

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The genesis of staff-student partnerships: Institutional influences

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ABSTRACT

As staff-student partnership activity becomes embedded into the infrastructure of higher education, there is an increased institutional focus on systematising the staff-student partnership support processes. Drawing on data from a case study of a partnership conceived under the auspices of an institutional staff-student partnership programme, this article offers insight into how the institutional context shapes partnership aims, objectives, and composition. It finds that in the pre-partnership phase a gatekeeping role is performed by the institutional programme, which ultimately determines which partnerships proceed and how they are evaluated. The study contributes to the broader critique of staff-student partnership practices, proposing a framework that integrates the various institutional influences and the pre- and post-partnership phases.

KEYWORDS

staff-student partnership, institutional context, partnership programme, evaluation

Staff-student partnerships have the potential to drive impactful change in higher education (HE) (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014). To encourage broader engagement amongst both students and staff, institutional programmes have emerged (Gravett et al., 2020; Marquis et al., 2019), typically establishing processes and criteria for project proposals, recruitment of students to projects, training of all partners, and reporting of programme activity. Examples include UCL (UCL – University College London, 2021), Birmingham City University (Curran & Millard, 2016), Bryn Mawr (Cook-Sather, 2014), University of Queensland (Coombe et al., 2018), and McMaster University (McMaster University, 2022), among others. In addition, partnership activity has been incorporated into national policy, also shaping how institutions respond. For example, in Norway, it is a condition for applying for status as a national Centre for Excellence in Education (Holen et al., 2021).

Partnership activity may be considered vulnerable to instrumentalisation by institutions to optimise “their innovation processes” (Naylor et al., 2021, p. 1028), with institutions also influenced by the national policy context (Holen et al., 2021). The challenge is to balance the “tensions between institutional structures, practices, and norms on the one hand and innovations on the other, through developing structures and cultivating practices that reflect student needs and interests” (Bovill et al., 2016).

Without a clear understanding of the stakeholders, and when and how they influence partnership activity, there is potential for staff-student partnerships to unwittingly “amplify specific types of value” (Dollinger & Lodge, 2020, p. 543). For example, from some perspectives, a successful partnership may not generate sustainable changes beyond its influence on the individuals involved in the project (Marie & McGowan, 2017). This has led to various evaluation frameworks being advanced (Dollinger & Lodge, 2020; Kligyte et al., 2021). This paper seeks to answer the research question: how does the institutional context shape the partnership, its aims and outcomes, and the evaluation?

The empirical work adopts a case study of an institutional staff-student partnership programme at one UK university, illustrated through a project-based enhancement partnership with a defined outcome (Healey & Healey, 2018). A framework for elucidating institutional staff-student partnership programmes is advanced.

WHAT IS PARTNERSHIP?

The prevailing definition of partnership is that it is “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all partners have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation or analysis” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6–7). However, it should also be recognised that there is not yet a universal terminology to characterise staff-student partnerships, which has led to various terms deployed including students as partners, producers, or change agents, as well as co-creation activity (Bovill, 2019).

Staff-student partnerships seek to disrupt the consumerist approach to academia by encouraging students to take responsibility for the educational process. It is argued that they support the retention and success of students (Healey et al., 2014) and can be a particularly effective means of engaging marginalised groups of students (Cook-Sather, 2018).

Healey and Healey (2018) identify two broad groupings of partnership activities: (a) learning, teaching, and research and (b) quality enhancement. Partnerships can be designed in the curriculum (Bovill, 2020) or as an extra-curricular activity (e.g. Smith et al., 2021a; Marie & McGowan, 2017). They can also be conducted by students on a paid or voluntary basis (Marquis et al., 2018). The size and composition of staff-student partnerships can also vary significantly (Matthews, 2017). All of these factors shape the partnership, the development of its values, and how students perceive any benefits of engaging in such activity.

HOW ARE PARTNERSHIP VALUES FRAMED IN THE LITERATURE?

