

## CASE STUDY

## Empowering student partners: Reflections on the dynamics of student-staff partnerships

**Kevwe Olomu**, School of Science, Engineering and Environment, **Elizabeth King**, School of Art, Media, & Creative Technology, **Oindrilla Ghosh**, School of Psychology, University of Sussex, **Susan Smith**, School of Management, University College London, **Catherine McConnell**, Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Brighton, and **\*Claire Hamshire**, Vice Chancellor's Office, University of Salford, UK.

Contact: [h.c.hamshire@salford.ac.uk](mailto:h.c.hamshire@salford.ac.uk)

## ABSTRACT

This case study reflects on a project that utilised student-staff partnerships to explore how best to prepare staff for collaboration in such partnerships. Eight student researchers worked together across four higher education institutions in the United Kingdom, conducting interviews with 41 participants, including both staff and students. The partnerships studied at these institutions, represents a mix of research-intensive and teaching-focused universities, covering a wide range of academic disciplines. The project examined experiences and the values of partnership, offering practical insights to support the development of successful student-staff collaborations. This student-led initiative summarises key findings, such as how narrative interviews facilitated an understanding of partnership values. It presents a practical resource toolkit to support institutions engaging in partnership work. Collaborative efforts were crucial in exploring power dynamics and trust within the project. The reflections in this case study will be valuable for students, educators, researchers, and others interested in developing student-staff partnership projects.

## KEYWORDS

student-staff partnership, narrative interviews, trust, power dynamics

Student-staff partnerships embody dynamic and collaborative relationships between academics who develop student-focused initiatives and students, wherein students actively contribute as informants, participants, and agents of change within an educational setting (Cook-Sather, 2014). Healey (2023) points out that partnership working recognises the right of students to actively drive their educational experience, catalysing social justice, inclusivity, and transformation. Effectively engaging staff and students as partners is a significant challenge facing higher education today (Bovill & Felten, 2016), as both groups' hierarchical imbalances and workload balances affect engagement. However, several key operational practices crucial to the success of student-staff partnerships have been identified (Chui et al., 2022; Healey, 2023). Creating physical and emotional spaces conducive to partnership activity, where conversations can be

informal and institutional hierarchy is not applicable, such as in campus coffee shops, is highlighted as essential for these partnerships to thrive (Trowell, 2024). In partnership processes, academic developers' pivotal roles are as facilitators (Matthews et al., 2019); this involves supporting relationship development, advocating for increased institutional attention to partnership potential, addressing resistance, providing reassurance, and promoting principles of equity and inclusivity.

There are limited studies within the literature on student-staff partnership that take a detailed look at staff preparedness for partnership, despite the consensus that successful partnerships benefit inclusion agendas (Bovill et al., 2016), improved student belonging and satisfaction, cultural responsiveness (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019), and changes in thinking among students and staff about the curriculum (Peseta et al., 2016). This lack of research on staff preparedness holds staff back from entering into a fully informed partnership, and this study aims to help address this by providing information and resources. Little training is offered to staff, and where it does exist, it is not typically compulsory for those participating in partnership projects (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020), leaving them to learn on an ad hoc basis as their projects progress. Working in partnership varies significantly depending on individual and contextual factors. Healey (2023) suggests a guide to help staff cultivate and develop their practice and proficiencies in partnership with students. Working with students as partners includes partnership values, core considerations, and partnership activities (see Healey, 2023, p. 9–14).

Being ready and able to work in a partnership has been described as a “mindset” (Cook-Sather et al., 2020) and as a set of “attitudes and intentions” which intersect thinking/mental processes (cognition) and emotions (affect), which can be strong predictors of partnership outcomes (Cook-Sather & Kaur, 2022). To embark on partnership working without any preparation, facilitation, or resources could present a serious risk to the process, to the experiences of those involved (both students and staff), and to the desired outcome—particularly as the reported challenges involve issues of power and authority and the need to move away from the dichotomous “us and them” mentality (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2018) towards a more unified relationship between partners. This dichotomy has been considered right at the heart of this study, as it was conducted by staff and students working in partnership and researching other partnership experiences to address this.

