Literature-evidence base: Students as Partners

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This literature review is an introduction to the wealth of growing research currently published on engaging with students as partners (SaP) in learning and teaching in higher education. The intended audience for this review are colleagues new to the research and scholarship in this area. We present a curated review introducing how scholars define or frame 'students as partners' along with highly cited models, followed by an overview of the benefits and barriers reported in the literature. Some exemplary case studies are selected to demonstrate the variation in how this work is put into practice. The Key intent is to position UQ's approach to SaP in relation to the literature.

Defining students as partners – the values and ethos

'Students as partners', or SaP, is difficult to define, which is why Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) refer to it as an 'umbrella term' for values-based practices in higher education. This process involves students being partners in the:

1. learning and teaching experience,

2. classroom and curriculum design,

3. knowledge co-creation through research and inquiry, and

4. institutional or educational practices.

The various definitions of SaP describe a wide array of ventures, initiatives and projects (Cook-Sather, Matthews, Leathwick, & Ntem, 2018; Matthews, 2017). Healey et al (2014) describe engaging students in partnership as an "effective approach to student engagement because of its potential to offer authentic engagement and genuinely transformative experiences to all involved" (p.55), and such successful partnerships underpin values of – among others – authenticity, inclusivity, and empowerment. Another frequently cited definition for SaP comes from Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014, pp.6–7), who view pedagogical partnerships as drawing on respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility. They emphasise the creation of affirmative spaces through partnership practices:

> *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 conceptualisation, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis.*

Regardless of the definition, SaP makes a clear division between student engagement and students in partnership; the authors state that "all partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership" (Healey et al., 2014, p.7). Matthews (2016) further clarifies that student engagement is what students do at higher education institutions, whereas the focus of student-staff partnership is on collaborative practices undertaken by students and staff to accomplish common educational goals. Another difference that Matthews (2016) emphasises is that the practice of student-staff partnership is mainly process-driven, and its outcomes are subsidiary, as reiterated in Healey et al (2014, p.7) that "partnership is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself."

Matthews (2017) further extended upon the work of these scholars in the USA and UK by outlining five propositions to guide genuine SaP practice, which include developing inclusive relationships; establishing power-sharing relationships through effective communication and reflection; accepting uncertain outcomes and procedures; adhering to ethical behaviour; and creating transformative culture. These propositions have shaped UQ's thinking about how students and staff engage with SaP in learning, teaching, and student life (UQ Student-Staff Partnership Implementation Plan, 2018).

Conceptual frameworks of SaP

The nature of SaP is fundamentally process-driven; staff and students work together to foster mutual learning and engage with the learning and teaching experience (Matthews, 2016). The framework in Figure X-1 differentiates between qualitatively different levels of student engagement in the SaP process; from student consultation (traditional gathering of feedback from students after a course) to partnership, which involves active collaboration over both process and outcome. Note that partnership as a form of student engagement is complementary to other forms of student engagement, which are equally important and valued.
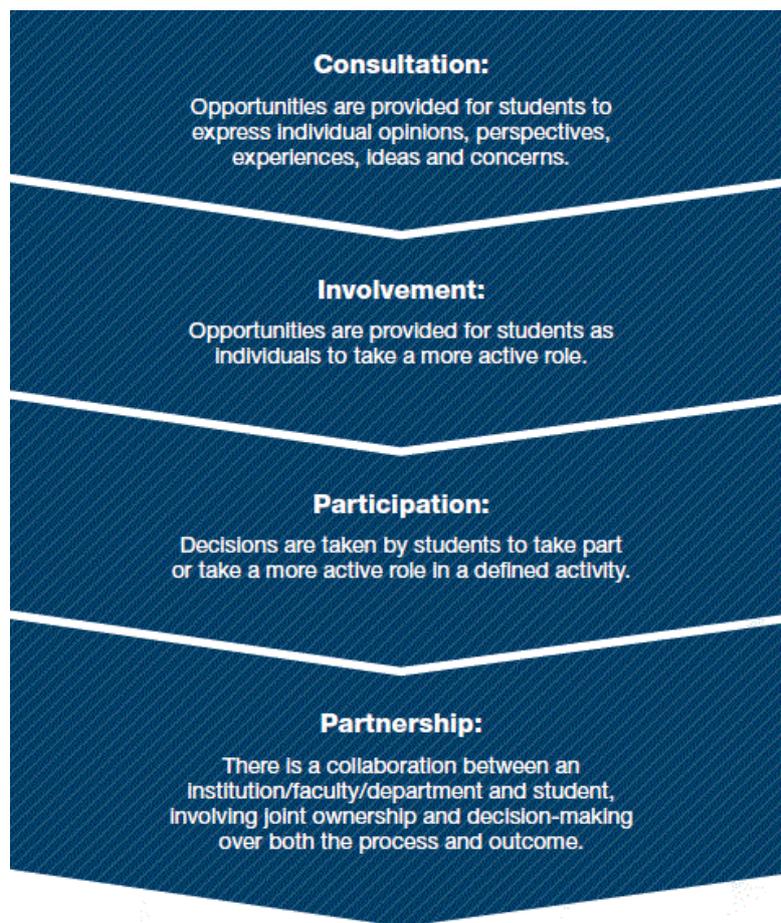

