

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“I am wary of giving too much power to students:” Addressing the “but” in the Principle of Staff-Student Partnership

Rebecca Murphy, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, United Kingdom.

Sarah Nixon, School of Sport Studies, Leisure and Nutrition, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, United Kingdom.

Contact: s.nixon@ljmu.ac.uk

Simon Brooman, School of Law, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, United Kingdom.

Damian Fearon, Department of the Built Environment, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, United Kingdom.

ABSTRACT

Staff and students coming together to enhance learning is a key educational challenge facing the higher education sector. Literature proposes different ways of achieving this through co-creation, partnership, and collaboration. This paper focuses solely on staff perspectives of a staff-student partnership project aimed at improving feedback strategies. Through a mixed-methods approach, staff in four disciplines in one UK university were questioned in regard to collaborating with students, asked to take part in a co-creation experience, and then invited to take part in a follow-up interview. Findings indicated that staff initially supported greater student engagement in curriculum development but were wary of substantial change in the design of curriculum content. Some doubted the experience and abilities of students in this context. The overarching response was a positive statement followed first with a “but” and then with the issues that could be caused by a partnership approach.

KEYWORDS

staff perspectives; partnership working; co-creation; feedback; educational change

INTRODUCTION

Students should play an active part in their education (Marquis et al., 2015). It is argued that the use of staff-student partnerships to adjust, design, and complement curriculum design CC-BY Licence 4.0 This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons – Attribution License 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed.

is one of the most significant challenges and opportunities facing higher education today (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Bovill, 2013; Ryan & Tilbury, 2013). There are many ways that students can and do work in partnership with universities. This paper focuses solely on staff and students working collaboratively to co-create part of their curriculum with a specific focus on assessment. According to Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) a partnership “is a relationship in which all participants are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together” (p. 7).

In the UK, there have been national calls for the sector to explore and enhance the ways in which students can become more involved in the design and delivery of their own learning experiences. For example, the National Union of Students suggests that students should be more involved in shaping their own learning and contributing to course content and delivery (NUS, 2012). This is supported by regulating bodies’ agencies, such as the Quality Assurance Agency, which calls for universities to “provide opportunities for students to influence their individual and collective learning journey” (QAA, 2012). This approach has gained substantial support from within the Higher Education Academy (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014), to the extent that the need for change appears to be almost unquestioned. However, within this context of the general acceptance of and support for enhancing opportunities for staff-student partnership lie a number of other generally acknowledged issues: What is the extent of academic resistance to such work? What are the issues of concern? And, how can these be addressed? This paper offers some answers to these questions from the perspective of a group of academic staff in a UK university who were involved in a staff-student partnership project to co-create assessment and feedback strategies.

The literature suggests that where staff and students come together to explore curriculum issues and design, it is normally initiated by academics (Deeley & Bovill, 2017). However, unless the claimed benefits are understood by staff, the value of co-creation may never come to fruition. Partnership work may not be easy to adopt, due in part to the strength of established cultural norms, alongside the challenge of establishing the mechanisms to enable students to participate in decision-making (Bovill & Bulley, 2011). Therefore, academics are only likely to be persuaded into developing staff-student partnerships if there are strong reasons as to why they should commit their time and energy in an already crowded higher education climate.

THE BENEFITS OF COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP WORK

The benefits of staff-student partnerships are frequently reported in academic literature (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014), with suggestions that partnership can be a positive experience for both staff and students (Piper, 2006). In a Swedish anthology on active student participation, Gardebo and Wiggberg (2012) propose that students are an unspent resource in an educational system that is struggling to manage the sheer growth in size of student numbers whilst maintaining the quality of experience. Strategic and appropriate involvement of students can facilitate the design of curricula that are engaging and empowering, and active involvement in assessment can enhance motivation and student engagement and may also help to foster the development of a learning community (Deeley & Bovill, 2017).

This is not a one-sided arrangement, and from a student perspective, there are also many benefits to working in partnership for the development of learning (Zaitseva, Clifford, Nixon, Deja, & Murphy, 2010). Such benefits include the development of academic knowledge, study skills, and disciplinary knowledge, as well as more confidence in expressing such skills (Delpish et al., 2010). A pedagogic case for learning and working in partnership is outlined by Healey et al. (2014), who suggest that such work has the potential for transformative learning whilst acknowledging that it may still involve a relatively small number of students, that it may not suit everyone, and that it requires further research. This study adds to this body of knowledge by exploring staff views of co-creation before and after being involved in a partnership project.

THE TYPES OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Previous studies have analysed various ways in which students can be involved in their own or others' learning experience. Bovill and Bulley (2011) offer a continuum of levels of student participation in curriculum design where the level of interaction ranges from a dictated curriculum where there is no interaction, to a curriculum where students have some choice and influence, and, finally, to a curriculum where they are in total control. It is therefore desirable that academics are aware of ways in which their own needs might be met by the various models of interaction.

