

## CASE STUDY

## A Student and Staff Partnership in the Development of a Student-Directed Independent Learning Toolkit

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## ABSTRACT

This case study offers reflection and evaluation on a student and staff partnership that utilises the principles of action research in the development of a practical toolkit to support directed independent learning by students. Since 2016, in an ongoing project under the auspices of the Hillary Rodham Clinton School of Law internship scheme, students have worked in partnership with members of staff to address the support for students' development of independent learning skills to enable their full engagement with different university teaching styles. This project theme was chosen because it has the potential to have a significant impact on creating or supporting student confidence in students' academic ability and associated mental wellbeing and sense of satisfaction and achievement. Students are best placed to provide solutions and inform the development of independent learning skills within a student-staff partnership project that facilitates active collaboration and the power to co-create.

## KEYWORDS

students as partners, directed independent learning, toolkit, action research project, co-creation

This case study considers how an internship project has effectively facilitated a partnership between students and staff to produce practical outcomes in the goal of developing students' independent learning skills. The partnership process has led to an outcome (the production of separate toolkits for staff and students) that draws upon key research in the area of independent learning skills (Thomas, Jones, & Ottaway 2014). The student toolkit supports the development of student confidence in their academic ability and consequently supports mental wellbeing and sense of satisfaction and achievement; those same traits are also encouraged in students who are working in partnership on the project. Staff confidence in the outcome is also ensured as students bring a focus and insight that staff will not necessarily have. Student involvement serves to reinforce and justify the investment in terms of staff time and resources.

Our working assumption in this ongoing project is that, without support and guidance from staff, first-year undergraduate students may continue to adopt learning strategies and patterns developed in their schooling prior to university as learning patterns are associated with prior education, age, and gender (Vermunt & Donche, 2017). The retention of these practices by students are largely reactive coping responses based on their prior academic experience and can contribute to a student's lack of confidence in their academic ability when they transition to university and experience higher education learning and assessment for the first time. Students with a single strategy for learning, revision, and assessment will likely struggle no matter how successful they have been in a non-university school environment (Vermunt & Donche, 2017). Vermunt and Donche (2017), referring to a longitudinal study by Catrysse et al. (2015), note that "students can develop their learning patterns over time. These developments do not always follow a linear path, and developments are larger when the learning environment changes more" (p. 286).

Transition into university learning may come as a culture shock to some students used to dialogic learning and feedback cycles and can lead to under-confidence, anxiety, and consequent questioning as to whether they have made the right choice. This may lead to avoidable withdrawal of a student from higher education (Beaumont, O'Doherty, & Shannon 2011). Interestingly, a student partner from the research internship scheme echoed these observations in her reflective journal in 2018 when noting that one of the most difficult challenges she faced as part of the internship was developing ideas that can be used and best suit the needs for all the students at the university. In her view, independent learning requires time and effort. Some students at university arrive fully committed to making the necessary changes and fully embracing the skills required to achieve well through independent learning, but in reality, there are many students who are not prepared for the leap into higher education.

### **Hillary Rodham Clinton (HRC) research internship scheme**

Since 2016, in an ongoing project under the auspices of the Hillary Rodham Clinton School of Law internship scheme, students have worked in partnership with members of staff to address the support for students' development of independent learning skills to enable their full engagement with different university teaching styles. Between 2016 and 2019 the lead author recruited seven student interns following a competitive interview process to develop an ongoing research project with students acting as partners to focus on two key complimentary work strands. One work strand was the development of directed independent learning support and another related to addressing the development of academic integrity skills as a means of combatting unethical behaviours, including contract cheating.

The students are recruited from year 2 and year 3 of the undergraduate law degree. A job description and "person specification" was published as part of a recruitment exercise which made reference to the work strands. Twenty applications were received in 2019 for two student intern positions during a 4-week period in July. The author selected students for interview because they demonstrated in their application wider reading around the work strands and clearly set out how their skills might benefit the collaboration. In interview, successful students displayed a willingness to suggest and follow their own initiatives and an enthusiasm for working collaboratively and enhancing the experiences of others, which

required a willingness to reflect not only on themselves and their experiences but also those of a diverse range of students intended to benefit from the work.

The label “internship scheme” is a link to the wider university strategy relating to the development of employability skills. Internship would normally imply a hierarchical relationship under which the intern carries out the directions of the supervisor. However, the HRC internship provides a framework in which students act as partners with staff in the production of a research output or in the development of university practices and policies and which leads to recognition as a student author or originator in that output. This environment is free from the day-to-day direction or control normally associated with internships. Furthermore, whilst the intern gains from personal development, so do the staff members involved. As recognised by Curran (2017), there are benefits to both staff and students of a partnership arrangement: “There is evidence that the personal development of both students and staff is a welcome outcome of partnership working and one which has the potential to enhance skills, motivation, and self-efficacy of not just students but staff, too” (p. 12).