Figure X-1: Four stages of student engagement. Source: Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014

Models depicting implementation of SaP

One of the most widely cited models to guide implementation in engaging SaP is the conceptual model by Healey, Flint, & Harrington (2014). It is defined as a lens, not a checklist, to explore activity areas where students can be successfully engaged as partners in learning and teaching (see Figure X-2). These areas are loosely separated into three sections: learning, teaching and research, and the enhancement of learning and teaching practice and policy (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). The former encompasses students engaging in teaching and assessment, or subject-based research and inquiry. The latter covers students engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning (course research and inquiry, or institutional research), along with curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy. These areas are represented as four overlapping

circles to emphasise how the distinctions are increasingly blurred over time. For example, a peer-assisted learning programme where students teach their peers to actively engage with their own learning and with one another, while their simultaneous partnerships with staff can lead to development and implementation of the programme, enhancing the learning and teaching practice (Healey, Flint, & Harington, 2014).
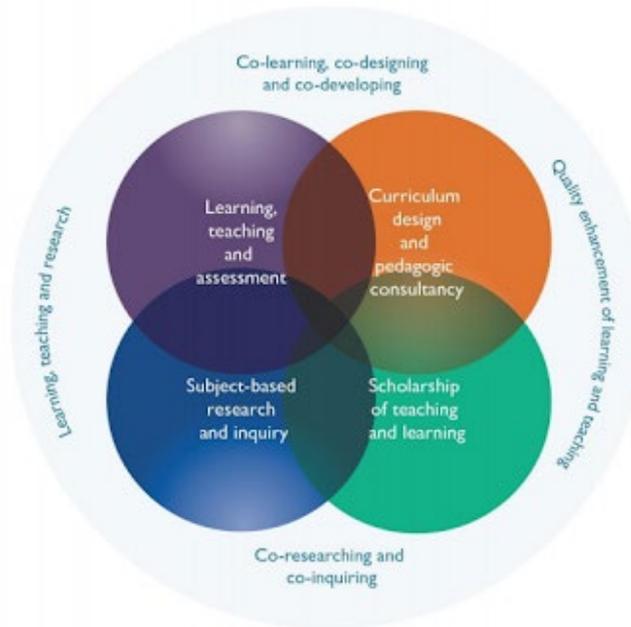

Figure X-2: Conceptual model of students as partners (Source: Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014)

Healey (2018) further breaks down the implementation of SaP into two: the teaching and designing of courses, alongside the scholarship of teaching and learning (see Figures X-3 and X-4). It shows examples of highly balanced partnerships which include students and staff planning and co-teaching a course, or students and staff developing a research project together. On the other hand, high levels of student participation in the partnership involve students learning staff-led content on partnership, or running projects supervised and created by the staff. It highlights considerations of power dynamics (staff or student-led) during implementation, and a spectrum of activities that provide decision-making capacities for individual students to entire cohorts.

