

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Students as partners in China: Investigating the potentials and possibilities for growing practices across universities

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ABSTRACT

There is a small but growing body of literature about engaging students as partners (SaP) in Asian countries. To further collective understanding of learner-teacher partnership practices in China, we invited undergraduate students and academics from three Chinese universities to complete a survey on their involvement in, and sense of importance of, 17 practices that align with SaP activities. The 402 students and 85 academic staff who engaged in the survey reported high levels of agreement about the importance of such practices that foster learner-teacher interactions, although the reported levels of involvement were lower. The findings demonstrate that SaP practices are unfolding in Chinese universities with evidence of a desire for growth of such activities. Our findings reveal potentials and possibilities for growing such practices in Chinese universities while raising questions about the underlying drivers and values motivating increased interest in learner-teacher interactions, which warrants further qualitative research.

KEYWORDS

students as partners, Chinese higher education, student engagement, learner-teacher interaction, undergraduate teaching and learning

Relationships are complex, particularly in established educational institutions such as universities. Positive relationships between students and teachers promote motivation and engagement in teaching and learning activities (Zepke & Leech, 2010). With a focus on establishing quality learner-teacher relationships, engaging students as partners (SaP) has emerged from a long history of practices and research that questions taken-for-granted learner-teacher interactions. While there has been emerging scholarly discussion about SaP in China (Liang & Matthews, 2021), it is not clear to what extent SaP practices in learning and teaching—whether named SaP or not—are unfolding in Chinese higher education.

In this study, our aim is to further collective understanding of learner-teacher interactions in Chinese universities by investigating practices that fall into the realm of SaP activities espoused in Western literature. Because the language of Students as Partners and its translation into Chinese are uncommon, we adapted a practice-focused lens in our research design, which is based on the approach of Matthews et al. (2017), to capture large-scale involvement in SaP activities while not naming them as SaP practices. In other words, by exploring self-reported involvement in and beliefs about the importance of specific practices that foster learner-teacher interactions, our study seeks to answer the broad question: are SaP practices happening in Chinese universities?

We begin by situating our study in the literature before outlining our study design and presenting the results.

Students as Partners as a relational practice

The current conception of SaP aims to reposition the roles of students and staff by creating opportunities for them to work together in teaching and learning in higher education (Matthews et al., 2018). Cook-Sather et al. (2014) asserted that such partnership practices are “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (pp. 6–7). The interaction or relationship is paramount. As Healey et al. (2014) argued, it is “a relationship in which all involved—students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students’ unions, and so on—are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together” (p. 12). More recently, Bovill (2020) has affirmed SaP as a relational pedagogy. The emphasis is on the process of interacting and engaging students and staff as partners who enhance learning and teaching.

Partnership practices take various forms in different contexts (Bovill, 2019). Healey et al. (2014) highlighted four overlapping categories where students and staff can engage as partners in quality assurance and quality enhancement, which are: (1) learning, teaching, and assessment; (2) subject-based research and inquiry; (3) research and scholarship of teaching and learning; and (4) curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy. Although Healey et al. (2014) emphasised that partnership is a process of student engagement and not positioned as an outcome-focused discourse, positive outcomes have been evidenced across a set of SaP practices (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). A recent thematic analysis of 63 publications in SaP literature (Matthews et al., 2019) reported a range of beneficial outcomes for both students and staff, such as identity shifts and power dynamic changes in learner-teacher relationships, increased beliefs in capacities in teaching and learning, and a stronger sense of belonging to and new awareness of university communities.

Importantly, SaP is also perceived as a values-based practice (Matthews et al., 2018). There are many ways to engage in partnership, yet the array of practices is underpinned and connected by particular values. Cook-Sather et al. (2014) defined three key values—respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility—to guide the framing of SaP theorisations and practices. Drawn from the literature around partnership and student engagement, Healey et al. (2014) named the values that underpin partnership as “authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community, and responsibility” (pp. 14–15). Emphasising that the language of partnership be discussed as relational and values-based, Matthews et al. (2019) captured the complex constructs of power and identity that underpin partnership practices. Through the enactment of these partnership values, power

dynamics and the relational identities of learners and teachers are reshaped and transformed (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Matthews, 2017).

Nonetheless, SaP is contested on several levels, including its political commitments and cultural grounding in largely Western constructions of its meaning and values (Cook-Sather et al., 2018). Contestation offers opportunities for clarifying and recognising new ways of thinking about, practising, and constructing knowledge of learner-teacher partnerships. In doing so, scholars have called for the expansion of SaP beyond anglophone contexts (Bindra et al., 2018; Green, 2019) and have recognised the context-dependent nature of SaP practices (Healey & Healey, 2018). Compared to the diversity of SaP practices in Western contexts, a recent scoping review (Liang & Matthews, 2021) found that explicitly named SaP/student-staff partnership implementation in Asian countries was “currently in its infancy, and many researchers were mainly focused on exploring practices to observe and understand the possibility of SaP inspired by Western practices” (p. 561). By focusing on Western notions and values of SaP, scholars positioned the contested nature of Confucianism as a barrier to SaP implementation in Asia, the review found (Liang & Matthews, 2021). Importantly, the review demonstrated the limited insights into how SaP was perceived and practiced in the unique contexts of Asian university teaching and learning when not explicitly named “partnership.” Thus, responding to these calls, we argue for recognition of the cultural norms shaping learner-teacher relationships in China that can enrich SaP as an international practice. However, although we acknowledge the complexity of values and constructs of power and identity that underpin the notion of partnership, for this study, moving toward richer cultural understandings means first identifying if students and staff are engaging in partnership activities or activities not explicitly named by SaP.