By creating a space in which students have the opportunity to interact with different members of staff and each other, students are encouraged to actively participate by challenging ideas and offering solutions which they believe could be more effective for them and their peers, knowing that their contributions matter as much as, if not more than, those of the staff.

Staff are helped to see and assess the impact of their own views and recommendations from a student perspective, and this facilitates discussion of further progression and development. In particular, students are given autonomy and independence to follow lines of enquiry that they develop and to frame the details of the research that they undertake.

As students are confident that they are acting as partners in a creative process they realise their freedom to reflect on student experiences and research different methods of teaching and integration, in turn broadening their knowledge and allowing them to build on their skills of forming an evidenced-based argument supported by academic articles and reports. These skills are transferable to their academic studies.

The research internship project thus builds upon Kolb's experiential learning theory (Healey & Jenkins, 2000), which presents a way of structuring learning using a learning cycle, the different stages of which are associated with distinct learning styles. Recognising an individual's preferred learning style is the first stage in raising students' awareness and helping them to be more flexible in meeting the varied demands of learning situations (Healey & Jenkins, 2000). The internship scheme itself utilises the four stages of the learning cycle in terms of experience, reflection, learning from experience, and then future planning based on what is learnt.

In summary, the primary focus of the HRC internship scheme is to work with students as partners to produce an agreed output aligning with the elite model for engaging students in a research partnership which aims to give selected students an authentic research experience (Healey & Jenkins 2009). Working together with students is the most rewarding aspect of academic life; their insight and experience is refreshing and invaluable; and they produce engaging and effective outcomes.

## PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURE AND PRACTICE

The student intern team has consisted of seven students over the course of four years (recently two in each year of the scheme). Each student agreed to focus their research on either independent learning or academic integrity but with an expectation that they would also work with each other when the work streams overlapped, recognising that independent learning supports academic integrity and ethical behaviours.

In 2018 one of the student partners reviewed a Course Design Consultancy at Sheffield Hallam University (an initiative that aims to go beyond student voice, giving students a role as active agents early in the course approval process). She argued in her reflective journal that working with students as partners would be best supported by the method of early integration and allowing staff and students to work side by side to evoke the principles of self-discipline that are required when obtaining a degree.

Subsequently, this insight relating to active agency and early integration was adopted so that in 2019 an initial team meeting between the students and staff scoped the parameters of the research with identified research goals. These goals were then refined through ongoing evaluation of student research and outputs within the context of further team and individual meetings and email communication with staff and students working together in this process.

Through this process, the history and developed culture of the work of the internship scheme discussed as part of the initial is further developed. A workbook is tabled having been emailed to students in advance so they could reflect on it. The workbook incorporated a project plan divided into weeks: week 1 focuses on preparation, week 2 development, week 3 review, and week 4 completion. With the exception of these broad topics, the plan was devoid of content because the students were asked to devise their own work plan to achieve the goal of the internship. Whilst the outcome is initially fixed, the means of achieving the outcome is in the hands of the students. This means that lines of research enquiry change regularly which allows students the freedom to pursue their leads and encourages a dynamic research environment with staff acting in a support and advisory role. One student intern noted “from the outset, there was a sense of parity amongst the groups members thus functioning without hierarchal instruction.”

Students and staff met at the end of each week to discuss and assess progress and to identify goals for the following week. Students were asked to keep a research trail, an evaluation of sources visited, and a development journal to encourage the growth of the skills of a reflective practitioner (including the use of Gibbs' [1998] reflective cycle). In addition the team meetings encouraged students to develop and demonstrate management skills, team-working skills, and the opportunity to show responsibility and initiative.

The second author had the opportunity to participate in the internship scheme in 2019 when it had been running for several years and was already well developed. The focus was on the development of the university's practice of directed independent learning. The goal was to further enhance the work of a previous intern who worked to ensure that students were supported in their individual journeys during their directed independent learning. The second author commented: “Due to the increasing media coverage of students' mental health during the move to university and seeing first-hand the impact it can have on students, this was a project I felt that I could get stuck into and felt passionate

about being able to produce a useful, student-friendly and practice-developing toolkit to enhance the previous work on producing a staff handbook.”

