

CASE STUDY

Trilateral partnership: An institution and students' union collaborative partnership project to support underrepresented student groups

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes a staff-student partnership project from the perspective of three staff members based across independent departments within a UK higher education institution (HEI) and its students' union. The authors, drawing upon an intersecting passion for advancing student equality, diversity, inclusion, widening participation and student engagement, developed a cross-collaborative and student-centred partnership project to create a series of guides specifically for underrepresented student groups. The guides, which sought to provide appropriate information and guidance in order to actively enhance students' overall experience whilst navigating university life, were developed and co-created through lived student experience. This case study critically reflects upon this form of partnership, along with its benefits and challenges, and considers its contribution to literature on staff-student partnership beyond the formal realm of learning and teaching.

KEYWORDS

inclusivity and diversity, widening participation, student voice, students' union

There is a growing body of research and practice within higher education (HE) that outlines the benefits of partnership between students and staff. For example, in the UK, Wenstone (2012) identified early on that within the area of student engagement, the concept of "partnership" gained significant attention as a useful alternative to the rhetoric of "students as consumers". This was especially powerful given the neo-liberalisation of (UK) HE, characterised by increased marketisation, higher tuition fees, and a shifting of HE's purpose and values (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). However, existing literature has pointed to partnership as a way to embed more inclusive and democratic practices which negate these underlying neoliberal agendas (Healey et al., 2014; Wijaya Mulya, 2019). Subsequently, a plethora of resources have been developed for those engaged in enhancing pedagogical

practice via partnership (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Additionally, a seminal definition of partnership from Cook-Sather et al. (2014) focuses on the collaborative and reciprocal process whereby all stakeholders have the ability to contribute equally towards their curricula and other pedagogical practices. This has also seen adoption of the term “Students as Partners” (SaP), which has mainstreamed a way of working with students that recognises their unique contribution, including: “students as consultants” (Cook-Sather, 2009), “students as change agents” (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011), and “student as producer” (Neary et al., 2014) (see also Healey et al.’s [2014] model). However, where the bulk of literature looking at SaP remains within learning and teaching (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), this case study explores embedding partnership outside of this sphere to ensure holistic ways of working, and considers how “working and learning in partnership becomes part of the culture and ethos of an institution” (Healey et al., 2014, p. 8) through cross-collaboration between multiple stakeholders.

A specific challenge to forms of student-staff partnership relates to inclusion of student diversity (Mercer-Mapstone & Marie, 2019). Whilst recent explorations of partnership have begun to consider equitable collaboration (Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2020), again they centre around the curriculum. Nevertheless, existing literature presents opportunities to appropriate these applications of partnership outside of the formal learning and teaching space. This case study then explores redressing issues of diversity in student-staff partnerships through actively amplifying the experiences of underrepresented student groups outside of the context of the curriculum.

OUR PURPOSE AND RATIONALE

Beyond the moral case, universities in the UK have long been driven by governmental regulation to demonstrate their commitments to ensuring student equality and diversity through the practice of widening access and participation (Office for Students, 2018; 2020). In England, following the introduction of differential fees, the national strategy for access and student success identified that HE providers had a role in both increasing the participation of underrepresented groups and enabling them to actively engage in all aspects of the student lifecycle (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). More recently the introduction of a new regulator, the Office for Students (OfS) under the *Higher Education Research Act* (HERA, 2017), ensured that all English HE providers charging above the basic tuition fee, a fee which is set by the OfS, must set out their targets and commitments to widen access and participation for underrepresented groups in their Access and Participation Plan (APP) (Office for Students, 2018). This, and subsequent guidance from the regulators (Office for Students, 2020), set out expectations for providers to actively and meaningfully engage with students as partners in their widening access and participation activity, stressing the importance of diverse voices and collaboration with students’ unions.