Learner-teacher interactions in Chinese higher education

Chinese higher education has been in a consistent cycle of reforms over the past four decades (Zhao, 2018). According to the latest Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) report, the number of higher education institutions across China has reached 2,900 (MOE, 2019a), and more than 40 million students are currently enrolled in higher education programs (MOE, 2019b). In addition to the expansion and popularisation of Chinese higher education, student engagement in the teaching and learning process is paid increasing attention (Guo, 2018). Since 2010, the Chinese higher education reform listed student-centred teaching and learning as a key concern that aims to increase the interactions between students and teachers (Sargent & Xiao, 2018). Many Chinese scholars have responded to the new reforms. For example, by assessing student engagement and the effectiveness of teaching and learning activities in Chinese universities, Guo and Shi (2016) indicated that student-academic interaction is one of the key factors contributing to higher levels of engagement among Chinese university students. Guo (2018) suggested that learner-teacher interaction should be positioned as a vital part of curriculum, encouraging student engagement within an inclusive teaching and learning environment. Thus, Chinese higher education reforms are evolving with a trend toward student-centred pedagogies and are explicitly focused on student engagement and student-academic interactions. In other words, Chinese higher education policies are increasingly focused on the quality of educational practices, including a growing pocket of explicitly named SaP approaches (Liang & Matthews, 2021).

However, Luo et al. (2018) argued that “a large-scaled expansion in [Chinese] higher education is to be accompanied by a process of differentiation within its system” (p. 1027). The stratification of Chinese higher education restricts the opportunities of lower-tier social

groups to higher-quality higher education institutions, which broadens the inequality among different social groups. In addition, the differentiated policies among the universities positioned in different tiers results in an inequality of accessing educational resources and national support (Liu & Wang, 2015). For this study, responding to issues of equality, we included Chinese universities from different levels of access within the tiered Chinese higher education sector.

CONTRIBUTION

SaP is fundamentally about meaningful interactions and relationships between students and teachers (Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Matthews et al., 2018). This study contributes new understandings of pedagogical relationships linked to the changing policy landscape in Chinese higher education by investigating relational practices that, though they are not explicitly named by SaP, yet potentially foster learner-teacher partnerships. Guided by the broad question, “***Are SaP practices happening in Chinese universities?***”, this study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are Chinese students and academic staff involved in partnership practices?
2. How do students and academic staff perceive the importance of such practices?
3. What are the differences between involvement and importance for both students and academics?

METHODS

We employed a quantitative method using an established survey tool, Student Involvement Questionnaire (SIQ) (Matthews et al., 2017), previously published in this journal, which is designed to capture self-reported involvement in and perceptions of meaningful learner-teacher interactions. The study has been approved by the Institutional Human Research Ethics Committee of University of Queensland (approval number: 2020001494) and the Chinese university sites participating in the study.

Research context

The study was conducted at three universities, each from different tiers of the Chinese higher education system: a local higher education institution, a first-class university, and a C9 university (“C9” refers to the elite league formed by nine top universities in China in 2009). Although resources and educational quality varies in the tiered system (Liu et al., 2015), this study does not focus on comparing students’ and academics’ perceptions between different levels of Chinese universities. However, it is an important area of future research.

Data collection

The data were collected by adapting and translating the SIQ instrument, which was administered online. The instrument was previously used in SaP research conducted in a research-intensive Australian institution (Matthews et al., 2017). The instrument was revised from the Science Students Skill Inventory (SSSI) instrument that captured students’ perceptions of learning outcomes in Matthews and Hodgson (2012). The SIQ captures two indicators—*importance* and *involvement*—of 17 practices aligned to the Healey et al. (2014) four-category SaP model.

The survey consists of questions on a 4-point Likert scale. “Not sure what this means” provided participants with an option when they did not understand the practice. Below, examples in Table 1 show the 4-point Likert scale for each indicator.