Other literature confirms the breadth of opportunities offered by different forms of partnership, including student involvement in pedagogical planning (Bovill & Bulley, 2011), students-as-researchers (Maunder, Cunliffe, Galvin, Mjali & Rogers, 2012), and students as strategic developers (Healey, Mason O'Connor, & Broadfoot, 2010). Dunne and Zandstra (2011) propose a theoretical model for integrating students into educational change and detail how the involvement of students in cross-university research initiatives drove institutional change and contributed to student engagement. Their matrix for students as change agents has four positions:

- a. Students as evaluators of their HE experiences
- b. Students as participants in decision-making processes
- c. Students as partners, co-creators and experts
- d. Students as agents for change

This framework offers a model by which to explore ways of working with students and was utilised in this study to frame how staff viewed partnership co-creation in their own work. In this study, we agreed with Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, and Moore-Cherry (2016) who, in relation to co-creating a course-level feedback strategy, asserted that "co-creation of learning and teaching occurs when staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches" (p. 196).

STAFF PERSPECTIVES OF COLLABORATION

Some literature suggests that staff may be reluctant to become involved in partnership work (Bovill et al., 2016). Despite sector-wide knowledge of its strategic importance and

Murphy, B., Nixon, S., Brooman, S., & Fearon, D. "I am wary of giving too much power to students:" Addressing the "but" in the principle of staff-student partnership. *International Journal for Students as Partners* 1 (1)

evidence of its associated benefits, as a pragmatic activity, partnership working is considered “unfamiliar” for some students and staff (Bovill, 2014). In this sense, staff may struggle with the challenge of actually making it happen (Allin, 2014). Healey et al. (2014) identify that “change can be experienced as deeply threatening to one’s personal and professional identities” (p. 21). Partnership working can challenge accepted roles and practices and evoke feelings of vulnerability and risk (Bovill, 2014). The general reluctance to expend time and energy in such work may be related to an underlying resistance to change amongst an academic community that is adjusting to loss of autonomy, “change fatigue,” and increased managerialism (Sundberg, Josephson, Reeves, & Nordquist, 2017).

Disciplinary cultures and practices will impact staff perspectives of and willingness to engage with partnership working. In this sense, whilst some staff will be willing to engage and embrace this practice, others may be less willing or feel less able to do so. There is some evidence, for example, that the professional requirements of some degrees leads some staff to question the potential involvement of students in designing curricula. In a study in a law school in the UK, Brooman, Darwent, and Pimor (2015) found that although staff were concerned about the need to maintain control due to the external body requirements, staff-student collaboration enhanced teaching and learning practice. Seale (2009) suggests that this new area of participation has the power to both empower students and increase the possibility that staff will respond to student voices.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This study aims to answer calls to develop our understanding of the “pedagogies of partnership” (Healey et al., 2014) and the need for more evaluation studies investigating initiatives where students have been co-creators of curricula (Bovill et al., 2016). Given the rising profile of this type of activity, it is imperative that such methods are subject to exploration and evaluation in order to test their veracity. This article discusses the perceptions of teaching staff both before and after an intervention regarding working in partnership with students.

We focus on the important aspect of staff willingness to engage in putting partnership activities into the heart of their academic practice. In particular, we explore the changing perceptions of a cross-disciplinary staff group before and after they worked in partnerships with students to create a feedback strategy. What were staff perceptions of such processes before the intervention? Did this change after the intervention? What conclusions can be drawn for the potential of partnership processes in higher education curriculum design?

The project was funded by a competitive, institutional funding stream for initiatives designed to support the enhancement of teaching, learning, and assessment practices. The aim was to explore ways in which second-year students and programme staff can work together as co-creators in developing feedback strategies and processes for the future. This cross-discipline project was conducted at a large university in the northwest of England and included four degree programmes: events management, law, sport and exercise sciences, and quantity surveying, which were all located in different faculties. These programmes were chosen as they were subjects that the researchers taught. The core project team included four academic staff members and three student project officers. The project officer was a paid position, and

students were selected through an application and interview process. The three successful candidates were all studying in full-time master's degree programmes in sport and exercise science, one of the four subject areas. Prior to the commencement of the project they were involved in extensive discussions about staff-student partnership and they were supported throughout by the research team.

The student project officers facilitated 12 co-creation workshops (four per programme) where they explored students' perceptions of feedback and co-created a programme-level feedback strategy. These workshops involved a total of 60 students and 35 staff members. The project officers worked with undergraduate students to review and develop ideas for a course-level feedback strategy and subsequently came together with the staff team to review and refine it. The staff were sent the students' ideas about their course-level feedback prior to the co-creation workshop. They then met with the students and, between them, they created the programme feedback strategy (see Nixon et al., 2016). The overall process resulted in a programme-level feedback strategy for each of the four programmes, written by staff and students.