Despite detailing diverse partnership practices, these models are still deemed as a 'work-in-progress' in terms of comprehensivity, showcasing the breadth and depth of SaP implementation. They are only meant to provide a framework for understanding the context and application across different institutions.
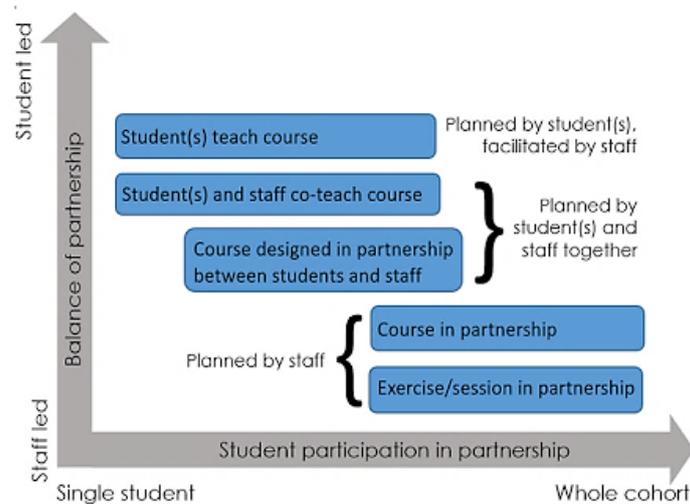
Figure X-3: *Student-staff partnerships in research, inquiry and scholarship of teaching and learning* (Source: Healey, 2018)
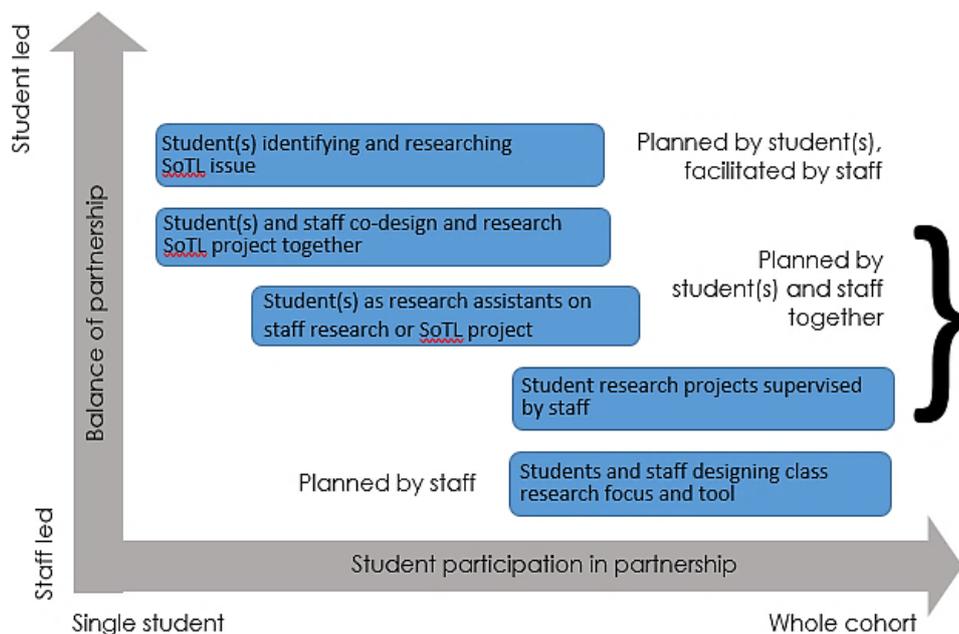

Figure X-4: *Student-staff partnerships in teaching, learning and designing courses* (Source: Healey, 2018)

Outcomes of student-staff partnership

A systematic review of 63 empirical studies published on SaP in higher education from 2011–2015 reported a range of outcomes for both students and staff (Matthews et al., 2018). A thematic analysis revealed eight overarching outcome categories, both positive and negative, for students and staff engaged in partnership (see Table X-1). A number of these experiences were emulated in the UQ pilot SaP project (Coombe, Huang, Russell, Sheppard, & Khosvari, 2018).

Table X-1: *Positive and negative outcome categories arising from thematic analysis of 63 publications in SaP literature* (Source: Matthews et al., 2018)