Table 1. Examples of survey questions and 4-point rating scale

STUDENT QUESTION	ACADEMIC QUESTION	4-POINT LIKERT SCALE
How IMPORTANT do you think it is to have the following included in your degree? Practice list: e.g. Negotiating assessment criteria and grade weightings with instructors ...(totally 17 practices)	How IMPORTANT do you think it is to have the following included in students’ degree? Practice list: e.g. Negotiating assessment criteria and grade weightings with instructors ...(totally 17 practices)	Not at all (1), A little (2), A moderate amount (3), A lot (4), Not sure what this means Not at all (1), A little (2), A moderate amount (3), A lot (4), Not sure what this means
How often have you been INVOLVED in the following practices? Practice list: e.g. Negotiating assessment criteria and grade weightings with instructors ...(totally 17 practices)	How often have you INVOLVED students in the following practices? Practice list: e.g. Negotiating assessment criteria and grade weightings with instructors ...(totally 17 practices)	Not at all (1), A little (2), A moderate amount (3), A lot (4), Not sure what this means Not at all (1), A little (2), A moderate amount (3), A lot (4), Not sure what this means

Because student evaluations for teachers and courses (subjects or units of study) are commonplace in China, as they are in many universities worldwide, one of the 17 SaP practices explores such surveys. Following the approach of Matthews et al. (2017), we included this practice as a baseline prompt (not as a SaP practice) with the expectation that responses would be high in terms of involvement. Doing so allowed us to sense check responses with a helpful comparative metric between well-known one-way student feedback on teaching and learning with more dialogic forms of SaP practices included in our data collection.

Our study followed the same survey format as SIQ and was translated into Chinese. The translated survey was first completed by several bilingual Chinese-English speakers using a think-aloud protocol to show a shared understanding of each SaP practice and all questions. A few minor translational edits were made to clarify the meaning.

Participants

By employing a convenience sampling approach, the survey link was sent to the online communication/notification platforms of the university/faculty (e.g., teaching and learning dashboard, Wechat group, QQ group) by university undergraduate coordinators (gatekeepers) of the three selected Chinese universities. All undergraduate students who were enrolled and academics who were teaching in the three universities were able to answer the survey. The survey link was open for 1 month.

During that time, a total of 436 undergraduate students and 85 academics engaged with the survey. Kim et al. (2018) suggested that straightlining (i.e., responding to all items with the same answer) “may deteriorate both reliability and validity of survey responses” (p. 215). Thus, the straightlined data were removed, leaving 402 surveys from students and all 85 surveys from academics for analysis. Information about respondent universities is shown in Table 2. The respondents were from various subjects of the three Chinese universities.

Table 2. Respondents from the three Chinese universities participating in the study

UNIVERSITY	STUDENT RESPONSES	ACADEMIC RESPONSES
C9 university	117 (29%)	22 (26%)
First-class university	109 (27%)	30 (35%)
Local higher education institution	176 (44%)	33 (39%)
All 3 institutions combined	402	85

Data analysis

In this study, the statistical analysis, including the analysis of overall descriptive statistics and paired t-tests, were conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS). As suggested by Matthews et al. (2017), the answers of “Not sure what it means” were removed for analysis. Due to the removal of “Not sure what it means” responses, each SaP practice was analysed separately and resulted in different response numbers for each practice, which are displayed in the data tables below.

The response number, percentage agreement, mean score (M), and standard deviation (SD) were calculated for each SaP practice across the two indicators of *importance* and *involvement* for both students and academics. Percentage agreement was calculated by combining the ratings of “A moderate amount (3)” and “A lot (4)” as done by Matthews et al. (2017).

To explore differences between indicators of *importance* and *involvement* for each SaP practice, paired t-tests were used, as Ross and Willson (2017) indicated that “a paired t-test compares the mean of two matched groups of people or cases, or compares the mean of a single group, examined at two different points in time” (p.17). We then adopted the common threshold for statistically significant differences where a p-value is smaller than 0.05 (McCluskey & Lalkhen, 2007).

FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics and paired t-test results are presented in tables and visually with graphs. They show the levels of importance and involvement for the 17 SaP practices reported by students and academics. Because of the amount of the data, findings are organised into the three sub-headings based on the Healey et al. (2014) 4-category SaP model: (1) “learning, teaching, and assessment”; (2) “curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy”; and (3) combined “subject-based research and inquiry” with “scholarship of teaching and learning.”

Results for “learning, teaching, and assessment” practices

Eight SaP practices were classified to this category and the results are presented in Tables 3 and 4 and Figure 1. The results showed both students’ and academics’ perceptions

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of *importance* were higher than that of *involvement* in all practices, but the gaps of mean differences of the academics were generally much lower.

Table 3. Students' perceived *importance* and *involvement* in "teaching, learning, and assessment" category

