

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Student-staff partnership in India: A future possibility within contested terrain?

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### ABSTRACT

Existing literature on named “students-as-partners” (SaP) practices suggest that these practices are still in their embryonic stage in Southeast Asia. In addition, the literature on SaP that supports it as a global practice has not examined the suitability of student partnership (SP) practices in Indian higher education (HE) yet. It is here that this paper seeks to contribute by examining Indian students with experiences in being a student partner in an Australian university to reflect on the challenges and possibilities in relation to implementing these practices in Indian HE. Adopting a postcolonial theoretical frame, this paper examines empirical evidence from an informal group discussion among six Indian collaborators. The data, analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019), provide four interrelated themes that focus on the suitability of these practices in India intertwined with the inherent challenges. The study argues in favour of context-specific adaptation of the practice. Through the Indian students’ experiences, it adds to the ongoing conversations about knowing and understanding SaP in new ways and about positioning students as knowledgeable individuals, which is at the core of partnership practices. By bringing the voices of Indian students to the fore, this article argues in favour of embodying SaP as culturally relevant or a decolonising practice.

### KEYWORDS

students as partners, student-staff partnership, Indian higher education, Indian students, global perspectives

Higher education (HE) plays a crucial role in today's knowledge economy because it connects to both skilled individuals and innovative knowledge, forming a strong foundation of human resources (Cookson, 2002; Yeravdekar & Tiwari, 2014). HE institutions have been bestowed with the responsibility of continually enhancing the frontiers of knowledge and innovation. In the context of India, “enormous” and “complex” are the two words commonly paired to define the country’s higher education system (Rizvi & Gorur, 2011). Set against the backdrop of colonial rule in India by the British Raj in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the system has now taken a hybrid form. After independence in 1947, it has leaned heavily on the influence of American traditions (Rizvi & Gorur, 2011). In recent

years, for-profit, financially independent institutions have changed the landscape of higher education in India. According to a survey by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD, 2020), there were more than 38 million students pursuing higher studies in around 1,000 universities. Apart from that, there are 40,026 degree-awarding colleges and nearly 11,000 stand-alone institutions (MHRD, 2020). The Indian Planning Commission establishes a framework for funding higher education, while the University Grants Commission (UGC) distributes funds and promotes reform in higher education (Rizvi & Gorur, 2011; Saravanakumar & Padmini Devi, 2020).

Built on centuries of values, the Indian education system is surrounded by tensions involved in addressing issues of quality education in universities and colleges. In addition, Indian higher education has been criticized for its outdated curriculum and pedagogy, ineffective assessment schemes, and bureaucratic staff recruitment and training practices (Hill & Chalaux, 2011; Rizvi & Gorur, 2011). Research conducted by Viswanadhan, Rao, and Mukhopadhyay (2005) highlights the shortcomings of the Indian education system, which include financial constraints, poor policy decisions, archaic curricula, lack of quality-driven staff, absence of research and development activities, and insufficient infrastructure facilities. The quality enhancement imperatives have been a slow process in an overcrowded educational system and a vital factor leading to the international migration of students to countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. In addition, the desire for a quality degree that has more credibility and value in the employment market has further escalated the demand for overseas education (Abbott & Silles, 2016; Hill & Chalaux, 2011; Kumar et al., 2009). In Australia, in 2019, there were 90,240 Indian international students, making up the second largest international student population after Chinese students (Parliament of Australia, 2021).

#### RESEARCHING STUDENT-STAFF PARTNERSHIP

The reason for my migration to the Australian higher education landscape as an Indian student was to pursue a higher degree in research in the field of students as partners (SaP). SaP has a range of related terms, some of which are used synonymously, such as co-creation, students as producers, pedagogical partnerships, and student partnerships (SP). In this article, I use SaP, SP, and partnership interchangeably to describe the practices that foreground the ethos of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). SaP is a space for collaboration between university staff and students where diverse voices, skills, and talents are welcomed to improve the teaching and learning experience of both staff and learners.