Within the project, we aimed to position the students as partners in structuring the teaching and learning process. In this sense, we recognized the student as an "active collaborator" (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011, p. 4), as an expert at being a student (Cook-Sather, 2014), and as an expert on the "experience" of learning in higher education (Crawford, 2012, p. 60). The project aligns with Bovill and colleagues' (2016) conceptualisation of students as pedagogic co-designers where there is a shared responsibility for aspects of teaching and learning which requires staff to explore differently their assumptions about their role in the learning experience (King & Felten, 2012). Similar approaches to student positioning are described elsewhere (Cook-Sather, 2014; Jensen & Bennet, 2016; Woolmer et al., 2016).

METHODS

The four programmes used in this study were purposively chosen because of the subject connection of the research group; each of the researchers worked in one of the subject groups across the university. Participants of this paper were academic staff members working in each of the four programmes of study. Their background and demographics were not collected, which may be a limitation to this study when exploring the results. A mixed-method sequential explanatory approach (Creswell, 2003) utilising questionnaires and interviews was undertaken (Johnson & Christensen, 2011), and data was collected in two phases.

In phase one, staff perceptions about co-creation were gathered using a survey format. A survey was electronically disseminated to all staff in the four participating departments. The survey covered three main topics: staff perspectives on co-creation, involvement of students in curriculum design, and barriers to involving students in curriculum design. The survey comprised nine questions that were structured in an open and closed format. The 35 academic staff members who responded to the questionnaire were based in the following disciplines: events and management ($n = 5$), quantity surveying ($n = 4$), law ($n = 10$), and sport and exercise science ($n = 16$). Responses to closed questions were collated and represented using descriptive statistics, and inductive thematic analysis was undertaken on the qualitative comments to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Murphy, B., Nixon, S., Brooman, S., & Fearon, D. "I am wary of giving too much power to students:" Addressing the "but" in the principle of staff-student partnership. *International Journal for Students as Partners* 1 (1) 71

In phase two, all staff participants who had taken part in the project were invited to attend a semi-structured individual interview to discuss their experiences and perspectives of engaging in the process. Sixteen academic staff members took part (this was out of a possible 21), with interviews facilitated by the student project officers. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure consistency in interview approach and to allow freedom in response whilst also ensuring a degree of commonality across the transcripts (Flick, 2009). Interviews took place in a familiar work setting, during work hours, and within a space where participants could be overlooked but not overheard. Interviews lasted an average of 14 minutes (range 8–17 min), were audio recorded, and were later transcribed verbatim. Interview questions were developed based upon the experience of working in partnership with the students; the result of this narrow focus was that the interviews were short in length. For analysis of qualitative data, verbatim transcripts of interviews were read and re-read to allow familiarisation with the data. Thematic analysis techniques were used to identify core and common themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers then discussed and debated emerging themes in the data with reference to the study aims. Key emergent themes and participant quotes have been used to ensure authenticity in the represented data.

University ethics approval was granted for the project and all staff and students received participant information sheets and were verbally briefed about the project and their right to withdraw at any time. All signed consent forms. In accordance with the Data Protection Act, all the data from the project has been held either in secure password-protected files or a locked filing cabinet.

FINDINGS

Staff perceptions of staff- student partnership prior to the project

Overall, the findings from the staff participants indicate that, prior to the project, there was a positive perception of working in partnership with students but that it comes with many difficulties both philosophical and practical. The personal philosophy of almost half of this group (42%, $n = 15$) aligned with the “students as evaluators” category in Dunne and Zandstras’ (2011) continuum of co-creation. Which relates to internal university surveys, and in this case to module evaluations, plus the external monitoring questionnaire, which in the UK is the National Student Survey. Of the other three categories 28% ($n = 10$) of staff viewed students as participants in the decision-making process, with students as partners, co-creators, and experts, and students as agents for change each gaining 8% ($n = 5$) of the sample.

Staff perceptions and understandings of staff-student partnerships and their philosophy regarding their role as an academic were found to influence their willingness to consider engaging in such activities. An indication of this was the perspectives regarding the boundaries of their role as an expert or the “assessor” (or as an experienced professional) relative to student participation as the “assessed.” The wider higher-education environment was also highlighted as offering issues to working with students in this manner. Comments included (emphasis added):

“There is clearly a powerful role for students and student feedback **but** in an environment shaped by fees there is a clear onus on staff to provide a quality and bespoke product.”

“I am wary of giving too much power to students; I am happy to respond to their feedback, **but** I am not sure that I would be happy with them ‘designing’ any substantive module components.”