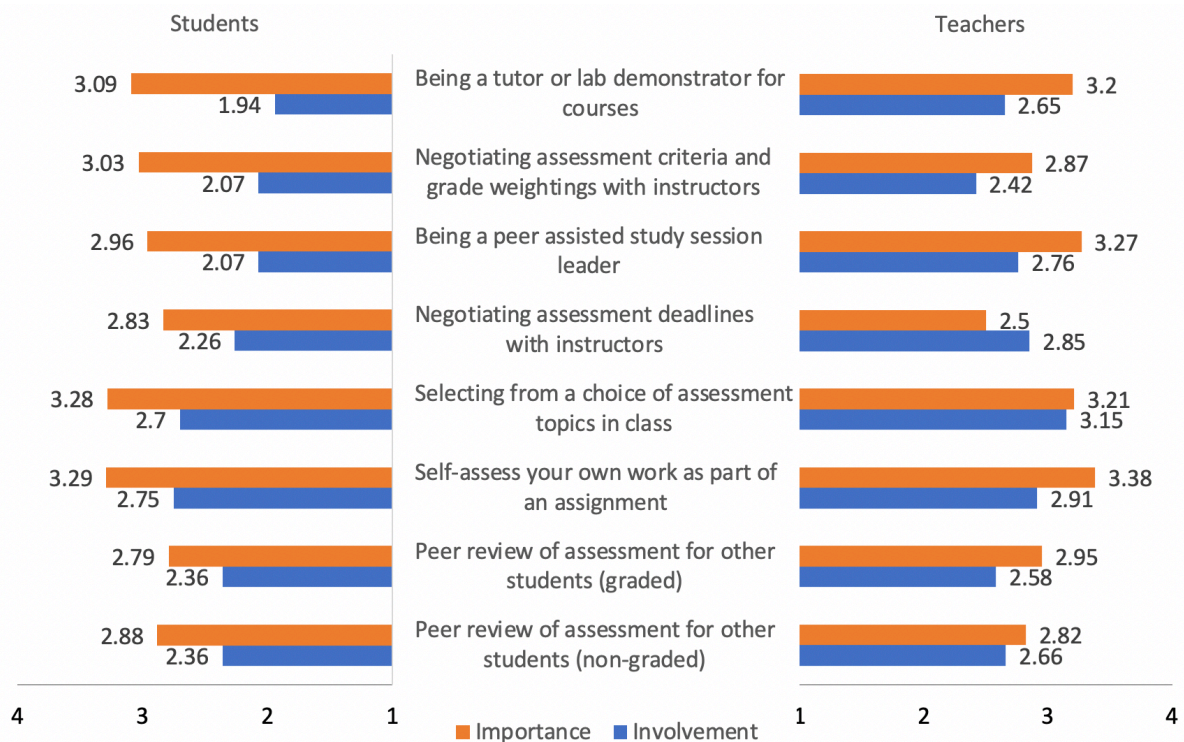
SAP PRACTICE	# OF STUDENT RESPONSES	IMPORTANCE % AGREE M (SD)	INVOLVEMENT % AGREE M (SD)	STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE LEVEL (MEANS)	GAP % AGREE M
Being a tutor or lab demonstrator for courses	391	79% 3.09 (± 0.86)	33% 1.94 (± 1.05)	$p < 0.0001$	46% 1.15
Negotiating assessment criteria and grade weightings with instructors	396	72% 3.03 (± 0.91)	35% 2.07 (± 1.00)	$p < 0.0001$	37% 0.96
Being a peer assisted study session leader	390	72% 2.96 (± 0.91)	34% 2.07 (± 1.06)	$p < 0.0001$	38% 0.89
Negotiating assessment deadlines with instructors	395	66% 2.83 (± 1.01)	42% 2.26 (± 0.98)	$p < 0.0001$	24% 0.57
Selecting from a choice of assessment topics in class	387	85% 3.28 (± 0.80)	62% 2.70 (± 1.07)	$p < 0.0001$	23% 0.58
Self-assess your own work as part of an assignment	387	86% 3.29 (± 0.80)	65% 2.75 (± 1.00)	$p < 0.0001$	21% 0.54
Peer review of assessment for other students (graded)	395	63% 2.79 (± 0.98)	46% 2.36 (± 1.01)	$p < 0.0001$	17% 0.43
Peer review of assessment for other students (non-graded)	397	68% 2.88 (± 0.92)	47% 2.36 (± 1.04)	$p < 0.0001$	21% 0.52

Table 4. Academics' perceived *importance* and *involvement* in "teaching, learning, and assessment" category

SAP PRACTICE	# OF TEACHER RESPONSES	IMPORTANCE % AGREE M (SD)	INVOLVEMENT % AGREE M (SD)	STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE LEVEL (MEANS)	GAP % AGREE M
Being a tutor or lab demonstrator for courses	84	85% 3.20 (± 0.85)	61% 2.65 (± 1.08)	$p < 0.0001$	24% 0.55
Negotiating assessment criteria and grade weightings with instructors	84	73% 2.87 (± 0.92)	47% 2.42 (± 0.97)	$p < 0.0001$	26% 0.45
Being a peer assisted study session leader	84	89% 3.27 (± 0.78)	60% 2.76 (± 1.07)	$p < 0.0001$	29% 0.51

Negotiating assessment deadlines with instructors	84	50% 2.50 (± 1.01)	68% 2.85 (± 1.05)	$p < 0.01$	-18% -0.35
Selecting from a choice of assessment topics in class	84	82% 3.21 (± 0.78)	79% 3.15 (± 0.87)	$p > 0.05$	3% 0.06
Self-assess your own work as part of an assignment	85	91% 3.38 (± 0.69)	67% 2.91 (± 0.90)	$p < 0.0001$	24% 0.47
Peer review of assessment for other students (graded)	84	71% 2.95 (± 0.85)	56% 2.58 (± 1.08)	$p < 0.0001$	15% 0.37
Peer review of assessment for other students (non-graded)	85	62% 2.82 (± 0.92)	60% 2.66 (± 0.98)	$p > 0.05$	2% 0.16

Figure 1. Graphical comparison of perceived *importance* and *involvement* (means) of both students and teachers in the category of “teaching, learning, and assessment”



Results for “curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy” practices

Seven SaP practices were classified to this category and the results are presented in Tables 5 and 6 and Figure 2. The results showed all students’ and most academics’ perceptions of *importance* were higher than that of *involvement*, but the gaps of mean differences of the academics were generally much lower.