SaP extends from a strong evidence base on student engagement showing that learner-teacher interactions are vital for learning. It relies on growing commitments to relational pedagogies that advance a more socially just and inclusive higher education community. Power and identity are at the core of partnership practices (Matthews, Cook-Sather, Acai, et al., 2018). In particular, power, as an influencing factor of SaP interactions, impacts the approach, enactment, and consideration of SaP praxis (Matthews, 2017). Staff have, and continue to possess, sole agency and authority in conceptualising, designing, implementing, evaluating, and researching educational practices in HE (Cook-Sather et al., 2018). SaP introduces changes in educational practices and culture, impacting members with authority and power (Cook-Sather et al., 2018; Guitman, et al., 2020). This form of partnership radically disrupts the power dynamics between staff and students, which have been persistently followed for decades, to create an egalitarian learning system (Kupatadze,

2018; Matthews, Cook-Sather, & Healey, 2018). Making the role of power in SaP interactions clear, Matthews (2017) explains that SaP does not intend to create a power imbalance in favour of one group over the other. Resonating with this view, Bovill (2014) affirms that SaP does not aim to erase the perceived importance of staff expertise but intends to shift the role to “facilitator of learning” (p. 22). While a shift in power dynamics may not seem pragmatic, Matthews (2017) suggests using open interactions about expertise and contributions along with ongoing reflections to ensure power is shared as all members come to acknowledge the resources they bring to the table.

In recent times, the practice of supporting students as partners in higher education has gained momentum. SaP as an area of study is expanding in the knowledge economies of places such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. This educational transformation is also observable in non-Anglophone regions such as Sweden, Hong Kong, and Italy (see Frison & Melacarne, 2017; Gärdebo & Wiggberg, 2012; Pounder et al., 2015). However, the literature on SaP practices has illustrated that partnership practices are in their embryonic stage in Southeast Asia (Liang & Matthews, 2020). As little is empirically known about student-staff partnerships in Indian HE and the experiences of Indian students in partnership in Western universities, I was drawn to understand how Indian students experience student-staff partnerships in an Australian university. Drawing from this larger project, this paper contributes to the scholarship by examining Indian students’ experiences of being student partners in an Australian university in order to reflect on the challenges and possibilities of implementing these practices in Indian HE. The paper’s overall aim is to honour Indian students as knowledgeable individuals by inviting them to provide insights as to whether the adaptation of these practices is possible amidst the inherent challenges involved in their implementation.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theories of postcoloniality provide the framework for this study to disrupt established knowledge and ways of thinking, seeing, and doing (Sperduti, 2017). Postcolonial studies examine the influence of cultures over time, with a specific focus on Western colonial interactions with non-Western counterparts (Said, 1997). The fact that postcolonial literature critically examines social phenomena and specifically challenges power relations among various groups in society (Quayson, 2000) is particularly relevant to this study. SaP is a contested space where power and identity are key constructs (Matthews, Cook-Sather, Acai, et al., 2018) and constantly negotiated between staff and students. This study recognises the history and legacy of European colonisation in India and how “it continues to shape most contemporary discourses and institutions, politically, culturally and economically” (Rizvi et al., 2006, p. 250).

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### **Student partners as knowledgeable individuals**

To address the aim of this research, it was paramount that the methodology and methods were capable of producing data that were rich in description and context. For these reasons, a qualitative methodology was adopted that employed group discussion in an informal setting. Moreover, as the research aimed to enable voices that have traditionally been unheard in the Indian and Australian higher education system, group discussion was employed with intent to “empower and foster social change” (Johnson, 1996, p. 536). The new knowledge constructed through this research has been produced in

collaboration with Indian students (henceforth referred to as “collaborators”) with experiences of being student partners in an Australian university. By recognising these collaborators as knowledge-holders in their own right, the study honours the ethos of SaP by acknowledging the students as co-producers of the knowledge created through this scholarship. The subjugated knowledge of the Indian students has so far not been given space for discussion in the scholarship of SaP. Including their voices is long overdue; this study allows Indian students to provide their perceptions because they have lived these experiences.

