaluations was explored, with special interest in uncovering personal motivations behind why students participate in these surveys as a way to increase overall response rates. Personal motivation was also taken into account when looking at how to involve students in improving teaching and learning at UQ, especially when it came to representing the student voice and improving staff-student communication. Likewise, the student-supervisor relationship was considered in a study on how students look for potential supervisors and how this process can be improved. Finally, the issues surrounding dual degree students such as lack of general support, issues with skill transfer and lower perceptions on their graduate learning
outcomes were explored in detail. In practice, the idea behind the project is simple. Involving students personally leads to new insights as well as personal motivation for the students involved. This can manifest itself in many ways; as part of this project, suggestions were placed before the Bachelor of Science Review board and a manuscript is being prepared detailing this particular work.

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Case study 5: Engaging students as full partners at the McMaster Institute for Innovation and Excellence in Teaching and Learning (MIIETL), Canada

Students are more than the beneficiaries of MIIETL’s work in advancing teaching and learning and McMaster. They are core partners who are involved not at the margins of MIIETL’s efforts, but at the heart, at a level and with expectations that surpass those of normal student engagement programs. Approximately 50 undergraduate and graduate students were engaged as student scholars in the mission and work of MIIETL in 2014-15 in ways both central to the processes and meaningful to the students. They were employed on average for 10 hours a week, but may volunteer to engage further if they wish on a voluntary basis.

Four goals are identified in the Strategy for this aspect of MIIETL’s work:

1. Build capacity for the meaningful engagement of student scholars in MIIETL’s work in educational development, technology, research and advocacy.
2. Identify teaching and learning projects led by student scholars who are first authors, presenters, designers and educational leaders.
3. Engage student scholars as active collaborators in core aspects of MIIETL operations
4. Support student advocacy for teaching and learning issues on campus, regionally, nationally and internationally.


PEDAGOGIC CONSULTANTS & CURRICULUM DESIGN

Case study 6: Students act as pedagogical consultants at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, Pennsylvania, US

Most models of new faculty orientation and academic development assume that faculty learning is the purview of faculty colleagues or teaching and learning centre staff. Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT), the signature program of the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, challenges that assumption by inviting undergraduate students to work as pedagogical consultants to new and continuing faculty members. Between 2006 and 2016, 185 faculty members and 130 student consultants have participated in 265 pedagogical partnerships. For partnerships focused on classroom practice, students are not enrolled in the courses for which they serve as consultants and often have no experience in the subject matter of the courses. Each student consultant establishes with the faculty member a focus for their collaboration; visits one class session each week and takes detailed observation notes on the pedagogical challenge(s) the faculty member has identified; surveys or interviews students in the class (if the faculty member wishes), either for mid-course feedback or at another point in the semester; meets weekly with the faculty member to discuss observation notes and other feedback and implications; and participates in weekly meetings with one another and with the director of SaLT. For partnerships focused on course redesign, faculty work with individual or groups of students
who have taken the course to revise course content, assignments, and methods of assessment. For full-semester partnerships, student consultants work approximately six hours per week and receive a stipend of $700. Feedback from participants suggests that these collaborations build confidence in both partners, deepen partners’ learning experiences and meta-cognitive awareness, recast the responsibility for education as one that is shared by faculty and students, and contribute to more inclusive and responsive curricula and practices. 

_Further information:_ Cook-Sather (2011; 2014; 2016); Cook-Sather & Agu (2013); Cook-Sather et al. (2014); [www.brynmawr.edu/tli/](http://www.brynmawr.edu/tli/)