Table 5. Students' perceived importance and involvement in "curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy" category

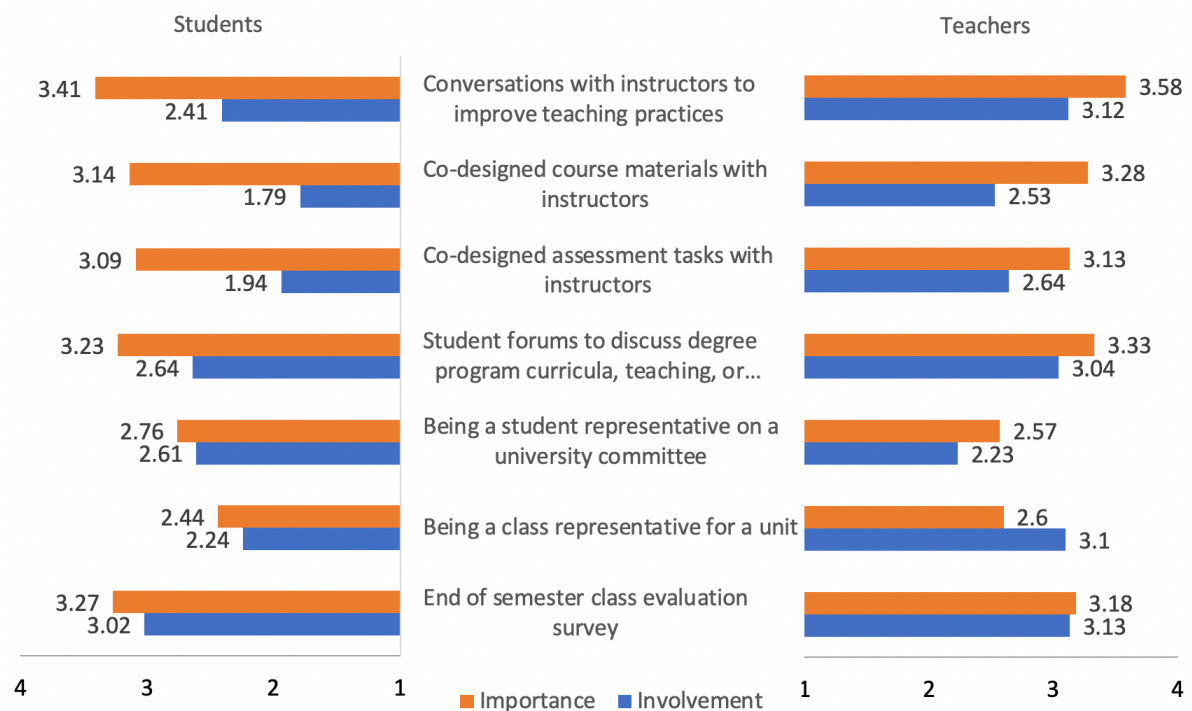
SAP PRACTICE	# OF STUDENT RESPONSES	IMPORTANCE % AGREE <i>M</i> (SD)	INVOLVEMENT % AGREE <i>M</i> (SD)	STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE LEVEL (MEANS)	GAP % AGREE <i>M</i>
Conversations with instructors to improve teaching practices	393	88% 3.41 (±0.76)	49% 2.41 (±1.01)	$p < 0.0001$	39% 1.00
Co-designed course materials with instructors	393	77% 3.14 (±0.88)	25% 1.79 (±0.94)	$p < 0.0001$	52% 1.35
Co-designed assessment tasks with instructors	393	75% 3.09 (±0.86)	28% 1.94 (±0.95)	$p < 0.0001$	47% 1.15
Student forums to discuss degree program curricula, teaching, or learning	391	82% 3.23 (±0.81)	57% 2.64 (±1.00)	$p < 0.0001$	25% 0.59
Being a student representative on a university committee	396	64% 2.76 (±0.98)	60% 2.61 (±1.13)	$p < 0.05$	4% 0.15
Being a class representative for a unit	390	52% 2.44 (±0.98)	44% 2.24 (±1.07)	$p < 0.0001$	8% 0.20
End of semester class evaluation survey	391	83% 3.27 (±0.80)	73% 3.02 (±1.04)	$p < 0.0001$	10% 0.25

Table 6. Academics' perceived importance and involvement in "curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy" category