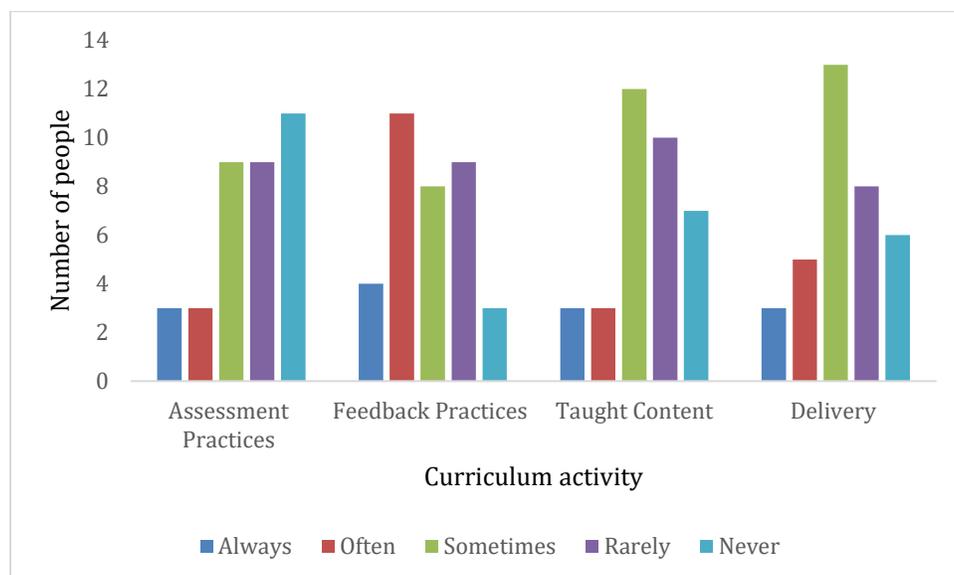
“I would welcome it **but** not in terms of content as we are the experts.”

“There is scope to involve students in some elements of module creation, **but** I feel that this should not extend to assessment or taught elements.”

These quotes demonstrate that although there is a sense of partnership activity being beneficial, the reality in terms of actually making it happen is perceived to be more problematic. Participants discussed the issues of fees and the need to provide what they saw as a quality and tailored product, as well as class and cohort sizes and issues related to the academic year where planning may take place when the students have finished for the summer months.

When asked about particular areas where they currently involve students in curriculum design (Figure 1), assessment (the focus of this project) was highlighted as an area where they rarely or never (57%; $n = 19$) engage students in assessment aspects of curriculum design. Only one member of staff responded that they often engaged students in assessment aspects of curriculum design.

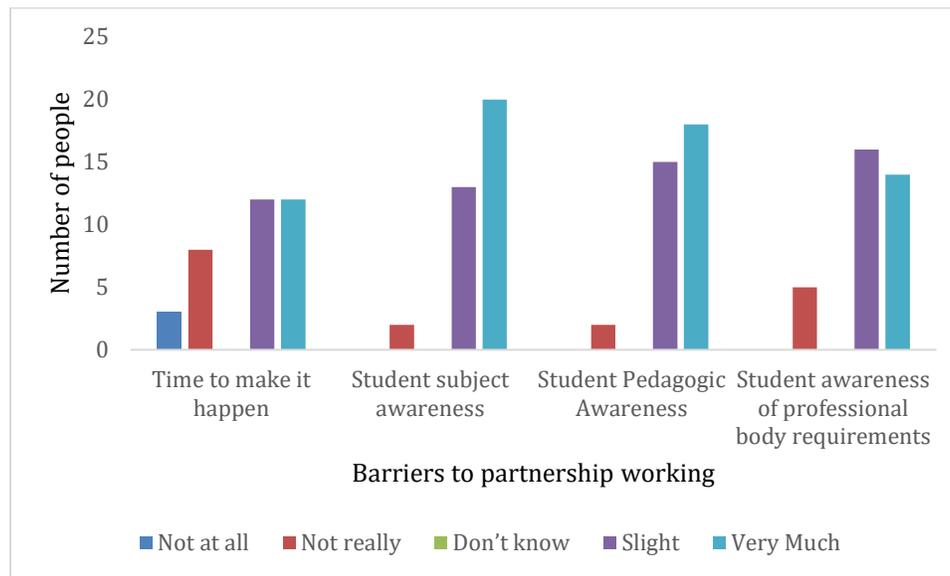
Figure 1. Do you currently involve students in designing the following areas of curriculum?



In relation to barriers to partnership working, the staff perceived, students subject and pedagogic knowledge and professional body awareness as issues to partnership activities (Figure 2). Time was considered to be a neutral issue but was still a key barrier to over 75% of the sample. This data strongly suggests that the staff felt the students themselves were the

biggest barrier to working in this way. The key themes emerging from the data were around the suitability of students to engage in a partnership process in relation to variances in student willingness to engage, interest, motivation, subject knowledge, and expertise.

Figure 2. To what extent do you think the following represent barriers in relation to involving students as co-creators?