_Inclusion in partnerships:_ One focus of Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) is how student-faculty partnerships both constitute “counter-spaces” (Solórzano et al., 2000) for underrepresented students and can support the development of more inclusive and responsive classroom practices. Launched in 2006, “Toward More Culturally Responsive Classrooms” was a pilot study in which five faculty members and five students from underrepresented groups worked together to generate a set of recommendations for making classroom environments and practices more inclusive and responsive. Since then, the SaLT program has intentionally sought the participation of underrepresented students as pedagogical consultants, and regular conversation across SaLT partnerships regarding how to create more inclusive and responsive classrooms has continued. Of the 130 undergraduate students who have participated in SaLT partnerships with faculty, 71 have been from underrepresented groups, based on race, ethnicity, and/or social class. One consultant explained the importance of this: “My point of view was not considered throughout my educational experience since my demographics are underrepresented. Being a student consultant gave me a seat at the proverbial table and the courage to speak up for what I believed and wanted to see.” Faculty who work in these partnerships argue that when underrepresented students are “authorities in the classroom,” it is “incredibly transforming and powerful for the students who [are] actually participating in the class.” Finally, the effect on classroom practice is evident. One faculty member explained that, when her student consultant pointed out inclusive and responsive practices, the faculty member “became more conscious and deliberate in doing them.”

_Further information:_ Cohen et al. (2013); Cook-Sather (2015); Cook-Sather & Agu (2013) [www.brynmawr.edu/tli/](http://www.brynmawr.edu/tli/)

**Case study 7: Deliberate Democracy: Students engaged in evaluating the curriculum at The University of Sydney**

In 2012, in a postgraduate unit of study called Critical Thinking in Business with 560 students enrolled, about 70% of the students were from non-English speaking backgrounds and were grappling with the language and with the concept of critical thinking. Professor Carson drew on her background in deliberative democracy to create an opportunity for the students to give feedback on the unit, and to model a different way to collectively decide in large groups. Building on a summary of mid-semester student feedback, a World Café was conducted in each of the 20 tutorial groups. Students engaged in an iterative conversation about what they wanted to change about the unit of study, both in the current semester and the next one. At the end of the tutorial, students were asked to reach agreement about the two most effective suggestions: one for this semester, one for next semester. A representative from each tutorial group then attended a meeting where the students created a final list of suggested changes. After an hour, the unit coordinator came into the meeting, with the guarantee that she would implement whatever changes the group proposed (with the proviso that the changes needed to be consistent with the university’s
policies). The unit coordinator heard what the students wanted, asked a few questions and the students offered additional comments. The agreed changes were reported back to all students in tutorials and in the lecture. Students commented about how the World Café helped them to appreciate multiple perspectives, and how the technique could be used as a decision making tool in the workplace. Tutors also commented that the World Café was one of the highlights of the semester.


**Case study 8: The ISE (Improving Student Evaluations) Project at The University of Queensland (UQ)**
The ISE project augments the ‘student evaluation of course and teacher’ (SECaT) architecture at UQ by creating a complementary and democratic process through which students and teachers can engage in ongoing and meaningful dialogue around teaching and learning. Specifically, it positions students as pedagogical consultants on six courses, based off the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. These student consultants work with teachers to design feedback strategies, gather feedback from students and co-construct curricula with teachers and students. The ISE Project is an innovative and meaningful expression of UQ’s commitment to “providing an enriching teaching and learning environment where students remain at the heart of what we do” (UQ’s Strategic Plan 2014-2017). Expected outcomes include the development of more dialogic and democratic partnerships between teachers and students, an evidence-based framework for an improved student evaluation of teaching system, and the construction of resources (case studies, guides, journal articles) and strategic networks that will facilitate scaling-up the project.