### Collaborators

Six international Indian students who have participated in at least one named SP program in an Australian university collaborated for this study. All these students are from a single university. This university launched institution-wide student partnership projects to enhance interaction between students and faculty, reduce the impact of power imbalances between them, and promote open communication. It is a structured and process-oriented program with a clear timeframe for projects, hours of engagement, and a grant paid to students for their participation. There are well-structured reporting requirements at the start and completion of the projects, grievance redressal mechanisms, and networking events.

The recruitment of these students was part of my PhD project. Six students who completed their prior education in India before moving to Australia provided rich insights from their Indian educational experiences. They were recruited via various Indian students’ Facebook pages, advertising on notice boards within the university and approaching the program coordinator of the student-staff partnership program to help in soliciting collaborators. We met for dinner for an informal conversation in September 2020. The students preferred to identify themselves with pseudonyms, and Table 1 (below) provides a basic overview about them.

**Table 1. The collaborators**

COLLABORATORS (PSEUDONYM)	PRONOUN	PRIOR STUDY IN INDIA	FIELD OF STUDY IN AUSTRALIA
Rahul	He/his	Bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineer. Prior work experience at a multinational company.	Post-graduate—engineering related
Kripa	She/her	Bachelor’s degree in hospitality. Prior work experience in hospitality industry.	Postgraduate—communication
Maya	She/her	Completed schooling till Grade Level 11 in India (Moved to Australia for Grade 12).	Undergraduate—science related

Vrunda	She/her	Bachelor's degree in English literature and communication. Enrolled in postgraduate degree in Australia	Postgraduate—communication degree
Beth	She/her	Bachelor's degree in music.	Postgraduate—music
M	They/them	Schooling in India	Undergraduate—science and technology related

Out of six collaborators, one collaborator identified himself as male and four as female. One student preferred not to be identified as male or female to maintain complete anonymity. Two students were enrolled in undergraduate courses and had migrated to Australia after completing high school whereas four students were enrolled in postgraduate courses.

### **Making meaning from the discussions**

The discussion did not follow any procedural guidelines or semi-structured interview guides. It was an organic discussion among collaborators whose knowledge comes from their lived experiences. The Indian students in this study were capable and competent social agents who are perceived as co-producers and collaborators (McCulloch, 2009; Neary, 2012; Taylor & Wilding, 2009), co-creators (Bovill, 2013; Bovill et al., 2011), and knowledge-holders. Inviting them to collaborate in a scholarly discussion was a genuine attempt to include their lived experiences and knowledge in the dominant discourse of student partnership. Engaging in dialogue assisted in exploring their prior educational experiences in India and how those experiences compared to their current experiences partnering with staff in a structured partnership project in an Australian university. The conversation happened in English with occasional use of Hindi phrases, which were used by collaborators to make their meaning clearer and/or as a spontaneous response. The conversations were audio recorded. I undertook the role of a facilitator and transcribed the group discussions.

This study aimed to examine the critical questions of Indian higher education in the context of social reality and knowledge production. It investigates how international Indian students in Australia perceive the challenges and possibilities around implementing student-staff partnership programs in Indian higher education. Two direct questions were asked to the collaborators in a group discussion:

1. After your experience being a student partner in a Student-staff Partnership (SSP) program in Australia, what do you perceive are the contesting factors inhibiting implementation of a similar practice in India?
2. Do you perceive a possibility of these similar practices such as the SSP program being implemented in Indian HE?

## ADOPTING AN INTERPRETATIVE LENS

After transcribing the group conversation, the analysis of the transcriptions was done based on the reflexive thematic approach of Braun and Clarke (2019). Reading and rereading the selected texts, coding, preliminary categorization, and further categorization were all part of this iterative process. After the categories were coded and recorded, the themes were developed and compared. A predominantly inductive approach was adopted for this segment with data being open-coded, and the emphasis was on the meaning derived through reflection. Deductive analysis was used to ensure that the open-ended coding created meaningful themes that were relevant to the questions asked. All the above processes were completed manually.

