Reflection on student-staff partnership to co-create study skills resources for UCLMS medical students

Dr Carys Phillips (University College London), Dr Nicole Tay (West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust), Anaïs Deere (University College London Medical School) and Dr Emma Kelley (University College London)

'Learning how to learn' is a key component of an undergraduate degree, the achievement of which will stand students in good stead throughout their higher education and beyond. Establishing effective study skills whilst in medical school is key to the ongoing learning required throughout a medical career.

UCL medical students provided feedback in a 2020-21 student-led survey, noting that they felt study skills teaching and support could be improved. Following this feedback, two clinical lecturers with an interest in study skills formed a partnership with students to better understand the student perspective on study skills and co-create resources. The project was funded by the ChangeMakers team at UCL, affording us the opportunity to develop this student-staff partnership, research student perspectives on current study skills resources and act on the findings to co-create resources and enact change based on student need.

How was the partnership formed?

The two staff partners wanted to work with students who themselves had a keen and vested interest in study skills, with student motivation identified as a key factor in successful co-creation (Martens et al, 2020). We offered the opportunity to participate to all students in the medical school to ensure a diverse range of students who best reflected the student population. Of the students who responded, all were motivated and interested in study skills

and medical education, and four students were selected randomly for fairness. Our student partners spanned three different years across the medical school, with two of the students contributing their reflection of the partnership to this essay.

We critically reflect on our experiences of how the student-staff partnership facilitated our understanding of available study skill resources and the co-creation of new resources using the Integrated Reflective Cycle (Bassot, 2013). Four overarching themes emerged from our collective reflections on the student-staff collaboration: using the partnership to develop new skills, ensuring a flat hierarchy, how the student voice in the student-staff partnership encouraged student perspectives, and staff support within the partnership.

The experience of the partnership

Using the partnership to develop new skills

Once the partnership was established, we met virtually to discuss initial ideas and our expectations of both the partnership and the project overall. The students had initial concerns regarding staff expectations and time commitments of the partnership as they had never collaborated with staff on such a project before. These were addressed in the initial meeting, helping the students understand that this would be a joint effort. Such concerns are reflected in the literature by students, who noted a lack of clarity of roles can lead to a mismatch in expectations of the partnership, suggesting the need for clear clarification of roles for an effective student-staff partnership (Martens et al, 2019). We discussed how to ensure that we heard varying opinions on study skills from the student body, and how to apply academic rigour to our approach. We used a mixed-methods approach to gather data, and as the students were new to qualitative research, this enabled them to learn a new type of research methodology whilst working alongside methods already known to them.

The student-staff partnership collaborated on the research approach, with staff guiding the students to ensure the research methods were appropriate for identifying students' perspectives on study skills and gathering their opinions on effective study skills resources. The students found it particularly useful to have guidance on the ethics application, which

was more arduous than either party initially anticipated. The process allowed the students to understand the importance of ethics approval in research and they appreciated gaining experience in an area to which they felt not many students are exposed.

The students in the partnership found creating the questionnaire and preliminary focus group questions a much more thorough process than expected, with multiple iterations following partnership discussions. However, the staff were expecting this from prior experience of medical education research. Both parties found that it was good to have different views within the partnership, allowing for healthy discussion and differing opinions, adding robustness and rigour to the approach. The students appreciated guidance on creating non-leading questions that would give reliable data, which they found surprisingly tricky given their personal opinions on the provision of study skills support.

As the students were so enthusiastic and independent, it was easy for staff to forget that this was their first foray into research. Whilst the students had ownership over elements of the research techniques, they may have benefitted from more guidance in specific areas, one example was analysing the qualitative data. This was challenging as it was new to the students, which the staff did not fully appreciate at the time. We subsequently revisited the analysis as a group, which duplicated efforts, but meant that we were all in agreement on the interpretation of the results.

On reflection by the partnership, such self-directed tasks also had positive outcomes. It encouraged the students to delve deeper into the literature and read more widely than prescriptive tasks alone would have. Martens et al (2019) suggest that students must have prior knowledge of the course when collaborating with staff in a successful partnership. Despite elements of the process being novel to the students, their motivation and passion for medical education enabled successful collaboration. Despite some shortcomings which were easily rectified, the students really appreciated that they were given autonomy in certain aspects of the research process. They felt this allowed them to fully immerse themselves in the research which, in turn, meant they felt more involved and invested in the project.

The main outcome was that students wanted a central online study skills resource they were able to access, alongside a forum where they could anonymously ask questions. We co-

created a central website, housing resources made by the students, as well as signposting to external resources. We tried to keep the page engaging and relevant, with 'top study skill tips' from peers, a video on study skills from a previous medical society president, as well as evidence-based study skill techniques. The students were able to produce helpful resources whilst staff curated them and helped with the logistical side of arranging study skills support sessions. The result was an informative, useful resource for students. We are currently working on writing up the research as an ongoing element of our collaboration.