Theme	Student Outcome Categories	Staff Outcome Categories
Relationships	Change in the interactions with staff that affects power dynamics along with the development of trust and empathy with the partner/s	Change in the interactions with students that affects power dynamics along with the development of trust and empathy with the partner/s
Learning	Learning and skill development in terms of academic performance including learning about their own learning (metacognition)	Learning about teaching, new pedagogies, and insights into student learning and how learning happens
Engagement	Encompasses outcomes associated with engagement, motivation, and ownership for learning, including engaging students from under-represented backgrounds	Encompasses engagement and motivation for teaching and engaging in partnership with students along with practices that engage students in learning
Confidence	Belief in student's capacity as a learner and partner in teaching and learning; encompasses both cognitive and affective domains	Belief in staff's capacity as an educator and partner in teaching and learning; encompasses both cognitive and affective domains
Identity	Shift in how students see themselves as students, learners and partners, and how they perceive others in the partnership process	Shift in how staff see themselves as staff members, educators and partners, and how they perceive others in the partnership process
Employability	Awareness of developing employability skills related to career development	Acknowledgment of partnership contributing to new insights into their field of inquiry
Community	Sense of belonging to a university community	Sense of belonging to a university community
Material Gain	Being a part of publications, development of new curricular materials, or changes to university policy	Being a part of publications, development of new curricular materials, or changes to university policy

The majority of articles reviewed reported positive outcomes of partnership for both students and staff, with a larger number of articles solely focusing on student outcomes rather than staff outcomes. As seen in Figure X-5, the most commonly reported positive outcomes for both parties were those relating to the theme of relationships; engaging in partnership helped them build trust in their partners and become more understanding of, and empathetic toward, the roles and perspectives of others (Matthew et al., 2018).
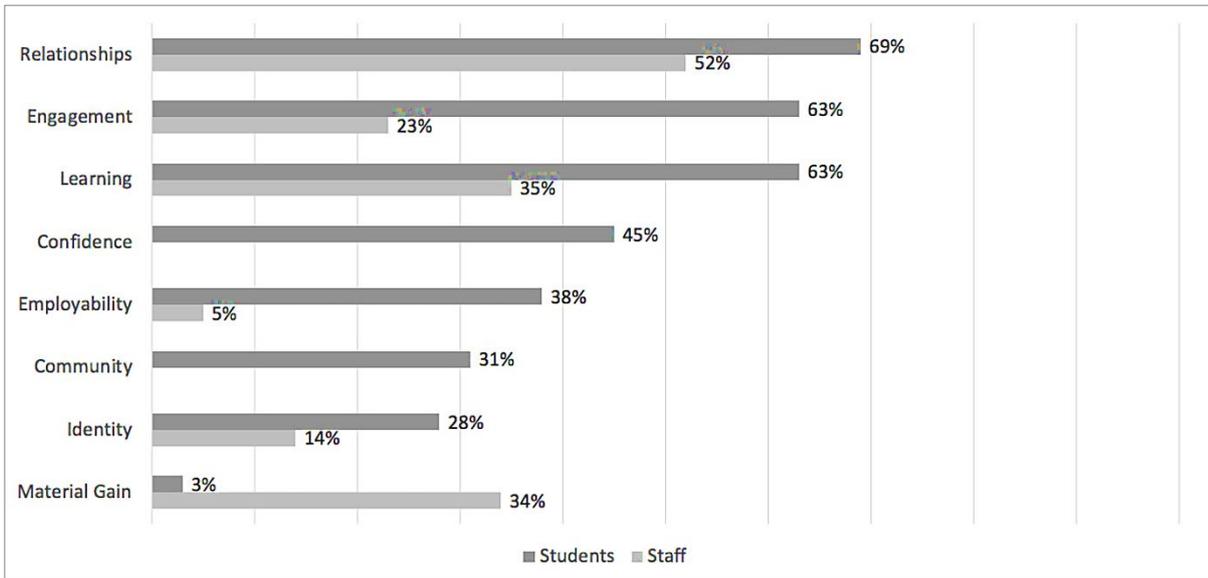
Figure X-5: Distribution of positive outcomes reported by student and staff (Source: Matthews et al., 2018)