Students’ unions operate in almost all public universities in the UK, with characteristics which include elected sabbatical and student officers who represent the student body at all university levels; advice and advocacy functions; and delivery of welfare support and campaigns covering liberation, equality, and diversity (Day & Dickinson, 2018). With their active focus on liberation, many students’ unions inevitably identified achievement gaps and equality and diversity issues long before the HE sector was mandated to act (Day & Dickinson, 2018). Students’ unions have campaigned on such issues for

decades (Guan et al., 2016), including promoting equality and diversity across various inequalities (Brooks et al., 2015).

Echoing this at a local level and building on gaps identified both in the provider institution and in the range and support of “representational” societies (i.e. student-led groups centred around a marker of identity e.g. race) then available, Winchester Student Union recently established representational networks in 2019-20. These student-led groups have an increased focus on advocating equality, diversity, and accessibility within specific underrepresented groups to directly improve the experience of students from the background they represent. Representational networks receive additional membership allowances and support from the Student Union. The Union defines “underrepresented” as those with protected characteristics as outlined within the *Equality Act* (2010), as well as other relevant student groups currently underrepresented in HE, including those without “traditional” access to campus. Established representational networks at Winchester Student Union include: Afro-Caribbean, Commuting, Islamic, International, LGBTQPIA+, Disabled, Mature & Part-time, and Care Leavers & Estranged Students Networks.

Nationally, several underrepresented student groups have noted lack of sufficient guidance prior to and whilst studying at university (Formby, 2017; Universities UK & National Union of Students, 2019). Therefore, universities must consider how their communication techniques can support diverse engagement whilst acknowledging specific challenges these students face in order to support access and success (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2019). With overlapping interests in supporting underrepresented student groups, students’ unions and universities are well placed and encouraged by national guidance to support such aims (Committee of University Chairs & National Union of Students, 2011; GuildHE & The Student Engagement Partnership, 2015), with evidence suggesting that the benefits from a university and students’ union partnership (alongside partnering with students) far outweigh the challenges faced (Jayne Briggs et al., 2019). Universities and their students’ unions can support each other in many ways, yet little literature has looked at how this way of working is actively addressing issues for underrepresented student groups.

OUR ENACTMENT OF PARTNERSHIP

Though partnership is not often traditionally understood to be an outcome but rather a process (Healey & Healey, 2019), outside of the curriculum, partnership has the ability to encompass both (Acai et al., 2017). We therefore demonstrate the ethos of partnership whereby it is partially enacted through its end result of producing a tangible resource to benefit the wider student population. As a result, we define a “trilateral partnership” in our context to relate to the ways of working between students, their institution, and their students’ union in the production and distribution of equitable knowledge in collaboration with underrepresented student groups in order to support, amplify, and enhance the lived experience of students in these groups.

Matthews (2016) lists core pillars of partnership which have directly informed our way of working. These include engaging with students, rather than imposing on or for them; having a relational way of working; involving a mutually beneficial and rewarding collaborative learning experience; and acknowledging how diversity forms the foundations of successful partnerships, whereby every individual brings an equally valuable, unique perspective. We endeavoured to emphasise “positioning students as peers who have valuable perspectives in learning” (Elkington, 2014, p. 178), a perspective which is fundamental to supporting equitable partnerships to improve practice. We also drew from

Cook-Sather and Felten's (2017) "ethic of reciprocity" by embracing respect and responsibility across all parties and recognising the "contributions of differently positioned people" (p. 175).

Using this ideology, our trilateral partnership worked to develop student resources, whereby students belonging to the Student Union's representational networks shared their experiential knowledge with staff from both the University and the Union, which were translated into the form of a series of "Student Guides to Winchester" in consultation between the three parties. The content of the guides was specific to each student group, such as where to buy Halal meat, find local LGBTQPIA+ friendly venues, Afro-Caribbean hairdressers, and other "top tips" from Winchester students belonging to each group. Information also included signposting to support services and details on reporting discrimination and harassment.

Partnership was integral to our methods of working, which can often be hard to navigate when working between and across two separate organisations with their own inherently different processes and procedures. Relationships between students' unions and universities are known to be varied, but this relationship can be successfully navigated through mutual support and commitment alongside partnership work (Day & Dickinson, 2018). We found the following values important to our execution and contributed to the strengths of this project: identifying student needs; identifying and utilising our strengths as a partnership; meaningful co-creation; authentic student voice; and flexibility, compromise, and overcoming challenges.