Reflection on action

Ensuring a flat hierarchy

All parties wished the partnership to remain collaborative, with the two faculty members providing academic mentorship and guidance where needed. There was initial concern from both staff and students that the partnership would feel hierarchical and staff-led, potentially losing the unique value of the partnership. Students were doubtful about how much input they would have on the project, assuming their value was giving a student opinion rather than guiding the project's direction. Such concerns meant that in the initial stages there were some reservations from students regarding contributing. As noted in the literature, the students wanted to be considered as equals in the partnership, transcending simply giving opinions and advice, and instead moving on to implementing such suggestions and changes (Martens et al, 2019).

Both groups thought that although the project initially felt more staff directed, as it proceeded, the collaborative element really flourished. The students noted how the staff members tried to flatten the hierarchy within the first few meetings by emphasising that they wanted the students to take the lead in certain aspects and showing a genuine interest in what they had to say. This is reflected in the literature, that for successful co-creation, staff must treat students' perspectives equally, which will encourage mutual respect and ultimately lead to more useful student input (Martens et al, 2020). The students felt this helped to destabilise the inherent power imbalance present and laid the foundations for an open partnership that not only allowed them to feel more involved, but also more

comfortable in vocalising ideas, ultimately leading to more productive discussions. This was also felt by the staff, who agreed that the hierarchy flattened out after a couple of meetings, and that the process was likely slowed by virtual meetings which were a necessity at the time due to the pandemic.

Despite initially feeling a little intimidated by the seniority of staff in the partnership, the students became more comfortable in the student-staff partnership as the partnership developed. The staff were mindful of this, trying their best to create a comfortable atmosphere, which was successful, as the students felt that as the partnership progressed they overcame their insecurities of voicing their opinion in group work and understanding the value of their contributions.

Elements of the project were student-led which encouraged student ownership of the project, seeking advice from staff partners as required. The collaborative nature of the partnership meant students felt supported as it was easy to ask for help, which was essential given that data collection and analysis were completely new fields for them. They felt they could easily approach the staff for help if needed, with literature also highlighting the importance of staff being open and approachable to facilitate student input for a successful partnership (Martens et al, 2020).

From a staff perspective, in future collaborations we would meet in-person (at least for the initial meeting) which we believe would facilitate earlier group cohesion and a flat hierarchy. Clearly defining roles from the off would also help at an early stage to set out the expectations of both parties in such a collaboration (Martens et al, 2019). However, we are mindful of maintaining the balance between setting expectations and retaining a friendly, relaxed atmosphere, which is outlined in the literature as important to students in collaborative projects (Martens et al, 2019). We all agreed on this, and feel that the project would have been hindered if the atmosphere and hierarchy meant that students could not easily approach staff.

Theory and personal learning

How the student voice in the student-staff partnership encouraged student perspectives

This project was staff-initiated based on student feedback of study skills support, however it was felt that a staff-student collaboration would be more effective in successfully obtaining the student perspective. As staff, we had preconceived ideas of what students may want or need, but it was important to put these aside as we formed a partnership seeking student input and collaborating on solutions. This is shown in the literature, that students provide a 'unique perspective' (Martens et al, 2019, p 910) due to their lived experiences.

The students had considerable insight into the potential issues and offered great ideas on how best to reach the wider student population, using alternative methods to disseminate the questionnaire such as year group chats and social media channels. This was influential in increasing the response rates as the student partners were able to access exclusive communication channels not available to staff, reflecting the 'liminal state' they occupy between student body and faculty (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011). Similarly, it was believed by all that the decision to have students facilitate the focus groups allowed participants to be more open and frank in their opinions, meaning the resultant data and feedback felt more authentic. Reflecting on this, the students gained a real sense of purpose within the partnership as they could see the direct impact they had on the research process, which contributed to their gains in confidence as the project progressed.

When forming the 'study skills resource' website, the students used both the data and their position as medical students to tailor the content to what students wanted. This is reflected in literature as students offer different perspectives to that of teachers alone (Martens et al, 2019), which we were able to harness through group discussion. From a staff perspective, we would seek out such partnerships in the future to co-create new resources, as it is hard to fully understand and incorporate the student voice otherwise. From a student perspective, being able to co-create one of the first online 'study-skills resource pages' tailored to student needs was felt to be a privilege, and both parties agreed this could not have been achieved as successfully without the student-staff partnership.