## OUR PARTNERSHIP PROCESS

This Quality Assurance Agency- (QAA) funded project brought together staff and students from four diverse institutions of differing sizes, socio-economic intakes, and locations in the UK. Central to the project were student-staff partnerships, with the funding used to employ two student researchers at each partner institution to ensure inclusion of meaningful and authentic voices across the research. For example, student researchers were recruited from within the universities, ensuring they could accurately represent the voices and concerns of their peers. Their first-hand experience allowed them to relay real-life scenarios from the student body, fostering authentic dialogue. The staff team was established through a shared interest in researching partnerships, and the student researchers were recruited via an institution-wide call for expressions of interest and interviews at each of the four universities. There was a phased approach to student recruitment, but communication was maintained via a collaborative

Microsoft Teams space, regular meetings, and shared training events. The student researchers had varying levels of interview experience, so each was offered bespoke training and support at each institution to develop their skills to undertake the interviews. For example, lead staff in each institution organised mock interview sessions with their student researchers where they provided feedback on their techniques and covered essential skills such as effective questioning in narrative interviews, active listening, and ethical considerations in research interviews.

The student researchers participated in mock interview sessions with lead staff in their institutions and received feedback on their techniques. The student researchers used online narrative interviews via Teams video conferencing to explore partnerships between staff and students at the four institutions. During each interview, participants were encouraged to use a narrative prompt to tell the stories of their experiences as a series of “episodes,” beginning and finishing wherever and however they felt was most appropriate; this allowed the participants to describe their own experiences in their own words to present a temporal, multidimensional view of their experiences without the imposition of a particular timeframe or targeting a particular aspect of partnership working.

Each participant gave extended accounts of their experiences working. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and a thematic framework analysis was conducted on the transcripts (Braun et al., 2006; Hennink, 2020). Led by the student researchers, the research teams at each institution analysed the transcripts independently to identify overarching themes. Following this first round of analysis, themes from each institution were discussed across the data sets and agreed upon. Thus, the research teams identified, discussed, and verified emerging themes across the four institutions.

## PARTNERSHIP OUTCOMES

Listening to the experiences and perspectives of both students and staff to explore partnership values was central to the project; this was facilitated by the emotional and reflective space created within the narrative interviews (n = 41), allowing participants to share their thoughts and feelings openly. The primary objective was to identify the fundamental conditions essential for fostering an effective approach to student-staff partnerships. The study found that these conditions include motivation, communication, relationship-building, and the importance of impact at personal, professional, and community levels.

Within these overarching themes, participants identified trust, respect, inclusivity, recognition, agency, value, and skill development as subthemes emerging through broader speculations. These elements emerged as critical factors contributing to the successful leadership and impactful outcomes of collaborative projects. The findings stress the need to focus on these aspects and train staff by cultivating these essential elements for effective leadership in collaborative initiatives.

### Motivation

Interviews with faculty and students emphasised the crucial role of motivation in collaborative partnerships. Participants found fulfilment and valuable learning experiences in their involvement. Monetary compensation initially attracted students, but they were also motivated by opportunities for skill development, such as gaining experience in project management,

communication techniques, and teamwork; they also aligned their personal interests with projects addressing pressing social issues within the university context, such as diversity and inclusion initiatives. Many participants were drawn to collaboration due to shared interests in enhancing student-staff partnerships, particularly improving academic support, promoting diversity and inclusion, and developing engagement initiatives. These shared goals empowered them to contribute ideas and build trust with university stakeholders; this symbiotic relationship enhanced project outcomes significantly. Engagement in collaborative initiatives catalysed skill development for students, providing immersive experiences and exposure to diverse perspectives. Coupled with intrinsic motivation, these factors incentivised active participation and fostered overall growth.