From these, two main themes were developed that focused on the challenges around implementing SaP in India which are (a) learner-teacher power dynamics and (b) complex HE system and resource constraints. The two themes that highlight the possibilities of these practices in the near future are (a) localising partnership practices and (b) focusing on emerging unnamed collaborative practices.

## FINDINGS

### **Challenges of SP implementation in India**

As these collaborators had prior experience of studying in India, they reflected on their experiences to highlight two major challenges in the implementation of SP practices in India. Their current experience of engaging in SP practice in Australia assisted them to compare the inherent challenges that they could perceive in the implementation of SP in India. The discussion focused heavily on two themes which are discussed in the following sections.

#### *Theme 1: Learner-teacher power dynamics*

Students affirmed what is widely known about the role of teachers in Asian contexts and the large power distance between teachers and students. Educators in such contexts, therefore, tend to initiate and steer class communication, indicating a teacher-centred approach in the relationship between students and teachers (Sofyan et al., 2021). The authority given to Indian teachers comes from the hierarchical nature of the society that puts them in a position of power. Even in modern educational scapes, the teacher plays a crucial role in implementing policies and schemes formulated to enhance qualitative improvement practices in education.

Maya, who completed her Grade Level 11 in India, narrated her experiences with Indian teachers:

My last 3 years in the Indian schooling system made me vulnerable. The teachers were like second parents, they just don't let you be. They would keep pushing me harder for academic achievement and I reached a point of break-down. Teachers and parents both wanted things according to their conviction. The teachers would teach with a straight face—they just didn't smile.

The complexity of the system and the inherent power distance in the learner-teacher relationship puts an underlying pressure on the students. The Western education format coupled with the inherited praxis of honouring the teacher puts the students in a difficult spot of managing dual identity (Seth, 2007) while they are studying in India. This is

uncovered in Rahul's account of his undergraduate experience while completing his engineering degree. He shared the urgency to meet industry demands in an authoritative environment, putting extra pressure on students to stick to the norm:

It was definitely different to Australia. We used to wear uniforms to the university in Bangalore and the focus was on making us job-ready for the multinationals. The study program was for 6–7 hours daily and doing as being told was the mantra. . . . I still find it hard even in Australia to be out of this shackle and use my voice, my agency.

Kripa, who completed her degree in hospitality in India, emphasised how the authoritative HE system made it challenging to deal with her identity:

Indian HE, with its hierarchical nature of ecosystem, was difficult for a person like me who wanted to voice her opinion. I kept on getting average grades in the hospitality unit back in the country, and my friends told me it is because you don't follow the exact instructions of the teachers. Once I started doing it, the grades improved.

The reference to the loss of voice and agency that both these narrators made in the excerpts above demonstrates how the distanced learner-teacher relationship creates a fractured identity of being and becoming. Maya, now an undergraduate student in an Australian university, identified the power relationships as a hindrance to implementation of collaborative practices:

A demanding change in implementing SSP practice will require a profound shift in teacher-learner power relationships. For centuries, they [teachers] have been on the highest pedestal—I don't think they will climb down anytime soon.

This lack of representation and voice in their own learning, in addition to the existing power dynamics between learners and teachers, are all connected to the constitution of identity of these students. More so, SP practices are essentially based on the underlying principles and propositions highlighted in Healey, Flint, and Harrington's (2014) work. The authors advocate for collaborative efforts that are authentic, inclusive, trustworthy, empowering, reciprocal, challenging, responsible, and community-focused. However, the challenge of the learner-teacher power distance that is prominent in Indian HE makes it inherently complex for successful partnership.