A perceived lack of engagement was highlighted as an issue, perhaps because the students that do engage are not always representative of all students. There was a sense that, because of variances in motivation and commitment, some students could actively contribute to the partnership process, whilst others could not. One participant noted: “co-creation to my mind requires a high degree of maturity and motivation on the part of students. The majority of students will seek to engage in their learning experience to a minimum degree necessary to achieve their award.” The perception of the staff in regards to subject content was that they were the expert and the students could not get involved in this aspect of the curriculum design. For example, one participant asked, “how does a student know what the curriculum should consist of when they don't know a great deal about the subject?,” and another stated that “the limitations of their understanding of the relevant subject matter, quality measures, and pedagogic issues would mean that this can only take place on a limited basis.” Staff perceived there to be a lack of expertise and relevant subject knowledge, which affected what they believe students can contribute if they were to work in partnerships.

Staff perceptions of staff-student partnership after being involved in the project

Following the project, the staff involved spoke favourably about, to use the participants' own words, the idea of “integrating ideas from the students,” involving students in “some elements of module creation,” and “making tweaks to course structure” based upon “meaningful dialogue.” Some staff articulated the importance of student perspectives; one, for

example, stated that “there is clearly a powerful role for students.” In this sense, in principle, the partnership was welcomed, as evidenced by the following comment: “I have no problem in principle involving students in curriculum design and delivery.” The partnership process enabled staff to gain an appreciation of student perspectives (they noted that “it’s been a while since we’ve been students”), and as a result it highlighted to them the differing perspectives of staff and students as regards to feedback, with one participant noting, “we had very different ideas about what is, sort of, covered by the term feedback.” One participant commented:

It means that perhaps a lot of the assumptions that certainly I, and I think some of my colleagues have been working on, have perhaps been flawed. It confirmed that students think more about their learning as a process than I thought they did.

This suggests that getting staff involved in partnership work may help staff and students come together to develop the learning experience in a positive way. Staff expressed their willingness to reconsider their practice with specific reference to the discussion topic of feedback as a result of engaging in the partnership, stating, for example, “I certainly reflected on [feedback] in terms of my own development and my own practices going forward.” The participants felt working in this way was useful from the perspective of student engagement and in providing opportunity for staff-student dialogue to enable staff to meet the expectations of students. One participant, for example, explained: “I think it’s a useful mechanism to use in addition to regular student engagement sessions,” and another said, “I’m trying to get, to meet the students as much as I can, on how they want to learn.” In addition, the process served to motivate staff by “reinforce[ing] that it is something that [they] can do something about as staff” and by giving them “that additional motivation to do something about it.” The process also provided evidence of the requirement to reflect upon practice for staff less willing to consider change by giving them an opportunity to return to those staff members who are “more reluctant . . . to change practices.”

DISCUSSION

Before being involved with students in developing course-level strategies, this group of staff saw working with students as part of university processes (i.e., module evaluations) or decision-making (i.e., working at the institutional level); they did not see students as partners or agents of change (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). Co-creation can challenge academics’ understanding of their roles and responsibilities in designing learning and teaching (Bovill, 2013). The cross-discipline group of staff involved in this study, whilst positive about the concept of co-creation on the whole, offered issues and problems that would make it difficult to carry out in practice, which we have labelled as the “but” in co-creation. No differences were found between the four subject groups, except for the law staff who were more wary of working in this way due to external accreditation. Further research is needed to explore those subject areas with external accreditation in order to ascertain whether this is a real or perceived issue.

The barriers around staff-student partnerships centred mainly on the students themselves (i.e., in terms of their willingness, interest, and expertise). Some staff considered

Murphy, B., Nixon, S., Brooman, S., & Fearon, D. “I am wary of giving too much power to students:” Addressing the “but” in the principle of staff-student partnership. *International Journal for Students as Partners* 1 (1) 75

partnership to be something that challenged their professional legitimacy since it handed power to the students. If staff consider partnership in this way, it would make sense that they are less likely to engage with it, suggesting that the staff still saw themselves as the expert rather than the reorientation that Bovill et al. (2016) suggest might happen from the expert to the facilitator of learning.

Staff interviewed after the co-creation process demonstrated some reinforcement of the reservations for involvement cited in the initial questionnaire. Staff perceiving themselves as the experts and concern about students' subject knowledge were common themes from the interviews. One participant, for example, explained: "I think that my judgment on the core content of the module is going to be stronger than the students I'm teaching," and another acknowledged a "fear of not knowing if they're competent enough to engage in the co-creation process." However, there was a sense that the experience of working with the students had offered an opportunity to appreciate another point of view. In this sense, the shared dialogue (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) provided an opportunity for staff and students to understand each other's perspectives and the ideologies and boundaries within which they operate. These positive outcomes were found to be more related to staff members' understanding of the student perspective in relation to feedback, which suggested, in alignment with the literature, that there is a benefit in staff and students working in partnership (Nygaard, Brand, Bartholomew, & Millard, 2013).