Whilst the nature of partnership remains contested, the underpinning foundations of the relationship are the values—respect, responsibility, and reciprocity (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Such values are interconnected and overlapping. They represent critical foundations for any partnership process seeking to reduce the power differentials embedded in academia (Bourdieu, 1988) to facilitate successful co-creation activity. Therefore, careful attention is required in establishing the partnership, including the processes for recruitment to the team and how meetings are facilitated, thus enabling the foundational values of authenticity, reciprocity, and inclusivity (Healey et al., 2014). It is only then that participants can feel empowered and that meaningful co-creation can occur. Successfully establishing the values of the partnership is therefore critical to its eventual success (Luo et al., 2019).

The values associated with partnership have been explicated in the literature, with some value groupings more granular in nature than others, although they broadly converge around authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community, and responsibility (Healey et al., 2014); respect, responsibility, and reciprocity (Cook-Sather et al., 2014); agency, accountability, and affinity (Cates et al., 2018); and respect, communication, understanding, and responsibility or commitment (Luo et al., 2019). Luo et al. (2019) found that the focus of responsibility for enacting the values varied: for some values, the responsibility was mutual between the staff and students (e.g., respect), whilst for others (e.g., understanding), there was a greater responsibility for staff development.

MODELS FOR IMPLEMENTING PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITY

Several models have been advanced for staff-student partnerships (Bovill & Bulley, 2011; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Healey et al., 2014). The differing models illustrate the multitude of different partnership types that are possible, ranging from curriculum design (Bovill & Bulley, 2011) to the intersecting Advance HE student engagement framework (Healey et al., 2014). A synthesis of the models has identified four roles that students can undertake: co-researcher, consultant, pedagogical co-designer, and representative, the first three of which typically rely upon staff identifying and initiating opportunities (Bovill et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important to clarify what partnership means in the given context. The theoretical model most closely aligned to the case study partnership programme is the model for students as change agents (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011), with students positioned as partners, co-creators, and experts, and staff initiating opportunities to work together.

EVALUATING AND RESEARCHING PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITY

Evaluation activity takes place before the commencement of the partnership, throughout the partnership, and beyond. This activity, performed by various stakeholders, shapes both the partnership and its outcomes and subsequently the types of future projects based on the perceived value of the partnership based on internal and external dissemination of the work. To date, the literature has tended to focus on partnership activity evaluation, with outcomes shaped by the process and values of the partnership (Healey et al., 2014; e.g., Ali et al., 2021). Evaluations of enduring impact resulting from partnership activity are comparatively rare (Marie &

McGowan, 2017). However, studies are now starting to look beyond the individual value of the project; for example, Dollinger and Lodge (2020) establish three distinct stages of co-creation: inputs, processes, and outcomes and go on to assert that there are two types of inputs to the partnership process: individual outlooks and environmental considerations.

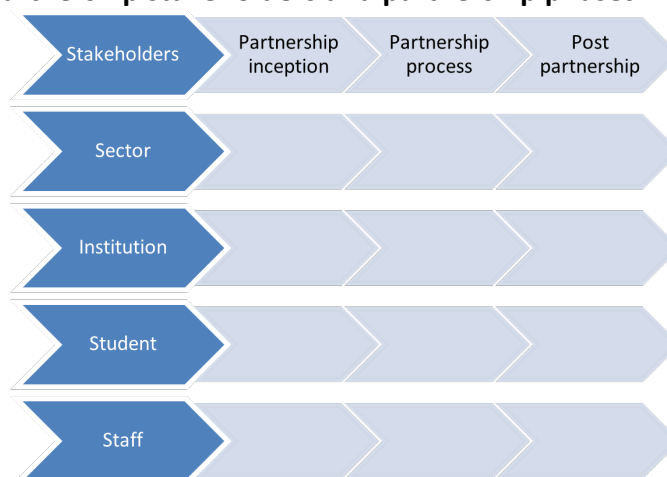
The extension beyond the immediate partnership activity helps highlight how outcomes may impact individual participants or establish whole-school and institutional ways of working. Many partnership outcomes are self-reported, for example, employability skills (Dollinger et al., 2018), confidence, and engagement (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Other benefits are expected to include improved quality of interaction between students and staff (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill, 2021), which is expected to lead to improved levels of learning (Dollinger et al., 2018).