**Further information:** Eimear Enright at UQ on e.enright@uq.edu.au

**Case study 9: Students act as co-creators of course design at Elon University, North Carolina, US**
Since 2005, faculty, students, and academic development staff at Elon University have experimented with a variety of approaches to partnering in ‘course design teams’ (CDT) that co-create, or re-create, a course syllabus. Each team’s process varies, but typically a CDT includes one or two faculty, between two and six undergraduate students, and one academic developer. Faculty members initiate the redesign process, inviting the students and developer to co-construct a team. Students usually apply to participate in a CDT, motivated by a desire to contribute to a course they have taken or that is important to the curriculum in their disciplinary home. Once the CDT is assembled, the CDT uses a ‘backward design’ approach, first developing course goals and then building pedagogical strategies and learning assessments on the foundation of those goals. Time is the most important element in the success of a CDT. Successful teams usually meet weekly for two or three months, providing ample opportunities to both accomplish the CDT’s practical purpose of redesigning the course and, perhaps more importantly, to develop a true partnership that welcomes student voices. Students often doubt that they will be taken seriously in the process, and they also need time to develop the language and the confidence to express pedagogical ideas clearly. Many CDTs experience a liminal moment when everyone present recognizes that a fundamental boundary has been crossed, either by a faculty member ceding significant authority for the course design or by students claiming power in the process.
Further information: Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten (2011); Delpish et al. (2010); Mihans, Long and Felten (2008)

**Case study 10: Student Observer Program at Carleton College, US**

The Student Observer Program, which has been available at Carleton since the 1970s, is a cornerstone of Learning and Teaching Center activities. Primarily a resource for the professors, it also serves as a very practical, experimental, and paid means for students to reflect about teaching, classroom interaction, and learning. The purpose of the Student Observer program is to provide faculty with trained students who will sit in on their classes and discuss observations, insights, and questions about the teaching and learning in a course. The program has worked successfully for faculty members from a wide variety of disciplines and in various stages of their careers. The point of the program is to give faculty the benefit of a trained student’s perspective on a course as the course is developing. Professors request an observer for a particular course. A student is assigned to attend that professor’s class and provide feedback on areas in which the teacher wishes more information. Professors often ask observers to provide feedback regarding student-teacher interaction, such as how long he or she waits for a response after asking a question or whether or not questions seem to be inviting open responses. Both lecture and discussion classes can be observed for clarity of presentation and levels of energy and enthusiasm in both students and teacher.

*Further information: [http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/ltc/services/observers/](http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/ltc/services/observers/)*

**Case study 11: Students work with staff as ePioneers at Oxford Brookes, UK**

Institutional Student ePioneer Partnerships (InStePP) seeks to create and institutionally embed a variety of active partnerships with students and, in so doing, develop, implement and exemplify:

- institutional approaches to partnerships as an integral part of digital literacy development in the curriculum and in employability policy and practice;
- digital literacies contextualized for disciplines and for career development; and
- student roles and activities which support the development of staff digital literacies.

It is part of an institutional strategic commitment to engage with students as agents of change in learning and teaching activities to develop and enhance personal and leadership attributes for employability.

The project aims to establish the role of ‘e-pioneer’: partnerships at institutional and curriculum levels, in which students share their digital skills, practices, ideas and expectations with staff at the crucial points at which decisions are made which influence the learning experience. e-Pioneers are supported in working towards professional recognition and/or academic credit for their work. Student staff partnerships help to contextualise digital literacies for the disciplines and to turn these into developmental tasks within course designs, thereby enhancing the digital literacies of both groups.

*Further information: [https://wiki.brookes.ac.uk/display/instepp/Home](https://wiki.brookes.ac.uk/display/instepp/Home); [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/developingdigitalliteracies/InStePP.aspx](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/developingdigitalliteracies/InStePP.aspx)*

**Case study 12: Medical and health science students are engaged in a curriculum development project at the University of Southampton, UK**

A group of medical students at Southampton University initiated a ‘Global Health Education Network’ (GHEN). One of the network objectives is to influence the curriculum of health and
social work programmes, which members feel ought to address global health more explicitly. Another is to enable greater scope for work placements abroad; medical, midwifery and some allied health students are able to access such placements although many hurdles exist and students need to be persistent. Underpinning the global health initiative is a clear moral standpoint; as citizens of the world, we have a duty to understand the global challenges ahead. In response, the Vice Chancellor and other senior executive staff offered them the chance to work collaboratively with staff and local health practitioners on a new interdisciplinary module – Global Health – which is being offered as part of the University’s Curriculum Innovation Programme. Twelve students were involved in designing the Global Health module with academics and employers, having generated interest by holding network meetings. They ensured the student perspective was integral to the development, contributing a unique perspective on what students might offer communities as well as what they might need to learn and develop. They ensured the module established the link between socio-political issues and health, wherever health care takes place, unlike the traditional medical definition of global health. Most importantly their contribution ensured that the values which motivated them and their peers were articulated and embodied in both the content and the delivery of the module. The time they spent was their own, with no payment or academic credit. When offered remuneration they refused. All are active in the Global Health Education Network and share responsibilities amongst the group so that no single individual takes on too much. The module development team benefited greatly by being reminded why motivated students become interested in education - they understand its power to change and influence future generations. Through discussions and presentations the students and staff learned together and came to share an agenda, of which the new module is only one aspect.