SAP PRACTICE	# OF TEACHER RESPONSES	IMPORTANCE % AGREE <i>M</i> (SD)	INVOLVEMENT % AGREE <i>M</i> (SD)	STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE LEVEL (MEANS)	GAP % AGREE <i>M</i>
Conversations with instructors to improve teaching practices	84	95% 3.58 (±0.63)	79% 3.12 (±0.86)	$p < 0.0001$	16% 0.46
Co-designed course materials with instructors	83	81% 3.28 (±0.86)	52% 2.53 (±0.98)	$p < 0.0001$	29% 0.75
Co-designed assessment tasks with instructors	84	77% 3.13 (±0.82)	53% 2.64 (±1.00)	$p < 0.0001$	24% 0.49
Student forums to discuss degree program curricula, teaching, or learning	83	87% 3.33 (±0.70)	72% 3.04 (±0.98)	$p < 0.01$	15% 0.29

Being a student representative on a university committee	82	54% 2.57 (±1.01)	40% 2.23 (±1.07)	p < 0.01	14% 0.34
Being a class representative for a unit	82	54% 2.60 (±1.06)	74% 3.10 (±1.01)	p < 0.0001	-20% -0.50
End of semester class evaluation survey	83	76% 3.18 (±0.86)	79% 3.13 (±0.79)	p > 0.05	-3% 0.05

Figure 2. Graphical comparison of perceived *importance* and *involvement* (means) of both students and teachers in the category of “curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy”



Results for “subject-based research and inquiry and scholarship of teaching and learning” practices

Two SaP practices were classified to this category and the results are presented in Tables 7 and 8 and Figure 3. The results showed both students’ and academics’ perceptions of *importance* were higher than that of *involvement* in all practices, but the gaps of mean differences of the academics were generally much lower.

Table 7. Students’ perceived *importance* and *involvement* in “subject-based research and inquiry and scholarship of teaching and learning” category

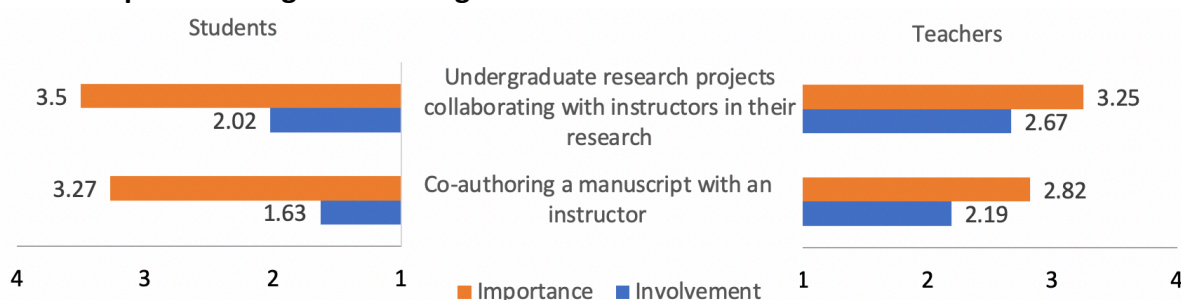
SAP PRACTICE	# OF STUDENT RESPONSES	IMPORTANCE % AGREE M (SD)	INVOLVEMENT % AGREE M (SD)	STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE LEVEL (MEANS)	GAP % AGREE M
Undergraduate research projects collaborating with	387	91% 3.5 (±0.69)	35% 2.02 (±1.08)	p < 0.0001	56% 1.48

instructors in their research					
Co-authoring a manuscript with an instructor	382	83% 3.27 (±0.82)	20% 1.63 (±0.97)	p < 0.0001	63% 1.64

Table 8. Academics’ perceived importance and involvement in “subject-based research and inquiry and scholarship of teaching and learning” category

SAP PRACTICE	# OF TEACHER RESPONSES	IMPORTANCE % AGREE M (SD)	INVOLVEMENT % AGREE M (SD)	STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE LEVEL (MEANS)	GAP % AGREE M
Undergraduate research projects collaborating with instructors in their research	83	74% 3.25 (±0.88)	59% 2.67 (±1.01)	p < 0.0001	15% 0.58
Co-authoring a manuscript with an instructor	83	61% 2.82 (±0.97)	38% 2.19 (±1.01)	p < 0.0001	23% 0.63

Figure 3. Graphical comparison of perceived importance and involvement (means) of both students and teachers in the category of “subject-based research and inquiry and scholarship of teaching and learning”



DISCUSSION

Our study explored perceptions of involvement in and importance of pedagogical partnership practices amongst undergraduate students and academics in Chinese higher education. The results from the 402 undergraduate students and 85 academics from three Chinese universities participating in our study showed an overall pattern of higher agreement levels about the importance of SaP practices with lower reported levels of involvement in such practices. The analysis found statistically significant differences between perceived levels of importance and levels of involvement for most of the 17 practices, signalling a willingness amongst students and academics for growth in SaP practices. Students in our study, on average, reported they wanted to be more involved in such practices. The pattern is similar to trends reported by Matthews et al. (2017) in their study of science students in Australia. Our study included academics who also reported higher agreement than involvement, although the importance-involvement gap for academics tended to be smaller compared to students.