As staff-student partnership goes beyond student engagement, it seeks to generate outcomes for the institution as well as the student body (Dollinger et al., 2018), including through increased loyalty, improved university image, and feelings of belonging, which can lead to enhanced academic achievement and student retention (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill, 2021).

PURPOSE AND CONTRIBUTION

This case study of a partnership conducted at one institution illuminates how the institutional context shapes the process, outcomes, and evaluation of partnership activity. It contributes to the growing literature on staff-student partnerships that considers the influence of institutional approaches on how partnerships are conducted (Gravett et al., 2020; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). The extension of the research to cover both pre- and post-project phases uncovers how partnerships shape and are shaped by the various stakeholders beyond the immediate project process and contributes to our understanding of how staff-student partnerships reconcile the tensions between structure and agency (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Staff-student partnership stakeholders and partnership phases



RESEARCH METHOD

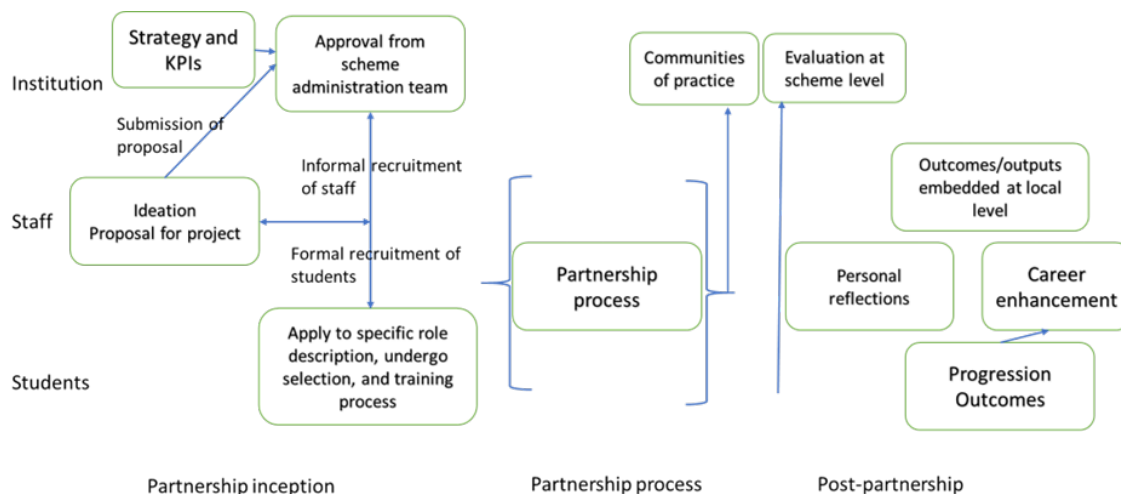
The study is a case study of partnership at one UK higher education institution. The case study approach enabled the researchers to undertake an in-depth exploration within this context (Yin, 2013). The research draws on three sources of

data comprising secondary data related to the institutional staff-student partnership programme, 11 reflections on personal outcomes from project participants completed in the month following its completion, and auto-ethnographic observations from the researchers who were also project participants. Notably, for some staff partners, this was their first project whilst others had worked on one or more prior staff-student partnerships. Combining research methods enabled the researchers to investigate the project from a variety of perspectives. Ethical approval was received from the institution before the commencement of the research and participants who completed the reflections signed a consent for its inclusion in this research. The purpose of the reflective prompts was to understand the individual perceptions of the partnership process. Questions focused on “you” rather than the broader outputs for which secondary data was available. The authors read all of the reflections and then started to code them, going back and forth between the literature and the reflections until a satisfactory fit had been achieved (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). Quotes selected were illustrative of the findings.