### **Communication**

In addition to motivation, a salient thematic element identified in the student-staff interviews pertains to communication. Open and transparent communication was imperative for fostering trust, mainly through practices such as granting autonomy by allowing students to lead project initiatives and make decisions and recognising the value of collaborative efforts by regularly showcasing joint achievements at university forums. Students articulated a preference for ongoing dialogue to ensure mutual updates and to seek validation for their contributions; they expressed disappointment and a sense of marginalisation when such validation was lacking. Moreover, students anticipated an accessible communication channel with staff to articulate their work expectations, concerns, interests, and thoughts. Conversely, staff members endeavoured to extend support through candid conversations and providing a flexible environment whenever feasible. Both parties emphasised the importance of sustained discourse within collaborative endeavours and experienced a sense of loss when projects concluded while simultaneously valuing a sense of accomplishment upon successful closure.

### **Relationships**

Establishing a robust rapport between academic staff and students facilitated effective communication and collaborative endeavours within academic settings. This robust rapport was established through informal personal conversations, respect from academics to students, and an understanding of time constraints. Qualitative interviews revealed a shared sense of support and mutual respect. While power dynamics were acknowledged, participants viewed addressing these dynamics as an opportunity to enhance equity. Both parties emphasised the importance of valuing diverse perspectives and fostering inclusivity. Furthermore, student involvement was recognised as a mutually beneficial learning experience. In essence, fostering symbiotic relationships between staff and students is crucial for the success of educational initiatives.

### **Impact**

Impact fostered satisfaction and a sense of agency among students. Students appreciated direct feedback from staff, which shaped their approach. Visibility of work was valued, providing a sense of accomplishment. However, a potential lack of utilisation of project outputs could lead to disappointment if not communicated transparently. Moving forward, staff should prioritise transparent communication, recognition of student contributions, and effective navigation of project outcomes to enhance the student learning experience.

A toolkit was generated from the collaborative research under the auspices of the QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project, emphasising key themes such as establishing expectations, fostering trust, understanding empowerment dynamics, and assessing impact (Axson et al., 2024). This toolkit offers guidelines for creating effective student-staff partnerships, strategies for facilitating open communication, and tools for evaluating the outcomes of collaborative initiatives. Specifically designed for staff involved in student-staff partnership initiatives, it supports individuals at various stages, whether considering project inception, actively participating in ongoing partnerships, or conducting retrospective evaluations of existing collaborations.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE PARTNERSHIP

Students and staff collaborated to explore partnership practices, ensuring that students' perspectives remained central to this project through structured actions such as regular discussions and feedforward and feedback sessions. This partnership model established the students as co-producers who collaborated from the outset, empowering them to actively shape the project's direction and contribute their insights during the initial development stage. As a result, student and staff perspectives were treated equally throughout the project.

Students and staff often operate from unequal positions of authority, and this power imbalance was addressed within this partnership by enabling students to take the lead in conducting interviews (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). This practical allocation of responsibilities involved training students in narrative interview techniques and granting them autonomy throughout the process, fostering a sense of ownership and trust between students and staff. While managing this shift in power dynamics could present challenges—such as initial hesitance from some staff to relinquish control and the need for ongoing support to build students' confidence—these issues were effectively navigated, resulting in a smooth transition.

Inter-institution working allowed for sharing of strengths and best practices, which was particularly useful for creating a toolkit. Key strengths such as media skills and photography were identified and effectively incorporated into the toolkit. The collaboration was also positive as some institutions struggled to attain enough students for interviews, but other institutions were able to balance these numbers out. One drawback, however, was that the institutions were working at different speeds, which meant that conversations at different points of the project could not happen as institutions were working on different parts of the timeline. Had they been able to go at a similar pace, it may have made for stronger collaborative work.