Approximately only 30 percent of the articles reported negative outcomes, with a third of them reporting negative outcomes for both students and staff, with more articles reporting negative outcomes for students than staff. As seen in the Figure X-6 below, the most commonly reported negative outcomes for students related to relationships. Students often felt that their opinions were not being heard or that their expertise and ability to contribute was under- or over-estimated. For staff, the most commonly reported negative outcomes were those relating to confidence, such as worrying about whether the initiative would be successful or experiencing a sense of vulnerability or discomfort (Matthew et al., 2018).
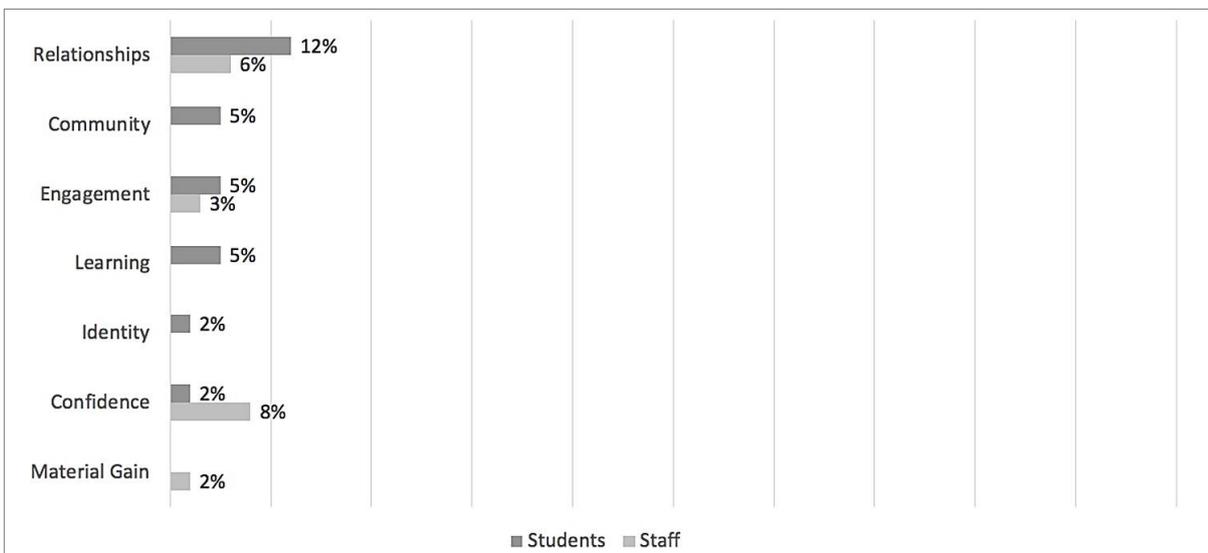

Figure X-6: Distribution of negative outcomes reported by student and staff. (Source: Matthews et al., 2018)

Factors inhibiting SaP by theme for students and staff

While there is a fair amount of coverage on the outcomes of SaP, there is less of a focus on the inhibitors to successful SaP. Across the sample, less than half the articles reported inhibitors for either staff or students, or both, as reported in Table X-2. Only a small percentage of articles reported inhibitors for both students and staff. More articles reported inhibitors for students than staff. These barriers were categorised as five broad classes of inhibitors below (Matthew et al., 2018):

Table X-2: Perceived barriers to successful SaP across an analysis of 63 publications (Source: Matthews et al., 2018)

Broad themes	SaP inhibitors for students and staff
Relational	Factors related to power structures, poor communication, lack of confidence, difference between student and staff goals, motivations, ambitions and identities, or uncertainty about how to begin the partnership relationship
Resistance	Both institution-level cultural structures that are risk-averse or do not recognise/reward involvement in partnership along with individual student or staff resistance for personal reasons
Logistical	Encompasses time constraints, over-crowded curriculum or inflexibility of curriculum (due to professional accreditation requirements, for example), and lack of support or funding
Experience	Lack of understanding about how universities operate along with lack of experience in partnership, research or teaching
Quality	Concerns about inclusivity in partnership and the value of materials created through partnership