*Further information:* Wintrup (2010); [http://www.southampton.ac.uk/cip/](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/cip/)

**Case study 13: Students as partners in mathematics course design at Loughborough University, UK**

In the 2010-2011 academic year, the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Loughborough University secured HE-STEM funding to redesign two of its historically problematic modules, Vector Spaces and Complex Variables. The aim of the project was to enhance the second year undergraduate mathematics experience, and increase student engagement and satisfaction with mathematics so that students leave the second year reporting increased satisfaction with their learning experience. The project was a collaboration between staff and second-year students and a unique feature was the active participation of four second-year undergraduate mathematicians in the course design process. The four students were recruited as interns to produce teaching and learning resources that could potentially engage future cohorts of second year students. An ethnographic study was designed to understand the students’ role, experiences, working relationship with staff, and the resources that they were able to produce. Data on the students’ experiences were collected via diaries kept by the students, self-reflection and evaluation reports produced by the students, participant observation, and fieldnotes. Staff were also interviewed individually in order to collect data to triangulate the students’ accounts so as to increase the validity and reliability of the findings. Findings from the study showed that the four students were socialised and drawn from the margins of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ in academic practice into full participation of a community of practising mathematicians. The four student interns were able to play an important role as mathematics course designers, and gained a deeper understanding of the mathematics they worked on.

*Further information:* Duah and Croft (2012)
Case study 14: Students undertake institutional research as part of their degree course at University of Tuebingen, Germany
Since 2007 students from across the University of Tuebingen have been able to take an 8-week, 40 in class hours, course for credit entitled ‘Data collection, analysis and strategic planning’ in which they learn about institutional research and undertake projects to enhance practices in the university. Project partners, usually a university service provider, have included enrolment services, university libraries, the Language Centre, the Computing Centre, dining services, and sports services. This outcome presents a win-win situation for the institution, students and instructors alike.
Further information: Buettner (2014)

Case study 15: Students centrally involved in curriculum and building design in Engineering at Queens University, Canada
In the late 1990s the Faculty of Engineering at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario introduced a new integrated learning curriculum that emphasized a common first-year program for all entering students, project-based active learning in small teams on real-world issues, development of communication skills and openness to social, environmental and economic issues affecting engineering decisions. A new engineering building was designed to facilitate this new approach that included, for example, dozens of small group rooms for project work, open labs with access 24-hours a day, space for informal social interaction, including a student-run tea room that encouraged environmental sustainability, and a "live building" in which the centre's mechanical, electrical and structural systems are monitored in real-time and left open to view, to show how sustainable practices can be incorporated into building design.

Students were centrally involved in the planning of both the new curriculum and the building itself. Both undergraduate and graduate students were prominently represented on the planning committee and their views (and votes) were often decisive in making key decisions. Early in the planning stage members of the committee visited other innovative engineering programs in Europe and the USA, and students participated fully in all these visits. One consequence was that when the curriculum came to be implemented it met with widespread student support, instead of suspicion or antagonism.

Have a case study to share?
Email Kelly Matthews: k.matthews1@uq.edu.au

Want to keep up with ‘students as partners’ practices, ideas, developments and events?
Join the Australian ‘Students as Partners’ Network:
http://itali.uq.edu.au/content/join-network