EVALUATING THE STAFF-STUDENT PARTNERSHIP

Figure 1 is expanded upon to create an outline map (Figure 2) specific to the institution and staff-student partnership. By disaggregating the process into three phases (partnership inception, partnership process, and post-partnership), the role of the institution in shaping the partnership and its evaluation are highlighted.

Figure 2. Institutional stakeholder mapping



It is the case that the institutional strategy is influenced by sector policies. In the UK, the case institution’s context, each HE institution is required to file an Access and Participation Plan (APP) with the sector regulator, the Office of Students (OfS), as part of its work to widen participation and narrow awarding gaps. The staff-student partnership programme under consideration was established as an initiative to further this aim. The university strategy, in common with others (Gravett et al., 2020; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020), explicitly references co-creation activity from a student-centred perspective, focusing on success and progression metrics.

Inception of the partnership

The institutional staff-student partnership programme has a focus on staff proposal generation which may result in other important partnership opportunities being overlooked and the voice of students being marginalised. This approach privileges the position of the staff member who is implicitly assumed to be able to identify and initiate suitable partnership opportunities to enhance the student experience. It reinforces the conception that the student experience is something the university delivers to students in a commodified manner. Proposals are shaped by the institutional aims which require completion of a structured template by the proposing staff member for evaluation by the programme team. The sections of the template shape the proposals and their expected outcomes, for example, by linking the proposal to the university strategy and its APP objectives. As the funding for the programme derives from the APP budget, the accountability linkage is important in this context. The proposal also requires the tasks to be outlined and a division of responsibility created at the outset rather than growing organically during the partnership project. As such, this could serve to constrain the operation of the partnership. The partnership proposal offers a benchmark against which the project can be evaluated from two perspectives, firstly whether it meets the criteria for the institutional programme and secondly whether it achieved its stated aims.

Table 1: Project deliverables

KEY TASKS TO BE DELIVERED	STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES	STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES
Define the problem we're trying to solve	Feedback	Outline the award gap
Collect data on student perceptions of barriers to engagement and success	Obtain insight from the student body and reporting back to the project team	Facilitate the process, listen
Use feedback themes to co-develop potential solutions	Joint	Joint
Implement initiatives	May fall beyond the end of the project	Resource initiatives to ensure they are sustainable

Source: project brief document

Once a suitable role description for students was agreed upon with the project lead researcher, the programme team placed the advertisement and students applied for the role via the university careers portal. Sifting of the application is undertaken by the programme team along with setting up the assessment centre and organising former student partners to join the scoring of candidates alongside the project lead. (An assessment centre is a recruitment selection process where an organisation typically assesses a group of candidates together deploying a range of selection exercises.) This approach provides a rigorous recruitment process that is objectively fair and seeks to establish authenticity but could also be seen to institutionalise the staff-student partnership process.

It is notable that comparatively little attention is provided to how staff members are recruited to projects beyond the screening of the proposal document. Some staff members are purposefully invited, as with the current project, whilst others are appointed through competitive and open calls. This is an important and often

overlooked aspect of the partnership as the authenticity of staff for joining the partnership is equally as important to its ultimate success as the authenticity of the student partners.

Partnership process

As outlined in the prior section, the partnership started from an unequal footing which was imperative to address early in the operational phase by establishing the partnership values (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) and arriving at a shared understanding of the purpose of the partnership (Smith et al., 2021b).

Participants' reflections centred on emotion, skills development, and belonging, which served as outward indicators of the social and cultural capital accretion they experienced during the staff-student partnership. These themes were common for both student and staff partners; however, they were experienced differently.