Importantly, our study framed in Western literature and conducted in China demonstrated that students and academics in China were able to make sense of the 17

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practices with the majority rating the practices (as opposed to ticking the “I am not sure what this means” option). In other words, forms of what we call SaP in the West are unfolding in Chinese universities. A recent scoping review of SaP practices in Asia found a small but growing number of research articles examining explicitly named SaP practices in China (Liang & Matthews, 2021). Our study confirms that SaP practices are more widespread in at least three Chinese universities, although students and academics are not discussing them as SaP explicitly.

To interpret the results, we bring them into conversation—as Healey et al. (2020) argued is fundamental in writing about university learning and teaching—with literature on student engagement and partnerships from both Western and Chinese scholars. In doing so, we also draw on the context-dependent nature of SaP, as signalled by Healey and Healey (2018), to explain the findings. We then discuss implications for future research.

From student engagement to academics engaging students as partners in teaching and learning

First, taken together, the presented results show a wider range of notable gaps in students’ perceptions in the category of teaching, learning, and assessment. Practices that emphasise the role of co-teaching and direct interactions between students and teachers focused on teaching and learning were found to have larger gaps between levels of high importance and low involvement. For example, practices with students being tutors or demonstrators (gap: 46%), negotiating assessment criteria and grade weighting with instructors (gap: 37%), and being a peer assisted study session leader (gap: 38%) all had large gaps compared to practices where students self-assess (gap: 21%), assess peers (gap: 17% and 21%), or have greater choice in assessment activities (gap: 23%). This result is consistent with the focus of existing research on student engagement in higher education settings in China. Most studies (e.g., Yin, 2018; Yin & Ke, 2017; Yin & Wang, 2016; Zhang et al., 2015) are designed to explain and reveal ways to better engage students in their own learning and show potential factors on both students and teachers, but they overlooked the importance of enabling students to directly engage with academics or in teaching processes.

According to Western research, engaging students in teaching has achieved various meaningful effects. For example, in a service-learning teaching assistant program, Begley et al. (2019) reported the benefits of involving students who introduced new insights to enhance teaching and learning approaches and who also eased the burden of teachers by partnering as undergraduate student teaching assistants in the program. A stronger learner-teacher relationship that improved mutual understanding by involving an undergraduate student as teaching assistant was also indicated by Daniello and Acquaviva (2019). Thus, the results of this study provide opportunities to investigate and explore whether and how such mutual benefits occur in the context of Chinese higher education through involving more students in teaching processes.

The practices listed in teaching, learning, and assessment with smaller importance-involvement gaps are indirect teacher-student interactions. The higher involvement perceived by students from the three universities indicates that indirect interactions between students and teachers may have been widely adopted in engaging students in the assessment process in Chinese universities. The extent to which these practices are embodied in the ethos of partnership are not clear given the culture of assessment that pervades Chinese universities. For example, although students hold high-level agreement about the importance of assessment-related practices, the motivation to be engaged needs

to be specifically considered. As Yin et al. (2016) revealed, “assessment mainly plays the role of monitoring rather than facilitating student learning in university teaching in China,” and “the progress of student learning in China is examination-driven” (p. 51). Thus, we may interpret students’ levels of importance and involvement in the monitoring nature of assessment that is intensified by the grade-driven foci for Chinese students in a high-stakes examination regime. The practices of self-assessing one’s own work and peer review of assessment of other students, where they are graded, raise questions about motivation and the values underpinning involvement. As Bovill (2020) has argued, there is a dearth of research into classroom-based partnership via co-creation processes. Our study suggests such research in Chinese universities would advance collective understanding of classroom-based pedagogical partnerships.

Quality assurance: Conversations, consultants, and student representatives

The results from SaP practices in curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy show large gaps among students between importance and involvement: conversations with instructors to improve teaching practices shows a 39% gap, co-design course materials a 52% gap, and co-design assessment tasks with instructors a 47% gap. Although the gap is smaller for conversations with instructors, which suggests that students have opportunities to communicate and provide feedback in real-time, they are less likely to be involved in co-designing activities. This shows that students have less decision-making power in their education, although they are provided opportunities to give feedback actively. Nonetheless, there is evidence of gradual improvement as more Chinese academics have recognised these missing opportunities for students to be a part of pedagogical decision-making (Liang et al., 2020). For example, Yin et al. (2016) advocated that “students should be empowered to express their views on the design and delivery of teaching and learning” (p. 52), suggesting more active feedback. Ma (2020) involved students as co-creators in course design and implementation at Chang’an University. Beyond giving feedback, practices of learner-teacher information sharing, co-creation, and working together are emerging.

In contrast, both students and teachers generally reported higher levels of involvement of students as course representatives and in governance processes, although the importance of such practices were called into question by the results. These results can be partially explained by longer-term national education policy changes. In the first 5-year report of national teaching quality evaluations (2002–2007), the Chinese Ministry of Education emphasised the importance of student feedback, which “is considered to be one of the most important quality assurance components, gained through surveys, individual and group interviews, student representative reporting, etc.” (Li, 2010, p. 70). Thus, students completing surveys, engaging in feedback conversations, and being included as course representatives were clear targets easily measured. Widespread inclusion of students on committees and as course representatives was adopted across the Chinese higher education sector.

