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Looking back to move forward: Evaluating an institutional staff-student partnership programme

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ABSTRACT

As higher education institutions increasingly seek to scale and access the benefits of staff-student partnerships more routinely many have established institutional programmes. Insight into scaling partnership activity across the institution is integral to the success of such programmes. This qualitative study investigates how a new programme at a UK university sought to establish the conditions for successful partnership working. A series of semi-structured interviews offer insights into the early experiences of the programme. By adopting a reflexive thematic analysis we find that partnerships are vulnerable to variable approaches to facilitation and that a greater emphasis on staff preparedness is warranted. The research uncovered tensions between the partnership scheme and other forms of student engagement e.g. student representation. As a result, clarity around the identity of partnership schemes, what partnership working involves and how it interacts with other student opportunities across the institution is critical.

KEYWORDS

Students as partners; co-creation; evaluation; partnership values; staff-student partnership

Introduction

The desire to harness the benefits of partnership working (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014) across the international Higher Education sector has driven the proliferation of staff-student partnership schemes as part of university structures. This has led to systematisation of processes for the generation and selection of proposed partnership projects, the training of student partners, and reporting of scheme impact (Coombe et al., 2018; Maunder, 2021). The development of such programmes has enabled partnership working to be increasingly formalised and embedded into university strategies (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019; Gravett et al., 2020; Marquis et al., 2019), accompanied by commitments to offer students the opportunity to shape the institution (Dollinger & Lodge, 2020). Whilst the recognition and adoption of partnership ways of working across the sector reflect the success of this high-impact pedagogy it remains important that the programmes created by higher education institutions do not instrumentalise partnership

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working to further their own ends. For example, Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill (2020) found that the institution was cited as the primary beneficiary by programme leaders across several UK institutions. Partnership scheme structures are likely to have a significant influence in shaping the substance, form, evaluation, and ultimately the identity and embedded values of partnership working.

This research seeks to elaborate on the learnings from a new institutional programme launched in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It builds on existing studies that explore the implementation of such schemes (Coombe et al., 2018; Shaw et al., 2017), and how they promote equity and diversity (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). By evaluating the experiences of early adopters of one institutional partnership programme, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

What does the experience of staff and student partners participating in a new institutional scheme tell us about creating the conditions for impactful partnership practice?

The findings will be of interest to those establishing institutional partnership programmes and those reviewing existing scheme practices.

Literature review

What is partnership?

Partnership is a process (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014), meaning that the role of both students and staff, as well as the level of engagement by both parties, typically varies throughout (Bovill, 2017). Multiple terms are used to refer to partnership working and whilst on one hand, it has been argued that a variety of terms are used almost interchangeably (Bovill, 2019), others contend that there is a distinction in the terminology used (Matthews, 2017). The contextual nature of partnership activity (Healey & Healey, 2018) means that a typology, similar to that proposed by Bovill (2019) is helpful to articulate the intended parameters of the partnership.

The success of partnerships is often influenced by how well they establish the values of partnership working (Luo et al., 2019). Whilst there are several approaches to articulating the values of partnership working, responsibility, reciprocity, and respect (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) are generally accepted as guiding principles. A more granular articulation of the foundational values includes authenticity, inclusivity, empowerment, trust, challenge, and community (Healey et al., 2014). Successful creation of conditions in which the values are developed is critical to establishing a true partnership ethos and those contemplating partnership working should be aware of this.

What are the benefits of partnership working?

Numerous benefits of staff-student partnerships are reported for both parties. From a student perspective, they include, benefits related to skill development (Curran & Millard, 2016; Marie & McGowan, 2017; Marquis et al., 2019) including enhanced employability skills (Dollinger et al., 2018), increased confidence, self-belief, and engagement with learning (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), alongside increased feelings of belonging (Cook-Sather, 2018). Other reported benefits include a deeper understanding of the

institutional structures (Marie & McGowan, 2017), and improved relationships between staff and students (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill, 2021). As a result, even a short staff-student partnership can have a lasting impact on students' learning (Duda & Danielson, 2018). The various benefits reported for students make the case for increasing the scale of partnership working compelling.

However, challenges remain to ensure that the structures associated with partnership schemes are equitable for student participants (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). This study does not specifically focus on equity for student participants as the programme in question was funded by the university's access and participation plan (Office for Students, 2018; University of Sussex, 2020), and thereby focused on engaging minoritised student groups.