Emotion

Students' self-confidence varied significantly based on their prior experiences. This led to some identifying that even applying to the role had required them to move beyond their comfort zone: "I was a really shy person, but I mustered the courage to take part in the connectors project and met some interesting friends" (Student Partner 5).

There was a general degree of anxiety reported by students before the start of the project linked to the unknown nature of the process: "I felt really nervous before the project" (Student Partner 2). This statement reflects the power imbalance at this stage of the partnership. Once the project started and the values were established, students reported that they relaxed and started to establish connections with staff: "after a few discussions, I felt staff partners are just the same as student partners, each has a very interesting multi-cultural background, and [they] are also there to contribute as much as to help build this project" (Student Partner 4).

An inclusive atmosphere (Healey et al., 2014) was constructed by spending time linking the authenticity of all members of the project team to the project: "hearing the groups' personal experiences of being an international student was a really nice way to set the scene and to attempt to reduce the power dynamic" (Staff Partner 4).

Once the partnership was established, it appears that from a student perspective, the power differential was effectively reduced and the use of the word "equal" by students reflected the nature of the partnership: "It was also a great boost to confidence for me as a student to be treated as equal" (Student Partner 3). The increasing confidence during the partnership process was also reinforced by staff reflections regarding the student partners and how they adapted their behaviours throughout the project: "As the project progressed I noticed that the student connectors were ever more at ease during sessions and less nervous while speaking" (Staff Partner 1).

Staff partners reported that they were positive and confident at the start of the project. Whilst this may not be surprising given the established power relations in academia (Bourdieu, 1988), the genuine authenticity of staff motivation for involvement in the project led to a strong belief that the work would lead to impactful

outcomes: “I had no doubt I could contribute to the project given I fully understood the problem” (Staff Partner 2). This is in contrast to another staff partner who expressed surprise at some of the themes identified by participants: “I am surprised by the richness of findings and overlooked areas identified in the series of meeting sessions of this project” (Staff Partner 6), which indicated that such findings would not have been achieved by either group working in isolation and that there were reciprocal benefits for each group (Dollinger et al., 2018).

Skills

The skills development of students is a critical aspect of the APP aspirations. The reflections highlighted that for some students the attraction of the project was the opportunity to develop employability skills by gaining work experience, thereby establishing reciprocity (Healey et al., 2014). At the time the project ran, during academic year 2020/21, the UK was in a COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, and there were very few part-time jobs available to students due to the substantial closure of the restaurant and leisure industry. One student partner commented:

Competition for this role was very intense, knowing that there were so many strong applicants in the interview round, therefore I am more than grateful for this opportunity and I honestly believe that this experience has broadened my horizons in many ways. (Student Partner 1)

Other students reported that they had developed similar skills and that a degree of empowerment (Healey et al., 2014) had been achieved through the operation and atmosphere of the partnership: “what value I gained most from the project is communication skills, being confident to share my experience and not afraid to speak up and have a productive discussion with the staff during the meeting” (Student Partner 4). Skills development, in this instance, is self-reported, and it may be the case that other project participants had different views of how each other’s skills were demonstrated throughout the project.

Staff members’ reflections differ markedly in this area, focusing on trust and unconscious bias, that is, their behaviours: “I learned many things from the project but the one thing I learned most was trust in students’ creativity and authenticity” (Staff Partner 2).

For many staff partners, the reported skills development was a product of taking the time to get to know the students on an individual level to better understand their perspectives. For example, one of the staff partners reflected that the project “gave [them] the opportunity to understand the issues better from numerous perspectives: current students’ perspectives, other staff’s perspective, and of course, [their] own perspective” (Staff Partner 5). Ultimately, this is a positive outcome that staff members can apply to their academic practice by allowing students more agency in their journey through their studies. A benefit that arose from the partnership was that it served as a reminder to view students as individuals rather than as a homogenous grouping.