A study into this formal system of engaging students in governance in Chinese universities sheds light on our results. While students are invited into university committees, unions, and institutional systems of governance, they are scrutinised and regulated in ways that result in these student leaders and representatives being reluctant to challenge university administrations and instead acting to maintain good relationships with university staff (Cheng, 2019). Cheng (2019) described the primary duties of student representatives as “either ‘event host’ or ‘errands runner’ to fulfill the administrative needs

of the university” (p. 59). Thus, the practices associated with student leadership and representation for Chinese students and academics were not viewed as important, with low levels of interest in involvement. These findings are consistent with results in a study conducted by Matthews et al. (2017) in Australia, which indicated that “students and staff working in partnership extends far beyond involving representative students in decision-making on institutional committees” (p. 10).

This finding has important implications for SaP practices in China. First, practices that encourage learner-teacher interactions (i.e., student engagement) do not always translate to partnership practices that share power (Healey et al., 2014). Second, it suggests that participants in our study are less interested in practices that do not take student involvement seriously. Understanding the drivers and values shaping interactions matters in distinguishing between engagement to measure involvement versus partnership processes in such practices. Third, it signals that identifying learner-teacher practices that foster interactions, be they partnership or engagement practices, are limited. These practices, such as involving students as representatives on committees, can be precursory to partnership or simply reproduce existing the learner-teacher power distance. That national policies and measures of success can foster surface-level engagement or misrepresent learner-teacher partnership practices are a consistent tension in Western literature (see Cook-Sather et al., 2018; Dwyer, 2018; Matthews, 2016, 2017; Peters & Mathias, 2018).

The role of academic leadership is opening up partnership practices

The academic participants in our study generally perceived higher agreement about involving students in all practices. The results reveal that teachers in different types of Chinese universities are open to creating more opportunities for student-teacher interactions. However, the gaps of perceived involvement between teachers and students indicate potential challenges with widening student involvement. One potential reason is large class sizes reducing quality interactions between teachers and students in Chinese universities (Wright & Zheng, 2016; Zhao & Wang, 2018). There are questions of how academics can engage in classroom-based practices, as Bovill (2020) has explored in Western contexts. There are also questions about cultural norms shaping teacher beliefs about what it is to be a teacher. Liang and Matthews (under review) examine the influence of cultural scripts in Chinese universities that emphasise the role of teacher leadership in teaching and learning. The academics in our study reported, on average, high levels of involvement in and importance of practices fostering student-teacher pedagogical interactions. We argue that common Chinese cultural scripts about teacher leadership provide a pathway for growing learner-teacher partnerships if Chinese teachers begin to view these pedagogical interactions as part of exercising teacher leadership. Our results suggest, for the academics in our study, this is happening. However, we note the limitation of our sample and the exploratory nature of our study.

As Carless and Yuen-Ying Kwan (2019) observed in Hong Kong universities, “close relationships between teachers and students are often developed, and beneath the surface lies Confucian respect for different forms of educational collaboration” (p. 3). More research of the lived experiences of Chinese students and academics could reveal understandings of teacher leadership constructed by Chinese cultural values and norms “beneath the surface”.

Implications for further research

That learner-teacher pedagogical interactions are unfolding in Chinese universities is unsurprising from a policy perspective. The changing tides in Chinese higher education policy toward student-centred approaches over the past few decades are re-shaping understandings about the roles of students and academics. For example, Liang et al. (2020) explored academic identities in Chinese universities and found “a move toward more participatory and relational pedagogies that value the contributions of students in the learning and teaching process” (p. 141). Furthermore, a scoping review of SaP in Asia found that “SaP is challenging, and will be challenged by, conventional higher education norms currently constructing learner-teacher interactions in Asian countries” (Liang & Matthews, 2021, p. 560). While our study investigated practices as a crucial initial step, there is much to learn about how such practices are shaped by and are reshaping the values and norms of Chinese educational cultures.

Qualitative lines of inquiry to understand the symbolic, political, and cultural meaning that learner-teacher pedagogical practices hold for students and academics in Chinese universities would enrich the growing global scholarship on pedagogical partnerships. Such research could illuminate the underlying values of working together as learners and teachers to enhance learning and teaching in Confucian heritage contexts while contributing to expansive theorisations of engaging students as partners as a globally inclusive international practice.

CONCLUSION

Our study captured undergraduate students’ and academics’ perceptions of and involvement in engaging students as partners in three Chinese universities. The findings show involvement in a range of SaP practices in Chinese universities and suggest that forms of what we call SaP in Western contexts are unfolding in Chinese universities. Both student and academic respondents indicated overall high-level agreement about the importance of SaP practices with some variation, specifically course representation and governance activities. Further qualitative research is encouraged to explore the values and aspirations of SaP in Chinese universities to understand how they converge and diverge with Western values and practices. Importantly, opportunities are presented to investigate how SaP practices are shaped by and are reshaping cultural norms and values in Chinese universities, particularly uncritical and politicised conceptions of Confucianism often viewed as an obstacle to such practices. Doing so will enrich global scholarship of learner-teacher partnership practices.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

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