Identifying student needs

Before this project was formalised into a trilateral partnership, the need for specific guides was identified by the lead author following institutional research looking into Muslim students' experience and sense of belonging. Finding an inconsistency in Muslim students' knowledge of institutional support, the "Muslim Students Guide to Winchester" was created. Similarly, a collaborative project, led by an external HE research organisation (Alterline, 2019) at three UK higher education institutions (HEIs) (including the University of Winchester) into the experiences of Black students, also recommended the benefits of targeted guidance for Black (and Black, Asian and minority ethnic [BAME]) university students.

Following feedback to the Student Union via newly established representational networks and similar feedback to staff in the University from various students who identified feeling isolated or unsure of where was safe for them to go for specifically targeted support and resources, it was recognised that other underrepresented groups could also benefit from having access to a similar resource.

Identifying and utilising our strengths as a partnership

Shaw and Atvars (2018) identify the opportunities and challenges of collaboration between students' unions and HE providers within student engagement, including changing priorities, inequality of responsibility and resources, and high student-staff turnover. The University of Winchester and Winchester Student Union already had a long track record of successful partnership projects, which aided in early identification of shared values and priorities, resourcing, and allocation of roles and responsibilities. The partnership also scheduled regular progress meetings to ensure consistent, transparent communication. Whilst the project hugely benefitted from engaging with students, staff oversight was also

integral. To ensure steady contribution from the Union between turnover of student representatives, a Union manager, with a remit for student engagement and lead role in supporting the representational networks, enabled ease of access to students from underrepresented groups and was able to retain momentum.

Meaningful co-creation

Wenstone (2012) notes that “at its roots partnership is about investing students with the power to co-create” (p. 8), and, indeed, the principle of co-creation embedded across the trilateral partnership was key to this project. Students belonging to underrepresented groups identified in the student guides were central to the creation of the content itself. The authors took on board the writing of the guides, directly amplifying student voices without additional burden for students to write/edit the guides. As the students who contributed to the content belonged to the Union’s representational networks, they in turn would receive physical copies of the guides which would directly complement their own promotional activities, emphasising the mutually beneficial outcomes of working together.

Utilising multiple channels of communication to access diverse student groups ensures engagement activity reaches beyond the “typical” student (O’Shea, 2018). We therefore adopted a mixed model that sought to utilise both the existing representational network committees (already established for specific underrepresented groups) alongside accessing authentic spaces, including prayer rooms, representational network group meetings, and online communities. In doing so, authentic listening and co-creation could take place where traditional hierarchical power structures were dismantled (Dwyer, 2018).

Authentic student voice

Whilst much literature on authentic and meaningful student voice relates specifically to learning and teaching, student voice transcends into any forum including the wider student experience (Fletcher, 2017). Fletcher posits that there are five pathways to authentic student voice; this project sought to ensure all five pathways were enacted when engaging with student partners:

1. Acknowledging the real ways students express themselves—enacted by reaching students via their own safe spaces and providing a flexible platform for contribution.
2. Fostering a genuine commitment to engage beyond simply listening—enacted by offering students the opportunity to provide feedback on revised versions of content.
3. Promotion and visibility of individual contributions—enacted by ensuring promotion of their representational network and recognition within the publications.
4. Empowering all parties to be agents of change—enacted by empowering students to recognise their role in improving the student experience and identifying areas for improvement.
5. Expanding conversations so that students can be educated on wider issues impacting them to make informed contributions—enacted by providing further background to wider projects and future engagement opportunities.