Belonging

Belonging is closely linked to increased student retention and outcomes (Guyotte et al., 2021; Pedler et al., 2022; Thomas, 2012) and is therefore an important aspect of the partnership process from the perspective of the institution. The project process resulted in students reporting that they felt an increased sense of belonging to the university: “it makes me feel my voice is being heard, and I am valued by the connector community” (Student Partner 4). In addition, the partnership was successful in reducing the barriers between students and staff, which can be particularly difficult to overcome for international students who have entered UK higher education from education systems that adopt a more didactic approach to education: “I have learned a lot about their [staff] roles and I feel closer to university stuff now” (Student Partner 2). This appeared to be a surprising outcome for the students.

Staff reflections indicated divergence in perceptions of students’ sense of ownership of the project and its outcomes. As the project was conducted during term time, it may be the case that concerns regarding impending deadlines and students’ studies were prioritised at this time, resulting in the students feeling more distance than in prior partnership projects.

It was important to develop feelings of belonging for staff as well as students so that everyone felt that they were contributing fully to the project outcomes and had the agency to change existing practices and procedures beyond the project: “empowerment was not only for students, as I as staff in this project felt empowered to change university procedures and curriculum designs” (Staff Partner 1). This helped to refresh staff enthusiasm for change by providing a glimpse of what is possible.

Post-partnership

Following the conclusion of the partnership process, both staff and student partners were enrolled in separate communities of practice and student feedback was sought for evaluation at the scheme level using a pre- and post-project survey approach. The survey encourages students to evaluate a range of skills and analyses changes in their self-evaluation. Significantly, the staff partners were not engaged by the programme team in any evaluation activity to determine whether the project’s aims had been achieved (see Table 1) and what the outcomes or outputs were. In addition, the responsibility for embedding the partnership outcomes or outputs was effectively handed back to staff, in other words, the institution (Marie & McGowan, 2017).

The university in question adopts the Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI) framework to evaluate its APP activity at the level of the overall programme rather than the individual project. This data related to the APP is filed with the Office for Students (OfS) and the UK higher education regulator and is published across the sector each year highlighting the progress towards institutional targets for access and participation. Where institutions are considered a “risk,” they will be subjected to enhanced monitoring by the OfS.

This focus drives the evaluation activity, ensuring that the students are the objects of evaluation rather than the overall project or holistic outcomes. Where the initial proposal document could form the basis of an evaluation whether the partnership achieved its aims, it is not followed up due to the institution’s focus on the student APP outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The findings offer several insights into the genesis of staff-student partnerships as part of an institutional programme. The institutional context can be seen to shape the focus of the partnership, its composition, and how success is measured and reported (Healey & Healey, 2018). The partnership context is shaped by how it comes into existence, for example, through a formal institutional programme and the identity of the initiating parties (Maunder, 2021). In this instance, the proposal process required an alignment to institutional objectives, thereby serving as a means of imposing power to shape the projects that take place (Matthews, Cook-Sather, et al., 2019). Proposals that do not submit to the institutional criteria will not be approved with the budget required to remunerate the student participants. Increasing institutional partnership practices through formal programmes offers a means of engaging students and developing agency, which are important attributes for marginalised groupings (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020) and which can contribute to student success (Cook-Sather, 2018). The ability for students to access partnership ways of working is also enhanced by remunerating students via an institutional programme (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). The analysis of who is accessing the scheme via the linkage to the aims of the APP is positive in this respect.

The programme under consideration does not allow for student-led proposals which are a feature of some institutional partnership programmes (e.g., Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; UCL, 2021). However, research that considered programmes where students could propose partnerships has indicated that they did not form the majority of projects (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). As Bovill et al. (2016) report, most partnerships are initiated by staff members. Importantly, establishing institutional schemes represents an important signalling mechanism to set a partnership ethos across the university (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014), which is critical to normalising staff-student partnership as a way of working.