It was also felt that the process enabled students to gain an appreciation of staff perspectives, which may help develop a more shared perspective of feedback. Our findings support previous literature in framing the partnership process as something that creates a shift in understanding, or a "threshold concept" in academic development (Cook-Sather, 2014; Meyer & Land, 2005). Staff reflections on practice as regards to both feedback and co-creation showed it to be beneficial in terms of personal development and, as a consequence, beneficial to the students they teach, which fits with the idea of a partnership threshold where staff and students understand and act on the collaboration (Marquis et al., 2015). The originality of this study lies in the evidence that with some engagement in partnership work, staff can experience its benefits and cross the threshold into seeing students as co-creators of learning the threshold."

Addressing the "but" in co-creation

There is significant evidence in the literature that co-creation has many benefits (Healey et al., 2014), but fostering this with staff who might not engage in the pedagogic literature will not be without its difficulties. After all, it will be a change in culture and practice for many. However, with the exception of Cook-Sather et al. (2014) and Curran and Millard (2016), there appears to be a scarcity of practical guidance for academic staff wishing to engage in partnerships with students on the subject of curriculum design and development. In order to support others in this type of activity we have taken the main messages from the staff who participated in this study and now offer suggestions to support this type of curriculum development activity.

Increasing staff willingness and involvement

The sense of unfamiliarity with the partnership concept and the perceived lack of student competence supports suggestions regarding the need for preparation and support for both staff and students in the process. Little et al. (2011) suggest that before we can get more involved we need to overcome any wariness staff have and convince them that it is worthwhile. The small-scale activity of designing a programme-level feedback strategy was seen as both positive and successful for all cross-disciplinary teams. Therefore, deciding on a starting place for staff and students to work together would seem to be a good place to start for programme teams, which aligns with Cook-Sather et al.'s (2014) practical recommendations for encouraging co-creation. Learning from this, programme teams could choose an area of their curriculum that is perhaps not working as well as they would like and set up a staff-student partnership to explore the issues and offer solutions.

Developing students in the partnership process

Staff felt that they were the decision makers and the subject experts, and they questioned both student engagement and expertise. It has to be recognised that staff will have, on the whole, greater knowledge and expertise (Allin, 2014). However, if staff are truly to move away from the position of power and authority, we have to find ways of utilising the staff expertise to empower the students in a way that works for them. Could a partnership approach be built into an early module or unit where the teaching staff and the students work together on one element of the curriculum? Student competence and confidence can also be developed through training activities (Jensen & Bennett, 2016), and this could also be undertaken with staff to start building on the idea of working together.

Staff as facilitators

Our findings suggest that we need a shift from the staff member as the expert to that of a facilitator of developing knowledge and learning. Training is needed to support staff in moving from the position of expert, and case studies are required to enable programme teams to see the benefits of this type of activity. A process plan, external facilitation, and a clear objective all helped in this study. Students facilitating staff-student interactions diffused any potential power implications. Negotiating roles is seen as crucial to a positive outcome. Programme teams could work with students who are further on in their academic journey to support those just arriving and utilise post-graduate students to mediate and facilitate the activities between staff and students.

Partnership can be a staff development activity

Working with students can alert staff to areas where training and development activities are needed. Higher Education is an evolving environment and by listening and working with students, we can benefit and enhance both the staff and student experience. An understanding and development of the roles that staff and students play in the higher education arena are critical to this. As Bovill et al. (2016, p. 205) state, the fact that these roles are “socially constructed and changeable can help both staff and students begin to think in fundamentally new ways about teaching and learning.” Programme teams willing to work in this way should

Murphy, B., Nixon, S., Brooman, S., & Fearon, D. “I am wary of giving too much power to students:” Addressing the “but” in the principle of staff-student partnership. *International Journal for Students as Partners* 1 (1) 77

gain support from central university support for teaching and learning. An external viewpoint can help to support both groups and can then support the dissemination of practice. Re-focusing on a different way of working takes time and evaluation, and this needs to be supported where possible by the wider institution.

CONCLUSION

Although not a new area of study, co-creating the curriculum is emerging as an area of interest in higher education literature, and yet despite this, it is far from common practice across universities. The strengths of the many different approaches suggest that there can be a very positive outcome when students and staff come together to develop and explore learning experiences (Curran & Millard, 2016). However, this does not come without significant barriers. This study has found that through a partnership experience, where staff and students came together to look at a programme-level feedback strategy, the staff stepped over a threshold in relation to their thinking about working with students.

Across the four disciplines engaged with in this study, staff, in relation to Dunne and Zandstras' (2011) model, perceived students as evaluators. Unsurprisingly, this was reflected in the lack of co-creation that had been undertaken up to that point. Almost everything that was said about working in partnership was prefixed with a "but," showing that staff felt the idea had merit but that delivering on this merit was not perceived to be simple. The "but" in staff's otherwise positive view of partnership was also due to the perceived lack of engagement and subject awareness of the students. Partnership activity has been found to increase student engagement and motivation (Little et al., 2011). However, as students may be reticent, a period of transition where students get used to working in this way may be helpful.