Flexibility, compromise, and overcoming challenges

Bryson and Furlonger (2018) identify several common risks of working with students, including reaching and partnering with only the “loud,” actively engaged students. Within

our project, there were concerns of being overly reliant on one or two students acting as representatives for a wider group and missing voices of those less willing to share their experiences with an authoritative figure. To overcome this, the authors sought to utilise wider feedback through pre-existing research and reaching out to less engaged members of an identified cohort through student contacts. However, due to time limitations and necessity of achieving student engagement, co-creation of content for the guides took place with the Student Union's representational network committee members who were most likely to engage with the project (Bols, 2017; Lowe et al., 2017). Nonetheless, as committee members are elected by their peers to advocate on behalf of the representational network, this helped to mitigate the limitation of our ability to facilitate authentic student voice as the student partners had been elevated to this position by fellow students from underrepresented groups.

Due to the challenges of campus closures and remote learning in the later months of our project, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kernohan, 2020), further considerations were made regarding the mode of student engagement and partnership working (Dickinson, 2020). For example, content creation for several of the guides was facilitated via online meetings. This showed a flexibility in our way of working, which was not derailed by the pandemic, ensuring that equality and diversity agendas do not lose momentum or impact (Khan, 2020). In fact, it demonstrated the opportunities of this "new normal", whereby an international student who had returned to Norway was still able to co-create content for the International Students Guide.

It would be naïve of staff partners not to envision resistance to the partnership project (Bryson & Furlonger, 2018). Challenges faced included a lack of resources from other departments. In particular, we encountered hesitation from marketing and communications staff who were wary of the student-led guides not aligning with recruitment priorities and appropriate branding. The project was then presented to student representatives on the Student Advisory Council (SAC, the consultative and advisory body to the University's senior management team) in a bid for support and resources, who enthusiastically approved funding to produce and publish the guides via the Student Union. Nevertheless, when unspent SAC funding was reconsidered due to the financial implications of COVID-19 (Kernohan, 2020), the guides were again put at risk. Senior leadership indicated that for the funding to be released for the guides they would have to be developed in line with internal branding guidelines. The third author, as a departmental director, enabled the project to move forward via negotiations between department leads, which secured funding for the project. These discussions highlighted the value of the student guides beyond student recruitment, with reference to Alterline's (2019) research and the University of Winchester's (2019) commitments in the Access and Participation Plan to improve students' sense of belonging and to close gaps in degree outcomes.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As noted, the authors were passionate advocates for student equality and diversity, widening participation, and student engagement. However, Carey (2018) cautions that there can be a disconnect between staff members and students over the importance placed on their student engagement project. Over-enthusiasm can be misaligned with other strategic, departmental, or personal priorities. Likewise, misaligned expectations over resourcing and engagement level can impede the success of both inter-departmental and staff-student partnership projects, as highlighted by the challenges faced with this project.

In this case study, the passionate, shared values across university departments and with the Student Union enabled the authors to navigate some of these difficulties. Despite challenges, the authors advocate for forms of partnership to transcend the typical learning and teaching space to ensure students are empowered as active stakeholders across all aspects of the university experience. We end with our own recommendations to practitioners looking to implement similar initiatives, as a result of this mutually enriching project.

Recommendation 1 (Maisha Islam)

What started with supporting one underrepresented group (i.e. Muslim students) became inclusive of a broader range of students. The process of collecting content for each guide was both enlightening and disheartening as it involved hearing a myriad of barriers to a full student experience. This project therefore highlights the ongoing commitment and flexibility required from practitioners if they are to fully support equality and diversity agendas within HE.

Recommendation 2 (Tiffany-Lily Burnett)

Resourcing supportive material for current students needs to become an institutional priority. Often guides in existence are aimed exclusively at prospective students and not at enhancing the current student experience. Resource allocation across institutions indicates that the experience of current underrepresented student groups is often not as high a priority as the recruitment of new underrepresented student groups. Thus, students can feel both unprepared and out of place once they arrive at university. Access needs to be met with support, and equipping students with supportive material, co-created with students themselves, is one way institutions can foster a sense of belonging.

Recommendation 3 (Sarah-Louise Collins)

As a sector we are now, rightly, driven to ensure active and meaningful student engagement in widening access and participation. This project demonstrates the true importance of authentic student voice by both establishing an evidence of need for targeted resources and by directly utilising the marginalised student as a collaborative partner to ensure the accessibility and value of said resource.

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