The experience of the student-staff partnership allowed for the co-creation of more useful, student-led resources, responding to the student need. This has been an invaluable experience for all involved. Not only have the staff developed their mentoring skills and guidance of novice researchers, but as a group we were able to foster a sense of community and teamwork. Within UCL Medical School, we aim to promote a culture of inclusivity and support, and collaborative projects like this can help with this objective. There is a wealth of advice in the literature to support the benefits of staff-student partnerships, highlighting patience, shared aims and creating a supportive environment (Cook-Sather et al, 2014). Whilst we aimed to achieve these, it was important that we learnt from our mistakes, something we did instinctively throughout the process.

Preparation for future experiences

Support from staff

This project was the students' first experience of a student-staff partnership, and the staff are aware of how fortunate they were to have such motivated students, making the research process much more seamless. In the early stages, the students required more direction, which was to be expected as they were unfamiliar with the processes. This is corroborated in the literature, which highlights the importance of tailoring co-creation to the skillset of the students, starting small and building up, which also increases confidence (Könings et al, 2021). From a staff perspective, in future we would make sure to provide more of a mentorship approach from the start, explaining each step of the process more clearly, which would ultimately empower students to take ownership of the project earlier on and help confidence grow. We found communication and regular check-ins key to successful collaboration. In future, we would encourage students to get in touch to troubleshoot any issues as they arise, rather than waiting for the next scheduled meeting to discuss any problems. This would allow for maximum efficiency and to use the meetings more collaboratively. We noted that, towards the end of the project, students would come to staff with queries as they arose, likely reflecting the increased confidence they developed throughout the project.

The students felt that the partnership allowed them to gain valuable access to resources and contacts that facilitated both the collection of data and the creation of the central site. While student involvement meant the site was better tailored to students' needs, staff's knowledge of what resources had worked in the past, such as those that are interactive, led to a more appealing page. This reflects the importance of co-creation by both partners in this project.

Students found the unexpected freedom the staff gave them in the partnership took a while to get used to. In some of the initial meetings without staff, a lot of the time was focused on discussing what they thought the staff envisioned for the project rather than coming up with their own ideas, emphasising the need to clarify expectations (Martens et al, 2019). Both staff and students felt this wasted valuable time that contributed to the project lasting longer than initially planned.

Despite initial uncertainty of what the student-staff partnership would entail, the students became more self-assured as the project progressed and improved their communication skills in a professional setting. They have developed the confidence to engage in staff-student discussion and now feel comfortable to take the lead, when necessary, in future projects with staff. The reciprocal enthusiasm from staff has also given them the confidence to reach out directly to staff with ideas in the future. In turn, staff also enjoyed this process and grew more confident themselves in such a collaboration, noting that they would engage in the process again for future resource co-creations.

The partnership allowed the students an insight into how to conduct medical education research. They gained experience of the complete process of a research project, co-creation of an online resource and presenting their research at conferences. They were able to use the staff members' experience of medical education research to augment their learning and understanding of new research skills. As students with an interest in research, they appreciated the skills developed throughout the process and look forward to applying them in future collaborative research projects.

Conclusion

Both students and staff valued the insight gained from working on this project collaboratively and feel that we have collectively made a positive impact on supporting medical students. Further research ideas have grown from this project, it has fuelled student interest in medical education and encouraged us all to take part in other collaborative projects in the future. The success of the project has provided students with evidence that they have agency within a student-staff partnership. We would also like to collaborate with other co-creation projects to allow us to learn from each other (Könings et al, 2021). Via the student-staff partnership, we were able to better understand student views on study skills and utilise the student voice to improve study skills support at UCLMS.

References

Bassot, B. (2013) *The Reflective Journal*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 9781137324719.

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C. and Felten, P. (2014) *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. ISBN: 9781118836262

Cook-Sather, A. and Alter, Z. (2011) 'What Is and What Can Be: How a Liminal Position Can Change Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.' *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 42(1), 37-53. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1492.2010.01109.x

Könings, K. D., Mordang, S., Smeenk, F., Stassen, L., and Ramani, S. (2021) 'Learner involvement in the co-creation of teaching and learning: AMEE Guide No. 138.' *Medical Teacher*, 43(8), 924-936. Doi: 10.1080/0142159X.2020.1838464

Martens, S. E., Spruijt, A., Wolfhagen, I. H. A. P., Whittingham, J. R. D. and Dolmans, D. H. J. M. (2019) 'A student's take on student–staff partnerships: experiences and preferences.' *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44(6), 910-919. Doi: 10.1080/02602938.2018.1546374

Martens, S. E., Wolfhagen, I. H. A. P., Whittingham, J. R. D. and Dolmans, D. H. J. M. (2020) 'Mind the gap: Teachers' conceptions of student-staff partnership and its potential to enhance educational quality.' *Medical Teacher*, 42(5), 529-535. Doi: 10.1080/0142159X.2019.1708874