### *Theme 2: Complex HE system and constraints of resources*

Indian HE is complex and enormous. The Planning Commission of India designs the funding parameters and the UGC distributes resources (Rizvi & Gorur, 2011). With 375 public and 40 private universities along with 20,000 affiliated colleges, the system provides employment to 40,000 teachers and has an enrolment of 10 million students (Rizvi & Gorur, 2011). As Jayaram (2004) rightly points out, Indian HE is homogenous, wrapped over the gigantic structural and functional diversity within the HE setup.

As an education innovation, SP is not separate from any other challenges in educational implementation. The challenge of implementing SSP was termed a "paradigm shift" by many collaborators in the group discussion. The collaborators expounded that the

educational policies governed by the government and the University Grant Commission (the regulatory body) leaves little space for a reform such as SP. Moreover, the issues with the speed of implementation of new concepts in a bureaucratic nation are not unknown.

Vrunda's perceptions about the Indian HE system were no different:

Just think about how complex India is as a nation, the classes in government-funded universities are highly populated and the teachers are not inclined to introduce new systems other than those recommended by the UGC. I can say this because my sister studied in a government university whereas my experience was very different studying in a privately funded university.

Kripa also noted that the lack of motivation to introduce new concepts can be attributed to the poor incentives and salaries of the staff:

If I were a staff, the pertinent question that I would ask is, what will be my reward for doing something new? Will I be recognised or awarded in any way? If the answer is going to be "no" I will have second thoughts about implementing any new efforts.

What Vrunda and Kripa state has strong links to teachers' attitudes. It is further linked with the messy arguments surrounding teachers' salaries and incentive schemes that have a significant impact in an education system struggling with resource constraints. As research progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that Indian educational reform lacks the professional agency of teachers (Batra 2005; Brinkmann, 2015, 2019), thereby further exacerbating the issue of quality imperatives. In the absence of autonomy, teachers feel compelled to strictly follow prescribed syllabi and textbooks, rather than seeing themselves as professionals able to adapt content and methods to local needs, as expected in any learner-centered approach. It would be unlikely for teachers who have never experienced autonomy to impart these skills to their students (Batra 2005; Kumar, 2013) and encourage the ethos and values of successful SSP practices.

Beth, who completed her undergraduate studies in India, agreed that the nature of Indian HE is chaotic; however, she emphasised that a developing nation with the second largest population in the world cannot be measured with the parameters set by developed nations:

The programs and offerings are bound to be different, and it would be very easy to pass the buck on culture and traditions that have long-standing influence. I can vouch from my experience that India is a risk-averse country. It remains laggard in any form of innovation.

What is important to note in these collaborators' experiences may not necessarily align with partnership at all levels, but stating that the collaboration is devoid of voice, agency, and any form of engagement would be misleading. Therefore, as Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1988) suggest we need to deconstruct the process of formerly colonised nations (in this study, the education system) and embrace newer and contested ideas. In their work, Guitman et al. (2020) argue that instead of trying to unlearn power, we need partnership practices and scholarship that acknowledge and critique existing power structures. These practices can lead to social change by dynamically transferring and sharing power



throughout the relationship, much like the ability to transfer and share energy (Guitman et al., 2020). Opening up space for differing ways of knowing, accepting diverse students' perspectives emerging from their cultures, and upholding their liquid identities is the first step forward for Indian HE institutions keen on implementing SP practices. This requirement necessitates a re-thinking of educational governance and social imagination that distinguishes students as inferior others in their current educational system.

### **Possibilities of SP implementation in India**

Moving the discussion forward, the students shared from their experience how there still was a possibility for implementation of SP practices in India. They reflected and shared valuable insights into how there were possibilities for partnership practices to be sustained and to survive despite the inherent complexity and challenges.