The approvals process outlined in the case study ensures that staff shape the agenda in line with the university strategy, rather than in pursuit of other aims. However, the existence of an institutional scheme does not preclude other forms of partnership, though it may drive them to the margins. One outcome of the institutional focus on students is that the recruitment of staff partners to projects may occur in a variety of ways and with motivations ranging from making a difference to advancing their career and development (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021). It can therefore be harder to establish authenticity within this group despite the apparent reciprocal benefits. The informal recognition attributed to the staff working in such partnerships may also lead to barriers for various groups of staff members to participate (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020).

In the institution under consideration, the students apply to the specific project through an advertised role description. The application process for students typically ensures some engagement and affinity with the project's aims and helps establish authenticity (Healey et al., 2014).

The partnership activity can help to develop a sense of belonging for students who are marginalised by the traditional structures of academia by developing a sense of belonging and empowerment (Cook-Sather, 2018), which is essential to enhancing student outcomes and reducing awarding gaps. Student participants reported a reduction in anxiety as the project started and power differentials were displaced

(Smith et al., 2021a). The student partners typically build their social and cultural capital during the project through skills development (Curran & Millard, 2016; Marquis et al., 2019), which offers an enduring outcome as they can develop their skills further in different environments. Staff also reported skills development by adjusting the way they relate to students (Curran, 2017). The outcome of these changes was to strengthen feelings of empowerment and belonging for both groups, which may lead to staff and students leading change beyond the staff-student partnership (Curran, 2017).

The study has added to the literature on staff-student partnership activity by revealing the institutional influence on partnership activity and the importance of acknowledging this within staff-student partnership research.

We propose that the institutional partnership context is considered in more detail; consideration is paid to the inception of the partnership by asking:

- Was the partnership organic or part of an institutional scheme?
- What is the purpose of the institutional scheme in light of the strategy and regulatory filings required?
- Who initiated the partnership and for what purpose?
- What type of partnership was it?
- How were students and staff recruited to the partnership?
- How will the output or outcome become business-as-usual activity?
- How can the output or outcome persist as staff-student partnership activity?

In addition, we propose that following the partnership activity further questions are asked to ascertain how partnership outcomes are framed:

- Did the partnership achieve its aim? If not, what lessons can be learned and how will they be shared?
- Who is evaluating, for what purpose, and how do they do this?
- How do staff and students share their experiences?
- Is the partnership output/outcome one-off or enduring?
- How are longer-term benefits for stakeholders defined and tracked?

CONCLUSIONS

Ali et al. (2021) ask, “how do you define success?” (p. 23). By applying a skeletal framework to one partnership project established as part of an institutional partnership programme, the research contributed to extending the understanding of the institutional context. The framework advanced offers an adaptive approach that recognises the context-dependent nature of partnership activity (Healey & Healey, 2018) and could also be used to illuminate broader stakeholder relations.

Future research could investigate staff members’ motivations for engaging in partnership activity and whether some staff are marginalised in the staff-student partnership creation process. Alternative perspectives could draw on evaluation as a means of measuring return on the institutional investment in the projects, not least to support the image of staff-student partnership as more than a box-ticking exercise and to advertise more broadly across an institution the benefits of such activity. In

addition, the sustainability and long-term benefit realisation of both the project and programme aims could form fruitful sites for further research investigating how the projects affect business-as-usual activity, where the impact is seen, and who is being impacted.

In common with many partnership co-creation projects, the case study was small-scale in nature and care should be taken not to over-generalise. The framework should be tested in other contexts. The timing of the project may have been a contributing factor in staff perceptions of a lack of engagement from students as it ran during the second half of the term when students had to juggle coursework assessments and was bounded by the end of the term to ensure that the work did not interfere with revision for the upcoming assessment period. This is consistent with other studies which have found that students can struggle to balance work and study (Dianati & Oberhollenzer, 2020).

Students are increasingly paid for partnership work which may encourage an instrumental approach to engagement with such projects. However, this is partially mitigated by the recruitment processes for students.

The research was successfully reviewed according to the University research ethics approval process (ER/SS706/18).

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