The toolkit videos were created with the intention of sharing the findings of the research in an accessible way for staff members. The creation of the videos gave a lot of space for student's voices; student researchers had critical discussions about quotations from research participants and made suggestions informed by the research about ways partnerships can work well; this gave another outlet for students to take ownership and control of the research project, again dealing with the power dynamics but also giving space for students to contribute to the project's impact. For instance, students directed, produced, and starred in video content in which they chose to freely discuss insights from personal experiences with staff members to expand upon the interview quotes they discussed, taking full control of the production.

The data is being shared through journal articles, which have been co-written by students and staff in partnership, and this paper is a student-led initiative by three of the eight student partners. In this co-written paper, staff entrusted students with sections of the paper to write, demonstrating trust and providing students with the confidence to engage in academic research. This experience was invaluable for those interested in pursuing an academic career. Although staff had extensive experience and expertise and therefore maintained a final say in the paper's content, the student partners played a significant role throughout the writing process. Their voices were essential in ensuring the authenticity of the partnership and maintaining the student-led nature of the project. The addition of this student-led paper helped by intentionally addressing the power imbalance by allowing students to take responsibility for analysing and sharing the research. By nature, writing the papers occurred sometime after the students had initially signed up to participate as student researchers.

Consequently, only a few students felt they had the time to continue with the partnership alongside their studies to contribute to paper writing; this is part of the realistic expectations of student-staff partnerships: as projects evolve, students may no longer have the time to continue in the partnership. Also, academic papers are often published long after the conclusion of the partnership, making it difficult for students to contribute as many will have graduated. Dissemination also took place through in-person and online presentations of the toolkit at conferences, seminars, and symposiums, where the toolkit was shared with University staff and relevant stakeholders. In these presentations, students and staff presented as equals, each taking sections of the research to discuss. This collaborative approach contributed to addressing the power imbalance and provided students with a valuable opportunity to participate in the research project's final stages. Again, this took place a while after the research was conducted, so not all students who had participated in the project could join. However, this was a much shorter time commitment, making it accessible for more student partners.

For the students who took part, being able to present the co-created work as equals was a moment of pride, just as it was for the staff involved, marking the conclusion of a positive partnership experience. The attendees at the online presentation gave great feedback on the help and insight they gained, improving their perception of partnership. Having an outward-facing presentation for staff and students to work on together showed strength in the partnership that had been created and marked an achievement, allowing all involved to see the impact.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights trust and empathy as essential for effective student-staff partnerships in higher education. Transparency and mutual respect are key to building and maintaining these partnerships, fostering an environment where staff and students can collaborate meaningfully. The project team gained a deeper understanding of partnership values through active collaboration. The toolkit developed for staff offers insights into building inclusive, trust-based partnerships, emphasising the importance of creating comfortable, open environments. One recommendation is to engage with student partners informally, such as over coffee, asking about their needs to encourage a collaborative spirit and mutual respect. This approach helps students feel valued and heard, establishing a foundation of trust. By centring student voices in a

partnership project, free from traditional academic hierarchies, the team gathered valuable insights into partnership dynamics, which informed both the toolkit and project outcomes (Gamote et al., 2022).

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## NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Kevwe Olomu** completed her PhD degree in environmental studies at the University of Salford and is now a lecturer in corporate environmental management and sustainability at the University of Salford School of Science Engineering and Environment.

**Elizabeth King** is studying for an MA in contemporary fine art at the University of Salford and is an associate lecturer in the Directorate of Art & Design in critical & contextual Studies.

**Oindrilla Ghosh** completed her MSc in foundations in clinical psychology and mental health at the University of Sussex. She is currently a PhD researcher in psychology at Ulster University, School of Psychology, Faculty of Life and Health Sciences.

**Susan Smith** is a professor of accounting and the deputy director of student experience at University College London.

**Catherine McConnell** is the head of student academic success at the University of Brighton. Her recent doctorate in education focused on investigating the complexities of student-staff partnerships in learning and teaching.

**Claire Hamshire** is a professor of higher education and the associate pro vice-chancellor of education and student experience at the University of Salford, UK. She is also a UK Advance HE National teaching fellow, principal fellow and CATE award holder.

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