#### *Theme 1: Localising SP within the growing knowledge hub*

India's higher education system is experiencing a boom (Alva & Hans, 2013; Saravanakumar, 2014), as contemporary Indian higher education institutions offer customized and diverse programs. In addition, more flexible and student-centric courses are being offered by universities (Ramaswamy & Kumar, 2021). There have been drastic changes in higher education due to the involvement of the private sector. This has led to the rapid establishment of HE institutes over the past decade, making India the country with the largest number of higher education institutions in the world (Tiwari et al., 2013). Rizvi (2016) attributes the exponential growth in Asian HE to various factors, including enhanced economic circumstances, societal aspirations, increased investment, and policy decisions. These changes depict the potential of Indian HE to implement collaborative teaching and learning endeavours such as SP. This is the need of the hour for Indian HE because, in a pluralistic and democratic society, HE institutions need to assist faculty and students to critically examine how the diversity of knowledge that students bring to their education is conceived and responded to, as well as provide ways to learn from its various dimensions (Cook-Sather, 2015).

Many of these students' experiences relate to this idea, just like Vrunda's narration of her student life in Delhi:

My university was spread in a sprawling campus outside New Delhi. It was a residential campus privately funded by the renowned corporate group. The facilities were world class and similar to my campus in Australia at many levels. But you know how it is still different and localised, just like McDonald's serving spicy burgers to suit the local palate.

Rahul affirmed that the educational scenario is changing and is changing fast:

It is becoming more in line with education in the West. You won't believe the sprawling shops the overseas universities have opened in India. The new and nice infrastructure, a form of a click-bait to enrol in these new universities, is one of many lucrative offers. The billboards of [a] university showing a blazer-cladded staff clearly demonstrates that the education landscape is changing fast and it will be anytime soon that the practices such as student-staff partnership will become part of the quality initiatives at the least in the privately governed universities.

The collaborators' responses demonstrate the impact of the various major educational reforms dating back to the 2005 policy guidelines suggested by the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) that are viewed as global imperatives. These reforms are drawn from neo-liberal policy ideologies (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), and Kripa attributed her academic success in Australia and her ability to crack the job market to her prior experiences in India. She also suggested ensuring that SSP practices are designed for the Indian context and are relevant to the students there:

I can see it happening in India. Why not? The only need is to encourage students and staff to draw on their background and prior learning into their practices.

Scholars in the field of SaP have supported diverse voices and contexts because the absence of diversity will lead to universalisation and dominance of ideas emerging from a single context, that will prevent SaP from "representing culturally relevant, decolonised practices" (Bindra et al., 2018, p. 11). What Kripa recommended is vital in understanding that the distribution of SP practices to those who need them on a "one-size-fits-all" basis is flawed. SP practices will only be useful if they can be practiced in an authentic way for that specific context or, at the very least, if they are fully adaptable. Local relevance should not be an afterthought in the SaP movement.

#### *Theme 2: Emerging unnamed SP practices*

The complicated history of colonization makes it difficult to delineate elements of culture and pedagogy into fixed categories of "local" and "foreign." The line between local and colonial is blurred by postcolonial theory, resulting in the recognition of an in-between, third space (Bhabha, 1994). This in-between space is also perceived as a transformative medium through which diverse groups can engage in conversation about the issues that have an impact on them. The *International Journal for Students as Partners* has published research on student partnership in higher education as a third space (see Special Issue, 3(1), 2019). This issue examined how students and academics have worked together outside conventional hierarchies to generate knowledge (see Healey et al., 2016; Marquis et al., 2018). Set in the context of SP practices, it would be worthwhile to examine how in-between hybrid identities create a new position, which Bhabha (1994) refers to as the third space, and enables Indian students as collaborators to share, contribute, and voice their experiences and to continue to re-form and negotiate their multiple identities, including their identities of being knowledge-holders in the partnership space.

This perspective reminds us that local culture is not a static, closed system, but is more heterogeneous, embedded in modernist discourse, and infused with power and inequality (Brinkmann, 2015). Within this context, many collaborators gave words to their experiences, stating that they have experienced collaborative activities with staff in India, though not exactly as they had in Australia. Many of them emphasised that it would be wrong to dismiss student-staff partnership as being non-existent in Indian HE as some of the private institutions have begun experimenting with pedagogic innovations, which is evident from Vrunda's experiences:

In my university, we used to work with the staff on research and they used to involve students in every stage of writing. In my first year as an undergraduate student, I

was taught how to write an abstract. Though there was no compensation or grant that the students received, it was empowering and very collaborative.