Nearly half the students reported that the key inhibitor in successfully implementing partnerships involved the theme of relationships, such as the navigating of power dynamics between staff and students, and unclear delineations of roles. However, only a quarter of staff members felt that way. On the other hand, very few students were concerned about resistance, while over a third of staff reported barriers relating to resistance, for example, from their colleagues or institutions, to the idea that partnership is a positive and fruitful endeavour (Matthew et al., 2018)
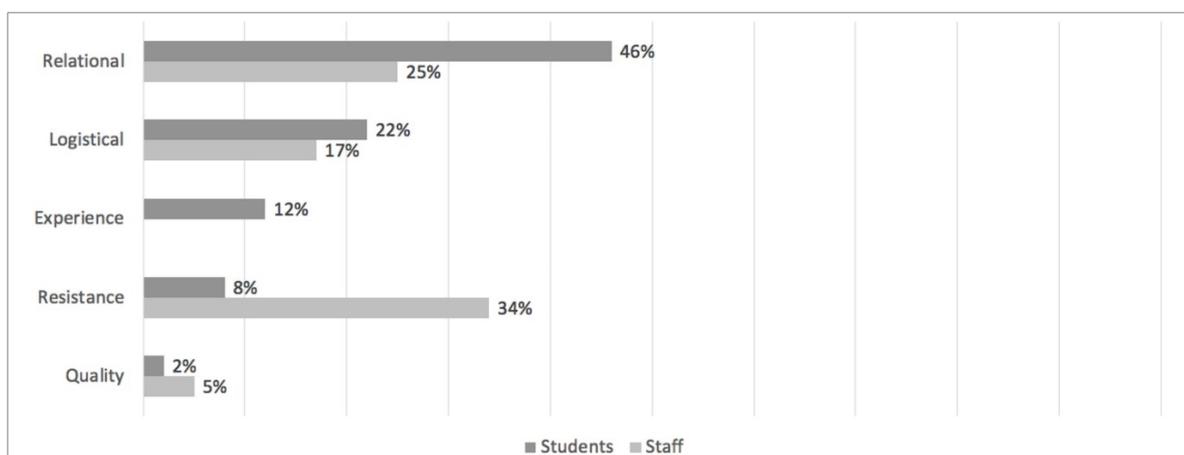
Another potential challenge with implementing SaP is highlighted by Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry (2016); as a partnership is commonly conceptualised as projects or activities, it risks excluding specific student demographics during the selection process. This restricts the participation of students who have no time for additional activities, students with financial or self-confidence issues, or inadequate cultural capital (Curran & Millard 2016; Felten et al. 2013; Peseta et al. 2016). Consequently, to address these challenges, Matthews et al. (2018) advocate considering partnership engagement as an ideology, by broadening the concept of higher education culture as egalitarian learning communities of staff and student - these examples are covered in the following section.

Possibilities of SaP in practice: Case studies

The case studies below highlight the potential for transformation in educational practices that can take place with successful partnership. Students who are co-creators and actively embedded within several levels of the institution develop valuable foundational skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, innovation, and embracing a diversity of perspectives through their experiences. This builds on transferable skill-sets that extend beyond the disciplinary context, enhancing their employability skills and transforming them into game-changing graduates. This engagement also generates a sense of belonging to their University and improved student experience. Moving forward, it is essential for UQ to continue leading and further developing the area of SaP as an ethos of higher education culture through university-wide partnership. The initiative is based on the key tenets of the SaP literature, positioning UQ at the forefront of applied research and ensuring that the UQ approach to SaP fits with the existing institutional culture of personal growth and lifelong learning.

Case Study 1: University College London (UCL), UK (Healey, 2018)

Research-based education is the focus of UCL's initiative, and its 'connected curriculum' has six dimensions based on the core principle of learning through research and inquiry. The initiative requires changing the criteria for promotion so that excellence in education is as significant to advancement as excellence in research and innovation. The implementation also involves reviewing all programmes and designing clear strategies for working more closely with students, as partners and change agents.

UCL also has "ChangeMakers', an initiative supporting students and staff partnerships on educational enhancement projects. Criteria include the extent to which the project will promote research-based education, enhance the student learning experience at UCL and produce sustainable educational enhancement. The projects run for one academic year and pedagogic, financial and administrative support are provided centrally. Since the pilot year in 2014/15, the scheme has seen rapid growth with 100 students and staff each year on projects. They also support 80 students working in pairs to review the teaching of 40 members of staff as part of UCL's Peer Dialogue scheme. Currently, they support 65 projects annually and the aim is to have at least one project running in each taught department at UCL by 2019/20.

Pilot evaluations showed very positive outcomes; students reported increased skills and confidence to make meaningful change and contribute to the university in novel ways, and re-conceived perceptions of themselves as producers, rather than consumers in the higher education experience. University College London provides exemplary work on how the values of engaging SaP in learning is undertaken through long-term planning, and is grounded in bringing about cultural change.

Case Study 2: Active Student Uppsala University, Sweden (Healey, 2018)

Uppsala university started its early active student participation initiatives with its Centre for Environment and Development Studies (CEMUS) in 1992 (Active Student Participation at UU, 2016). CEMUS has a collaborative program designed by students and professors to fulfil the gap that the students perceived in their education in relation to global challenges of sustainable development. With a legacy of more than two decades of initiation, CEMUS is now run as an educational centre driven by students (Barrineau, Engström, & Schnass, 2019).