Another factor in relation to the "but" was that of professional legitimacy. Clearly, staff placed themselves in the position of expert, and for co-creation to work, this stance is not helpful. Co-creation processes can challenge learning relationships and the power dynamics that underpin them (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013). Empowerment of learners in curriculum design, whilst challenging for some, is reported as a transformative process by pedagogic literature. Therefore, despite the potential difficulties, the end result seems to be worth the struggle. Training and development is crucial for both staff and students; further research is needed of case studies that show the benefits and also models of engagement. If we are to overcome these "buts," new ways of working and understanding will be crucial for future success.

The research was successfully reviewed according to the university regulations.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Rebecca Murphy is a Subject Head in the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences at Liverpool John Moores University. She is a University Teaching Fellow, a member of the cross-university Post-Graduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning team and her teaching focuses on exercise psychology and qualitative research methods.

Sarah Nixon is a Subject Head in the School of Sport Studies, Leisure and Nutrition at Liverpool John Moores University. She is a National Teaching Fellow and focuses on supporting the development of innovative curriculum design and development. Her subject focus is in Sport Business.

Simon Brooman works in the School of Law at Liverpool John Moores University. He is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and has dedicated his professional life in legal education to developing a culture of scholarship-influenced learning, teaching, and curriculum design.

Damian Fearon works within the Department of the Built Environment at Liverpool John Moores University where he has responsibility for teaching and learning. His work focuses on stakeholder analysis and measuring the student experience to develop practice.

REFERENCES

- Allin, L. (2014). Collaboration between staff and students in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: The potential and the problems. *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, 2(1), 95–102
- Bovill, C. (2013). Students and staff co-creating curricula: A new trend or an old idea we never got around to implementing? In: C. Rust (Ed.) *Improving Student Learning Through Research and Scholarship: 20 Years of ISL. Series: Improving student learning 2* (pp. 96-108). Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.
- Bovill, C. (2014). An investigation of co-created curricula within higher education in the UK, Ireland, and the USA. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 51(1), 15–25.
- Bovill, C., & Bulley, C. J. (2011). A model of active student participation in curriculum design: Exploring desirability and possibility. In C. Rust (Ed.), *Improving student learning 18: Global theories and local practices – Institutional, disciplinary, and cultural variations* (pp. 176–188). Oxford: Oxford Brookes University. Retrieved from <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/57709>
- Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2011). Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design, and curricula: Implications for academic developers. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16(2), 133-145.
- Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A. Felten, P., Millard, L., & Moore-Cherry, N. (2016). Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: Overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms, and ensuring inclusivity in student-staff partnerships. *Higher Education*, 71(2), 195–208. [doi:10.1007/s10734-015-9896-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9896-4)
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. [doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa](https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa)
- Brooman, S., Darwent, S., & Pimor, A. (2015). The student voice in higher education curriculum design: Is there value in listening? *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 52(6), 663-674. [doi:10.1080/14703297.2014.910128](https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2014.910128)
- Cook-Sather, A. (2014). Student–faculty partnership in explorations of pedagogical practice: A
 Murphy, B., Nixon, S., Brooman, S., & Fearon, D. “I am wary of giving too much power to students:” Addressing the “but” in the principle of staff-student partnership. *International Journal for Students as Partners* 1 (1) 79

- threshold concept in academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 19(3), 186–198. [doi:10.1080/1360144X.2013.805694](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2013.805694)
- Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Crawford, K. (2012). Rethinking the student/teacher nexus: Students as consultants on teaching in higher education. In H. Stephenson, L. Bell, & M. Neary (Eds.). *Towards teaching in public: Reshaping the modern university* (pp. 52-67). London: Bloomsbury.
- Creswell, J.W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed). London: Sage.
- Curran, R., & Millard, L. (2016). A partnership approach to developing student capacity to engage and staff capacity to be engaging: Opportunities for academic developers. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21(1), 67-78. [doi:10.1080/1360144X.2015.1120212](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1120212)
- Deeley, S.J., & Bovill, C. (2017). Staff student partnership in assessment: Enhancing assessment literacy through democratic practices. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(3), 463-477. [doi:10.1080/02602938.2015.1126551](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1126551)
- Delpish, A., Darby, A., Holmes, A., Knight-McKenna, M., Mihans, R., King, C., & Felten, P. (2010). Equalizing voices: Student faculty partnership in course design. In C. Werder & M. Otis (Eds.), *Engaging student voices in the study of teaching and learning* (pp. 96-114). Virginia: Stylus.
- Dunne, E., & Zandstra, R. (2011). *Students as change agents: New ways of engaging with learning and teaching in higher education*. Retrieved from the Higher Education Academy ESCalate Subject Centre website: <http://escalate.ac.uk/8064>
- Flick, U. (2009). *An introduction to qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Gardebo, J., & Wiggberg, M. (2012). Importance of student participation in future academia. In J. Gardebo & M. Wiggberg (Eds.), *Students, the university's unspent resource: Revolutionising higher education using active student participation* (Pedagogical Development Report 12) (pp. 7–14). Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet.
- Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. York: The Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from www.heacademy.ac.uk/engagement-through-partnership-students-partners-learning-and-teaching-higher-education
- Healey, M., Mason O'Connor, K., & Broadfoot, P. (2010). Reflections on engaging students in the process and product of strategy development for learning, teaching, and assessment: An institutional case study. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 15(1), 19–32.
- Jensen, K., & Bennett, L. (2016). Enhancing teaching and learning through dialogue: A student and staff partnership model. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21(1), 41-53.
- Johnson, R.B., & Christensen, L.B. (2011). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches*. London: Sage.
- King, C., & Felten, P. (2012). Threshold concepts in educational development: An introduction. *The Journal of Faculty Development*, 26(3), 5-7.