M's school experience also testifies that emerging international educational institutions are capable of providing student-centred experiences that engage students' perspectives in teaching and learning:

In my school, we addressed the teachers by the first name. Calling teachers by their first name may sound liberal but when I look back, I understand how it helped to break the barriers in the way teachers are perceived in India, "the powerful other." In this school, we collaborated on various projects, small ones such as writing a newsletter with the teacher, but it paved the path for [the] real partnership that I am currently doing in my Australian university.

M further shared:

When the education system is managed on frugal resources, you are by default partnering. There were various activities centred around students' voices and engagement. We were given opportunities to teach the class, along with the teacher, some concepts in science and maths. I know it was not on the scale of what I experienced, nevertheless I will not demean my Indian experience as devoid of agency or support grand narratives that depict Indian students and teachers in a single light.

My friends enrolled in HE degrees in India share similar stories of how the HE in India is transiting to a more student focussed system, more so in the private sector. They talk about how India was quick and successful in transiting to . . . online learning during the COVID-19 global pandemic and how the rise of mobile technologies, online discussion forums, and social media platforms is transforming the HE teaching-learning space to enhance student engagement.

These experiences reflect a changing educational landscape in India, where private institutes now have an increased degree of autonomy to develop their own programs and qualifications. The emerging use of online platforms in HE has propelled the importance of student engagement, prompting universities to adopt online or web-based tools as a supplementary means of delivering education (Gupta & Pandey, 2018). Some of the HE institutions in India are quick to respond to the changing requirements of education and programs that enhance student engagement.

Scholars have long been paving ways for embodying the inherent ethos that defines values-based partnership with students in HE (e.g., Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Matthews, 2017; Cook-Sather, et al., 2018). However, clarifying the common misconceptions between student engagement and students in partnership roles, Healey et al. (2014) state that "all partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership" (p. 7). Resonating with this distinction, Matthews (2016) further clarifies that student engagement is what students do at higher education institutions, whereas the focus of student-staff partnership is on collaborative practices undertaken by students and staff to accomplish common educational goals. The collaborators' responses emphasised SaP as a

relational process and practice that is messy, difficult, and constrained by context (Matthews, 2017; Healey & Healey, 2018). If genuine SaP focuses on relational processes, then the scholarship should be expanded to investigate practices that are not enmeshed in labels of partnership but follow the values inherent in the practice. Therefore, this work is a call for expanding the investigation of SaP beyond conventional notions of partnership and focusing on the relational processes that promote meaningful collaboration and hope.

## DISCUSSION

At present, despite recognising the need to include diverse voices, the SaP terrain remains primarily dominated by Northern pedagogies and structures of practice, with emerging work by some scholars to bring Global South pedagogies and cultural practices into discussion (see Liang & Matthews, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). If we are to create genuine democratic approaches to knowledge production through partnership, a great deal of work needs to be done to decolonise the space. Creating space for the research emerging from Southern spaces and knowledge systems is one way of doing it. While this is an arduous and profoundly complex struggle—what Manathunga (2020) emphasises for the decolonisation of higher education and making space for Southern knowledge systems—the risk of tokenism and superficial change within the space will remain. Therefore, including global South voices in the dominant discourses will enrich the ongoing dialogue on inclusivity in SaP. A lack of such research will not make SP a transformative practice, but rather a platform of knowledge exchange that reinforces SaP as another colonial practice that privileges partners with dominance. I urge you to remain aware that as we move forward, there will be a wide range of options, some of which may seem overwhelming and dizzying. However, I want you to pause and consider these options, as they will address concerns regarding decolonial understanding and genuine implementation of SaP practices that are context specific (Healey & Healey, 2018). Subsequently, Healey and Healey (2018) caution against the implementation of SaP as a universalised approach, and advise perceiving the practice as context dependent, which recognises various factors that influence partnership. Nevertheless, values-based partnership is not limited to an identification through name, because it is the values that matter.