For staff involved in partnerships, reported benefits include improvements in teaching materials and new perspectives on traditional teaching and learning practices (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Staff motivations have previously been found to range from making a difference in the form of addressing specific challenges in practice or policy within the institution to advancing their career and development (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021). Typically staff members involved in such projects are naturally predisposed to innovation (Duda & Danielson, 2018), and are often referred to as the 'usual suspects' (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020, p. 2548), with their work showcased by the institution to encourage other faculty to adopt similar initiatives. The largely informal recognition of staff work can create barriers to participation where staff are time constrained. The formal recognition of the incremental workload associated with partnership projects represents a major hurdle to scaling up partnership working effectively across the institution.

In light of the reported benefits for students, staff, and their institutions it is important to further our understanding of how partnership schemes can develop the conditions for increasing numbers of students and staff to engage with partnership working and optimise the likelihood of individual project success.

Method

The case context is a series of staff-student partnership projects delivered as part of an institutional programme launched in 2020. The programme 'sees students and staff working as equal partners; learning, innovating and co-creating together to improve the student experience at Sussex' (University of Sussex, 2022). The definition maps to that advanced by Cook-Sather et al. (2014), and given the interchangeable nature of the terminology in this field we will continue to use the term partnership despite the choice of the words 'innovating', 'co-creating', and 'improve' having parallels to the terms depicting co-creation (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019).

The scheme adopted a project-based model (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021). Proposals for staff-student projects required the completion of a proposal outlining the following: aims of the projects and which student groups will benefit, the catalyst for the work e.g. student feedback via the NSS, how the work aligns with the university strategy, and how it contributes to the access and participation plan. The proposal also includes a section on the project delivery that asks how students will be inducted into the project, key tasks and responsibilities along with any risks to the project, and how success will be measured (Smith & Axson, 2023). Once this has been accepted by the scheme, a role description for students is developed and the role is advertised on the

university's internal job site. Applications are scored by staff and students and a shortlist of candidates is invited to an assessment centre where students carry out a scenario-based task in teams. Again scoring is undertaken by staff and students and successful applicants are offered roles.

Staff and students who had participated in the first 15 projects of the scheme were invited to be part of the study (institutional ethical approval ER/SS706/21). The general details of the project duration and number of participants are outlined in [Table 1](#) (below).

An outline interview guide was constructed, informed by the literature, to answer the study's research question. The questions sought to elicit an understanding of how the programme operated from the perspective of both staff and students and its influence on the success of individual projects that were conducted as part of the scheme, e.g. through the project proposal process, and the student recruitment process. The interviewees had worked on a variety of different partnership projects that were representative of those conducted in the first year of the programme (University of Sussex, 2021), both in terms of scale and duration ([Table 1](#)). The ethical approval required that project identity was anonymised and that analysis was undertaken at the scheme level (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020).

Recruitment emails, drafted by the researchers, were sent by the partnership programme team, and those interested in participating in the research responded directly to the research team. In common with Marie and McGowan (2017) the

Table 1. First fifteen projects.

| Project Number | Duration of Project | Number of Student Partners and hours p/w | Number of Staff Partners |
|----------------|---|--|--------------------------|
| 1 | Continuing with partners changing each academic year. | $N = 10$ 10 hours p/w | 1 |
| 2 | Continuing with partners changing each academic year | $N = 3$ 5 hours p/w | 2 |
| 3 | 7 months | $N = 4$ 10 hours p/w | 1 |
| 4 | Continuing with partners changing each academic year | $N = 6$ 5–10 hours p/w | 3 |
| 5 | 4 weeks | $N = 20+$ Up to 25 hours p/w | 1 |
| 6 | 9 months | $N = 12$ 4 hours p/w | 1 |
| 7 | 6 months | $N = 20$ 3 hours p/w | 1 |
| 8 | 4 weeks | $N = 4$ 5 hours p/w | 1 |
| 9 | 8 months | $N = 2$ 3–4 hours p/w | 1 |
| 10 | 6 months | $N = 8$ 5 hours p/w | 1 |
| 11 | Continuing with partners changing each academic year | $N = 11$ 8 hours p/w | 1 |
| 12 | Continuing with partners changing each academic year | $N = 6$ 3–5 hours p/w | 1 |
| 13 | Continuing with partners changing each academic year | $N = 3$ 3–5 hours p/w | 3 |
| 14 | 6 weeks | $N = 4$ 5 hours p/w | 1 |
| 15 | 5 months | $N = 6$ 10 hours p/w | 1 |

Source: project proposal documentation.

research team encountered challenges in recruiting interviewees for the study. One such challenge is that by the time of the study, the majority of students had graduated from university and may not have continued to access their institutional email. Ultimately, four students and six staff members agreed to participate, giving a total of ten interviewees.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with participants via video call (Zoom). Interview transcripts were read by the researchers and initial themes were identified, followed by further cycles of detailed reading using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The interviews provided insights into how the partnership programme influenced the operation of the individual projects that the interviewees had conducted. Codes were both expanded and merged by a process of going back and forth from the data to the literature until the researchers were satisfied that they reflected finding related to the partnership programme rather than the individual project. Representative quotes were selected to illustrate the findings and as a result, staff and student quotes are presented together under each theme.