Around 700 students enrol annually in one or more of the 20 undergraduate, graduate and PhD courses offered at CEMUS. The courses are organized and led by students, who are usually recruited from the current student pool, and hired on a 9-month project-basis as course coordinators. The course coordinators lead the process of planning, running and evaluating each course, and do so in close partnership with a selected multidisciplinary group of teachers, practitioners and educational developers who contribute to the course as guest lecturers, examiners and advisors. Over the years, several hundred students have worked as course coordinators, thousands of researchers, teachers and guest lecturers have been engaged, and well over 10,000 students have taken one or more of the courses offered by CEMUS.

As CEMUS itself is in constant renewal, with just a handful of permanent staff and between 5 and 10 new course coordinators hired every year, a major challenge has been to maintain sufficient continuity and institutional memory to navigate and manage the evolution of the Centre. In the last two years, this has sparked an increased collaboration with a number of new partners worldwide, both within and outside the university. Strategic funds from the vice-chancellor of Uppsala University, in collaboration with the Department of Quality Enhancement and Academic Teaching and Learning, brought to life a two-year project on encouraging and supporting "Active Student Participation in Higher Education at Uppsala University". Other flourishing collaborations include the instalment of guest professorships and the development of new research fields, inspired by themes from CEMUS courses and made possible by co-funding from philanthropic organizations. It has also served as an oasis of creativity and pedagogical experimentation for university teachers in inspiring educational development, including new courses in their own departments.

A Meaningful partnership does not warrant a structured approach or a universal set of activities. Cook-Sather and Felten (2017) acknowledge that it can be ambiguous or in a liminal state where moving back and forth is possible. Nevertheless, a place where students and staff can explore various possibilities and novel configuration of ideas (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017), is possibly the best form of partnership. The good practices of such university-wide partnership echoes in the philosophy of UU, which has greatly expanded the space for trans-disciplinary student-led higher education, as well as research and collaboration that transcends traditional academic disciplines and boundaries between academia and society at large.

Case Study 3: University of Queensland (Healey, 2018)

Growing from the passion and commitment of a grassroots movement to think differently about how learners and teachers interact, SaP was enshrined in the University of Queensland (UQ) policy as a central pillar in the *UQ Student Strategy, 2016-2020*. In 2018, UQ launched an institutional program to support student and staff engagement in partnership by establishing the Student-Staff Partnership Initiative. This Initiative consists of three central strands:

1. Student Representation: Improving the effectiveness and quality of student representation in all its forms across the University

2. Student Voice: Assisting staff members who want to consult with students to ensure that their work truly reflects the desires of UQ students and addresses their concerns.

3. Student-Staff Partnership Projects: Aim to create a cultural transformation at UQ where Students and Staff connect as equals, partners and co-collaborators on projects that seek to enhance the student experience at UQ.

Currently, hundreds of students are engaged in projects, focus groups, and representation work all directed to enhance the student experience and student employability with funding available to support 600 student partners and over 200 student representatives in 2019. The Partnerships Team have developed a suite of resources and networks that are available for UQ students and staff.

Here we focus on Student-Staff Partnership Projects, which seeks to foster partnership through a project-driven approach to enable students and staff to engage to enhance the 1) teaching and learning, 2) governance and strategy, and 3) student experience environments at the University. The aim of this initiative is to fundamentally change the way in which students and staff interact, diminish the effects and impacts of power imbalance, and open dialogue between students and staff. Students *or* staff can submit project proposals to request student partner funding for grants of up to 50 hours in a semester. Students can then apply and are selected to engage in a project. In 2018, 342 student partner grants were awarded, in 2019 there will be 600 student partner grants, and it is projected for 800 student partner grants to be awarded in 2020. To date, there have been approximately 250 university staff that have engaged with this program.

Following a Partnership Induction, which seeks to unpack the values of partnership and establish effective group dynamics, students and staff work to establish goals within the ethos of the partnership via a co-developed project plan. Projects vary significantly in scope and purpose, including co-developing university policy and plans; co-investigating the impact/s of student experience initiatives on students' sense of belonging; collaborating on blended learning course design; and pedagogical consulting and advising.

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