With this, it would be fair to say that SP's future in the Indian higher education system is not entirely bleak. Concurrently, accepting that "SaP is challenging, and will be challenged by, conventional HE norms currently constructing learner-teacher interactions in Asian countries" (Liang & Matthews, 2021, p. 560) is a signpost for practitioners and scholars to slow down in the expeditious implementation of SaP as a global praxis. This study illuminates that in India, certain aspects of the colonial education system and learner-teacher power dynamics may create conflict with SP implementation, which the student collaborators involved in this study have highlighted from their experiences in Australia. Their experiences signify that the tensions related to power dynamics between learners and teachers are unavoidable in the complex context of Indian HE, for which it is advisable that SaP be adopted in ways that are appropriate in the context. For these reasons, it is vital to critically analyse both the local cultures of the region and the pedagogies originating from Western cultures to identify what pedagogies will best support successful learning within a particular local context. By ignoring such concerns, we may see another educational push to colonising education.

The concerns raised by this study's collaborators make it clear that there are definite challenges in relation to power dynamics between learners and teachers and the resource

constraints that India is grappling with. Therefore, a context-specific approach to SP (Healey & Healey, 2018) which is suitable for Indian HE is desirable. Affirming Green's (2019) call for stretching the cultural and linguistic boundaries of SaP by enacting its values grounded in local context is one way to make the practice more relevant. Another strategy for SP implementation would be to involve a dynamic process of analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the practice in relation to the learning processes and outcomes in the particular educational context. The attention due to SP's potential for creating collaborative spaces between staff and students, mutual respect between staff and learners, and inclusive spaces of diverse voices and groups should be highlighted. Instead of identifying the projects or programs with names that signpost partnership, SP as a broad concept must be recognized as a framework within which the concept can be adapted to local contexts.

At the risk of being cynical, I also ask uncomfortable questions about whether or not the Western pedagogical approach of SP has taken the local implementation challenges into account for the praxis to be truly global. Moving forward, it is vital to step back and reflect on how SP practices can be implemented in a resource-deficit country such as India where power dynamics have age-old traditions. In moving forward, do we continue with the dominant discourse of singling out culture as a hindrance to many learner-centered and student engagement practices in the East? Or are we too comfortable in labelling the culturally appropriate distance between teachers and learners as an issue in the implementation of partnership practices? For SSP practitioners and scholars, to drive the language of partnership as a global practice, we need to get out from the comfort of framing complex issues as a culture struggle. There is no doubt that we must abandon these entrenched perspectives and embrace the complexity and richness the SP space provides. As a qualitative researcher I feel uniquely equipped for the challenge with the renewed interpretation of the potential of SaP practices shared by Indian students as knowledgeable individuals.

## CONCLUSION

This article illuminated the potential challenges and possibilities of implementing SP practice in Indian HE. The two themes in both the challenges and possibilities categories demonstrated that learner-teacher power distance is an inhibitor in implementing activities that support student engagement. The other challenges focus on what is already known of the huge population of the country that creates complexity and resource constraints in the implementation of novel pedagogic approaches and innovative teaching-learning practices. However, not giving up on the optimism of perceiving partnership as a global praxis, the group discussions drew attention towards India's growing economy and its expanding HE space, which is attracting global players into the contested space. In addition, from the accounts of the collaborators, it would be safe to state that though partnership activities are not named in the Indian HE context, it would be inaccurate to completely rule out these organic and culturally specific activities as not partnership. With this, this article also advances a renewed understanding of the local cultures rather than seeing it as a deficit or a barrier. It calls for appreciating a multiplicity of views without subjugating them into fixed dichotomies.

*The ethical approval for this study (2020001177) was acquired from the Institutional Human Ethics Research Committee, which aligns with the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.*

## NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

**Preeti Vayada** is a PhD student in the University of Queensland, Australia. Her research interest includes student-staff partnership, student voices, and decolonised research practices.

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