Findings

Insights into the operation of the partnership programme were derived through three core themes that reflected the experiences of those who participated in the initial projects: preparedness for partnership, the relationship to the student voice strategy, and cultivating the partnership ethos.

Theme 1: Preparedness for partnership

While both student and staff partners acknowledged the benefits of the partnership scheme, they also identified the importance of having university-wide clarity about what a partnership project is: 'Institutionally, I think we need a very clear message, this is what it is, this is what it isn't'. (Participant 7 – Staff member)

At the outset of their projects students often reported feeling unclear about their role: 'When I first was a [student partner] my roles and responsibilities were not clear at all'. (Participant 4 – Student) Although the students did undertake generalised training in preparation for partnership working, it was clear that some projects were better at inducting students than others.

This led to students' impression that various staff members also lacked role clarity, and perhaps were not adequately prepared for partnership work. The experience of students of individual projects was closely linked to the clarity of purpose of the staff member who initiated the project (Participant 2, 4 - Student). For example, reflections were associated with the importance of the project definition as a key contributor to partnership success: '(Successful projects are) tightly focused in their remit, they've got very specific aims for what they're trying to do'. (Participant 7 – Staff member).

Initial staff training was effective in ensuring that they had an appreciation of co-creation under the auspices of the scheme with staff members expressing views similar to this: 'So I understood that very much to be an equal partner as a co-creator with the students' (Participant 10 – Staff member). However, the initial training did not focus on

the practical aspects of facilitating a partnership, and additional partnership resources related to this aspect would have been helpful to enhance staff preparedness.

Staff identified additional conditions required for co-creation, including an investment of time from staff, a team ethos, and specific aims that are understood across the project team, 'Everyone needs to know what they're aiming for'. (Participant 7 – Staff member) This quote reinforces the findings from the literature that establishing the values of partnership, for example, authenticity, empowerment, and challenge, is a critical step in a successful partnership. This is a task that staff partners are implicitly expected to lead and in this study, several discovered as the projects progressed.

Although co-creation was a central aim of this partnership scheme, looking back, not all staff felt that they achieved co-creation (Participant – 7 Staff member), with a number describing more of a supervisory relationship. This may have been attributable to staff members familiarity with supervisory processes e.g. dissertation supervision and supervision within research teams. However, any tendency towards a supervisory relationship is likely to undermine the benefits of collaboration and co-creation leading to dissatisfaction and disengagement of those involved.

Theme 2: Relationship to the student voice strategy

As a new initiative, the relationship of the programme to the overall student voice strategy was not made explicit at the outset. The resultant confusion manifested itself in several respects: a perceived lack of identity (and presence) of the scheme and tensions between the scheme and existing student voice mechanisms.

Students reported that they felt that the partnership programme didn't have a clear sense of identity and that they (and others) didn't appreciate what it was about at the outset. Participants highlighted conflicts between the partnership programme and the university as an institution, and how this may impede the programme from creating its own identity. Part of the uncertainty may be attributable to the fledgling nature of the programme and might be resolved over time: 'as the programme developed, it just got clearer and clearer'. (Participant 4 – Student).

The ongoing process of establishing a clear identity for and raising awareness of the programme across the University was important to ensure that those beyond the programme were aware of its aims, to encourage staff project proposals and student applications for the partnership roles, and to highlight how it differs from other student voice mechanisms. Rather than a single endeavour associated with the initial launch, it must be a continuous process as the student body is transient and staff members may not always be aware of or alert to activities coordinated centrally. The scheme does now have a web presence for both staff and students and produces an annual impact report highlighting projects that it has supported (University of Sussex, 2021).