The second author began by reviewing the existing handbook created previously during the internship project, highlighting the key focuses for students. The second author then created an infographic providing students with the information they needed to know in a manner which would draw their attention and would provide the information they needed in a quick glance. Whilst a challenge, it was important for it to be presented in a manner which was memorable and catered for the vast variety of students by balancing the text with pictures and diagrams and through the careful selection of colour schemes. Following background research on expectations of students in higher education, the second author formed the view that there was a disparity between how much guidance staff thought students should be provided to enable them to learn effectively depending on their level of study and the level expected by the students, even into their final years. The revised handbook and infographic was then sent to academic colleagues in the Swansea Academy of Inclusivity and Learner Success (SAILS) for their view on how it could be further adapted to increase its effectiveness, such as adjusting the language to be more direct to the student. Additionally the authors discussed the need for early and repeated promotion of this toolkit as students needed to know what is expected of them prior to university and from the start of their higher-education experience. Because it is common for students to get caught up in the whirlwind of information during the first few weeks, it is crucial to remind them of expectations. SAILS manages an outreach scheme on behalf of the university as well as an associated academic community of practice and it was agreed that introduction of the toolkit here as part of outreach activity would be an effective method of direct engagement with prospective students.

### **Partnership outcomes**

Whilst the scheme has been running since 2016, the focus of directed independent learning was introduced in 2018 in an attempt to address staff concerns over the support given to students transitioning to university education and as a means of developing students' academic skills and confidence. This lack of confidence in academic skills had previously been identified as a cause of academic misconduct. SAILS received a grant from Advance HE to develop a toolkit for staff to support directed independent learning by students. However, during development it was suggested by a student intern that a toolkit also be developed by students for students.

In the development of both toolkits, students were provided with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the issues beyond their own personal experiences. With the staff toolkit there was a mixture of involvement (ensuring their staff concerns and aspirations were met) and partnership (working together to develop and implement a solution), but with the student toolkit, the students were in control of the final decision making as to the format and content of the toolkit (which was adapted from the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum and presented at the Student Voice Australia meeting at UTS on 9 May 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Partnership in the eyes of the law is a relationship of trust and confidence. In educational terms, it is an ethos and not an activity; it is a process of student engagement, and such partnerships and processes are refined over time. The development of a successful student research community requires continuity, otherwise partnerships might exist for a single-purpose project that has limited impact on the culture of an institution, college, or department. That continuity can be provided by an ongoing research topic but, perhaps more importantly, it is provided by continuity in those willing to engage with that community of learning and in a shared understanding that (a) we work for the benefit of others and, in particular, those that will come after us and (b) that outcomes are continuously developed, disrupted, and refined as acknowledged by Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014).

This theme of community was noted by a student intern:

I found teamwork and communication to be an integral part of this internship. Healey et al. (2014) states that a fundamental aspect of making communities is sharing similar experiences, which I found to be a great help in the completing of this internship. All three interns including myself are in the process of completing our degrees and working internships during the summer. The fact that we had relatable experiences made working together effortless and made communication easier. Being given the chance to work alongside my peers rather than work for them made me feel respected and allowed me to thoroughly enjoy the work and research I was doing. Despite all working on different aspects of research, we regularly met up and discussed our findings, ensuring there were no gaps in our research but also no overlap. From the very first meeting I found there to be a mutual respect between all of us and an eagerness to work together, with tasks being delegated quickly and without argument. I found that this increased efficiency of working but also made the internship enjoyable which is highly important to me.

As noted, however, one of the most difficult challenges faced by students is developing ideas that can be used and are best suited to meet the needs of all students at the university. There is evidently a pressure or responsibility to deliver felt by some in their aspiration to act for the support of others. In the future, this will need careful management in initial meetings and will involve emphasising that the process of and engagement with partnership rather than an immediate outcome is the purpose of the internship, which will additionally help to develop community and increase student confidence. The second author noted in her reflective journal that

as a third-year student who had insight of both staff and student expectations at several levels of higher education, it was important for me to give back to the university and enable them to address the disparity that became so apparent, thus enabling future students to feel more supported in their educational development. I also believe that being a part of the internship encouraged me to reflect upon my own independent learning and research skills, considering how the supportive guidance of staff had been crucial in getting me through my degree, but also to

undertake some self-evaluation to address areas I need to work on both for my future career and for my intended master's.

Student partners will physically leave the institution but they will have created a legacy not just in terms of outcomes and outputs for the benefit of students and staff but also in shaping an institutional culture and community with a memory. This is essential to avoid duplication and overlap of initiatives and effort and in securing and targeting resources, but it also plays to the selection of student partners in future recruitment processes. This process has already commenced for Summer 2020.

#### NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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