- Little, S., Sharp, S., Stanley, L., Hayward, M., Gannon-Leary, P., O'Neill, P., & Williams, J. (2011). Collaborating for staff-student partnerships: Experiences and observations. In S. Little (Ed.), *Staff-student partnerships in higher education* (pp. 215–226). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Little, B., & Williams, R. (2010). Students' roles in maintaining quality and in enhancing learning—is there a tension? *Quality in Higher Education*, 16(2), 115–127. [doi:10.1080/13538322.2010.485740](https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2010.485740)
- Marquis, E., Puri, V., Wan, S., Ahmad, A., Goff, L., Knorr, K., & Vassileva, I. (2015). Navigating the threshold of student-staff partnerships: A case study from an Ontario teaching and learning institute. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21(1), 4–15. [doi:10.1080/1360144X.2015.1113538](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1113538)
- Maunder, R., Cunliffe, M., Galvin, J., Mjali, S., & Rogers, J. (2012). Listening to student voices: Student researchers exploring undergraduate experiences of university transition. *Higher Education*, 66, 139–152 [doi:10.1007/s10734-012-9595-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9595-3)
- Meyer, J.H.F., & Land, R. (2005). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. *Higher Education*, 49(3), 373–388. [doi:10.1007/s10734-004-6779-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-6779-5)
- Nixon, S., Brooman, S., Murphy, B., & Fearon, D. (2016). Clarity, consistency and communication: Using enhanced dialogue to create a course-based feedback strategy. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. [doi:10.1080/02602938.2016.1195333](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2016.1195333)
- NUS. (2012). A manifesto for partnership [Website]. London: National Union of Students. Retrieved from www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/a-manifesto-for-partnership
- Nygaard, C., Brand, S., Bartholomew, P., & Millard, L. (Eds.). (2013). *Student engagement: Identity, motivation and community*. Farringdon: Libri.
- Piper, R. (2006, May). *Enhancing the student experience in Scotland: The work of the QAA Quality Enhancement Theme*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Higher Education Academy, Edinburgh, Scotland.
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2012) Chapter B5: Student Engagement. UK Quality Code for Higher Education [Website]. Gloucester: QAA. Retrieved from www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/quality-code-B5.aspx
- Ryan, A., & Tilbury, D. (2013). *Flexible pedagogies: New pedagogical ideas*. York: Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from www.heacademy.ac.uk/flexible-pedagogies-new-pedagogical-ideas
- Seale, J. (2009). Doing student voice work in higher education: An exploration of the value of participatory methods. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(6), 995–1015. [doi:10.1080/01411920903342038](https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920903342038)
- Sundberg, K., Josephson, A., Reeves, S., & Nordquist, J. (2017). Power and resistance: Leading change in medical education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(3), 445–462. [doi:10.1080/03075079.2015.1052735](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1052735)
- Woolmer, C., Sneddon, P., Curry, G., Hill, B., Fehertavi, S., Longbone, C., & Wallace, K. (2016). Student staff partnership to create an interdisciplinary science skills course in a research intensive university. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21(1), 16–27. [doi:10.1080/1360144X.2015.1113969](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1113969)

Murphy, B., Nixon, S., Brooman, S., & Fearon, D. "I am wary of giving too much power to students:" Addressing the "but" in the principle of staff-student partnership. *International Journal for Students as Partners* 1 (1)

Zaitseva, E., Clifford, E., Nixon, S., Deja, E., & Murphy, A. (2010). Communication as performance: A cross-disciplinary approach to staff-student partnerships. In S. Little (Ed.), *Staff–student partnerships in higher education* (pp. 215–226). New York, NY: Continuum.