Challenges were experienced because staff outside the partnership felt threatened and slowed down or blocked collaborative opportunities. For example, the issue was outlined as follows:

And so it took a lot of explaining that we are not there to take their job away from them, we are not there to change their processes, we are just there to sort of just to give a nudge, just to

give your services an edge, you know for students, make it more accessible so yeah there was definitely barriers. (Participant 3 – Staff member)

This misunderstanding may have been addressed at the outset by ensuring that the intent of the programme was clear to all. The institutional context was one of financial constraints and it appeared that some staff members were concerned that the programme would seek to replace their roles, leading to them adopting the defensive stance outlined above.

However, a shift in perspective was also reported and was attributed to (academic) staff within schools talking to each other about their experiences of running a partnership project. Along with a change in understanding of what running a staff-student project involves there was a marked increase in enthusiasm from other staff wanting to run a project themselves. Despite these developments, concerns were also raised that, while informal discussion of the partnership programme was positive and helped raise awareness, this could also amplify existing misunderstandings about what a partnership project involves.

The tension between the roles of student partners and other student roles across the university was highlighted by both student and staff partners (Participant 1 – Student; 9 – Staff member). This includes the work undertaken by the Students' Union and the Student Representative scheme which is unpaid in contrast to the partnership programme where students were remunerated for their time. It led to a degree of hostility towards the student partners (Participant 9 – Staff member) that did not seem to be fully resolved at the programme level.

Theme 3: Cultivating the partnership ethos

The interviews revealed that the expectation was for staff members to act as facilitators and establish partnership ways of working with students in the projects. This created a dual role for staff members: 'You are a co-creator, but you're also a little bit supervisory because you're enabling something to happen' (Participant 10 – Staff member). There was also a recognition that the balance between staff and student leadership varied throughout the project with students often taking more control as it progressed. For example, one participant remarked: 'I feel like in some cases it was more led by us [.] I feel like they definitely gave us a lot of space for creativity'. (Participant 4 – Student)

Staff members who were interviewed as part of this study all shared a similar passion for their roles and the power of working co-creatively with students. They demonstrated an awareness of the engrained power dynamics that exist within the working structure and discussed approaches to establish strong working relationships with their student partners, explaining that they had to make themselves open to challenge by the student partners:

that's really what you have to do and be open and also be open-minded to the feedback and understand it's not criticism, it's not criticism it's a genuine willingness to make things better.
(Participant 3 – Staff member)

For staff members, this new state of vulnerability was somewhat alien and often difficult to achieve. At the same time, it was recognised that there is a need to

establish the value of empowerment so that student partners feel that they can provide candid feedback within the confines of the project. In practice, as with staff partners, it appeared easier for certain students to move beyond the traditional staff-student roles to embrace partnership ways of working. For example, students reported remaining conscious that they would return to the imbalanced power dynamic of the university following the project:

you don't know if they're gonna be like grading your paper, the next day, or like being your lecturer and everything and you don't want that awkward dynamic, so if there is.
(Participant 1 – Student)

Staff partners were also conscious of this underlying tension and reflected on: 'how we help student [partners] see themselves as kind of colleagues, more so than students'. (Participant 7 – Staff member). The importance of the staff-student relationship (or the value of trust) was identified by both staff and students as a critical success factor for partnership projects and time needs to be invested in building this at the outset of any partnership. This is critical for short projects where relationships have little time to grow.

Where issues are encountered with staff partners it is important that students have recourse to the partnership programme as they may have limited ability to influence staff members outside of the operation of the partnership. However, power structures between staff members can influence how such matters are handled, for example in the case where the student partners had been left to work on the project without any staff co-creation input, the hierarchical nature of the university made it awkward for the programme lead to intervene with the relevant staff member because they were more junior (Participant 1 – Student).

Reflecting on the development of a partnership ethos in their projects, staff partners remarked upon the considerable time commitment involved in partnership projects, which was more than they had anticipated at the outset. This serves to reinforce the importance of setting a clear understanding of the investment required by staff partners at the outset to ensure that they can devote the time required to the project and thereby enhance the partnership experience for participants and the likelihood of a successful outcome.

The time investment was not without benefits to staff members and participation in the partnership programme was recognised by staff as having aided professional development, with participants listing skills developed in areas of project management and relationship management. Further, they also cited career benefits, with one member using the project as a case study for a professional recognition scheme and another presenting on the project to peers from across the sector: 'it's had a sustained impact in terms of I've given conference papers, and workshops and sessions'. (Participant 8 – Staff member)

Discussion

The implementation of the institutional partnership scheme represented a shift in the institutional role from one of listening to students to working with students. The findings reflect the experiences of staff and students who participated in partnership projects run under the auspices of a new institutional programme and offer insights for such implementations. They highlight the fact that partnership working is 'neither simple nor inherently good' (Bovill et al., 2016, p. 196) and that careful consideration must be

devoted at the level of the partnership scheme to mitigating the challenges associated with such practices. The study contributes to and extends the existing literature in the following ways.

Firstly, it identifies that both students and staff members need to be adequately prepared for partnership work (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). In the scheme under consideration, significant focus was placed on student preparation, with a lesser emphasis on staff preparation and training. Findings are consistent with prior studies that identified student anxiety at the outset of partnership projects (Smith & Axson, 2023) combined with staff uncertainty around implementation of such initiatives (Marquis et al., 2017). At the programme level, a toolkit for partnership could be developed to better equip both staff and students for partnership projects. Specifically, the ethos of partnership working and the expectations that accompany it must be made explicit at the inception of a partnership project to ensure that a common understanding is achieved and that multiple interpretations do not proliferate (Cotton et al., 2013; Høgdal et al., 2021). Suggested contents for the toolkit would include the aims of the partnership scheme, a background to student-staff partnerships, establishing the partnership, achieving co-creation, evaluating the project against initial aims, and responding to reflective prompts.

We find that there are two stages to the development of partnership values, those communicated by the programme, which communicates the identity of partnership work at the institution, followed by the values-setting approach of the individual projects (Smith et al., 2021). Improved clarity would reduce the potential for ‘collaboration-washing’ i.e. a façade of collaboration (Marquis et al., 2016) as reported by one of the participants of the study. At the partnership level, a more extensive programme of staff support focusing on and making the facilitation role of staff members explicit may enhance the likelihood of projects successfully achieving co-creation aims.

Secondly, interviewees highlighted tensions with staff across the institution who were concerned about the students’ roles, and with established student representation schemes. Whilst such tensions have started to be addressed in the literature e.g. (Cornelius-Bell et al., 2022; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023; Patrick, 2023) there is no conclusive approach to managing them. Although there is, in theory, a clear delineation between student representatives who work within the governance system of universities and student partners who work via a ‘project-based’ framework there continues to be scope for blurring at the boundaries (Cornelius-Bell et al., 2022).

Further, during the partnership process, the roles varied over time as the project evolves (Bovill, 2017). Partnership working has been subject to criticism and caution has been recommended with researchers highlighting negative aspects of partnerships (Patrick, 2023). However, this is not an inevitability and significant thought needs to be given to the details of partnership schemes to promote greater inclusivity for all participants and mitigate such risks.

Thirdly, whilst the benefits of student involvement in such work have been widely documented, less is known about the staff benefits (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). We find that the benefits for staff are closely entwined with the authenticity of their involvement. It was clear that in the early phases of the scheme’s deployment, many staff participants were already highly engaged (Duda & Danielson, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). This natural engagement enabled several staff members to benefit beyond the projects through conference presentations, developing cases for professional recognition,

etc. However, there was also a backdrop of variable staff investment in the partnerships. In part, this may have been due to the lack of recognition as part of the professional workload (Coombe et al., 2018) and it remains important to address such concerns to remove barriers to staff engagement and enable partnership schemes to scale up (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). Further, whilst significant care was taken to promote diversity of student partners, similar data was not recorded for staff partners, and as such it is not clear how accessible the partnership scheme was to staff members. This is an important consideration as in this scheme staff-members were responsible for submitting project proposals. Any implicit barriers are likely to influence the range of projects proposed.

Finally, it reveals that the partnership scheme was subjected to the structural tensions of the university with staff members running the scheme conscious of their own position in the hierarchy in relation to staff-partners responsible for projects.

Conclusion

The findings reflect the initial experiences of implementing an institutional partnership programme. They offer insights for other institutions as they seek to implement and scale institutional schemes addressing preparedness for partnership working, the relationship to the institutional student voice strategy, and the cultivation of a partnership ethos.

To reduce the variability in outcomes and facilitate a stronger identity of what partnership constitutes within an institution, a focus on staff development activity before facilitating a partnership project is essential along with ensuring that staff have sufficient time within their workload to devote to this work. Partnership projects are vulnerable to the extent to which the values of partnership working are embedded at the outset and this is a conscious step that should be undertaken by the staff lead. Our findings also underline the need to situate institutional programmes within an overall student voice strategy and to articulate the differences between the different roles both to participants and the wider institution. One of the challenges going forward for partnership programmes is to continue the self-evaluation process and continually enhance their practices.

Further studies could extend this work by investigating the development and implementation of resources for the facilitation of staff-student partnerships along the lines of the proposed toolkit.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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