

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

## Values and vision: The successful story of a student-staff partnership project

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In this paper we detail the background to our project and provide reflections on the pedagogic partnership and its impact on medical education.

### BACKGROUND

In late 2021, a team comprising four medical students (one Year 1, two Year 2, and one Year 4) and two staff members from The University of Queensland (UQ) participated in a student-staff partnership (SSP) project, co-designing, co-organizing, and co-implementing an extracurricular activity with the purpose of enhancing medical students' experience<sup>1</sup> and wellbeing. The project team facilitated a creative extracurricular activity in the form of Bollywood dancing, directed to students from the UQ Medical School. The focus was to relieve stress and foster meaningful relationships beyond the demands of the Doctor of Medicine (MD) program. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the partners sought to build a sense of community, promote a sense of wellbeing, and alleviate the isolation experienced by many students.

The 13-week project, which was successfully attended by an enthusiastic group of 12 medical students, offered opportunities for both students and staff to try new skills and explore their talents by challenging themselves and connecting with others.

This paper shares the experiences of the team, four student partners (Tamyka, Isini, Shreya, and Tonchanok), a pathology lecturer (Suja), and a projects and events coordinator (Anna), and continues the conversation initiated by Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) on SSP's guiding principles of "respect, reciprocity, and responsibility" (1-4) in academia by broadening the scope to apply these concepts to extracurricular activities. It also expands upon the importance of shared values and vision in achieving a successful student-staff partnership and reflects upon the learnings from this project that are transferable to students' future careers as medical professionals.

### ADOPTING AN EXTRACURRICULAR DANCE PROJECT AS STUDENT STAFF PARTNERSHIP

Medical schools are generally held in high regard as places of learning excellence. They bring together the best and brightest students, academics, clinicians, and researchers with an intensive schedule of study and placements that aim to set students up for a successful medical career. When COVID-19 hit Australian shores in early 2020, the devastation of the pandemic was felt in

education with universities and schools moving almost overnight to online learning. For medical students, the transition to predominantly online learning and the paucity of clinical opportunities and patient contacts during the COVID-19 pandemic further increased the uncertainty students faced. Apart from the impact on their academic performance, the transition to the home environment also limited students' social interaction and affected their mental health (Gaur et al, 2020;). University support systems were required to boost their wellbeing, resilience, and enthusiasm by increasing participation in engagement activities attended in person by peers and colleagues (Forycka, 2022).

As existing students-as-partners (SaP) literature and principles make plain, a student-staff partnership is a reciprocal process of active engagement that constructively influences students' sense of shared responsibility and growth through the relationship (Healy et al., 2016. Specific studies of student involvement in extracurricular activities have demonstrated benefits such as improved communication and interpersonal skills, transferable work experience, and development of a professional identity (Lewis, 2017; Marquis et al., 2018; Petrou et al., 2021), all considered essential for employment in a competitive market and an investment in professional development. It is, however, the work of Jarvis et al. (2016); Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014); and Mercer-Mapstone (2020) that has inspired this extracurricular project, with its focus on shared responsibility and collective leadership amongst partners for the common goal of improved wellbeing and stress relief through dancing.

The Bollywood dancing student-staff partnership (SSP) project was an opportunity to co-develop an extracurricular activity that could alleviate stress and anxiety, promote networking, and ensure that student partners took a leading role in the wellbeing support process of themselves and their peers. The underlying strategy of this SSP project is that physical activity and, in particular, dance participation as a form of social engagement, is associated with multiple physical and mental health benefits (Sheppard & Broughton, 2020). The criticality of the student-staff partnership for this project lies on the ability of the students to recognize the stressors affecting themselves and their peers and engage with them as best as they can to alleviate feelings of alienation and ensure engagement and social inclusion in a group activity. The student partners had the continuing support of staff, who were accessible and willing to share their expertise, training, and the resources required.

## STRATEGY, CO-DESIGN AND CO-IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

The project, titled "Inspiring and Engaging Medical Students Through Extracurricular Activities: Creative Arts and Medicine," focused on the evidence that music and dance have been used consistently as tools for healing and health, promoting positive wellbeing through active engagement (Sheppard & Broughton, 2020). Given that this is an extracurricular project, a simplified model of student partners as active co-creators in planning and implementing non-academic activities was considered (Matthews, 2016), which also aligned with UQ learning and student experience strategies that encourage involvement in a vibrant campus culture that fosters a sense of belonging and wellbeing for all learners.

During a team kick-off workshop at the design stage, we decided to schedule regular group meetings throughout the project to discuss planning and marketing and to monitor

progress. The expectations we established set solid foundations for equal power and shared responsibility amongst the staff and student partners. This led to consensus decisions and open communication that encouraged the whole team to ask for help if unsure about the completion of a task. WhatsApp and email were used for fast and effective communication amongst us. We also divided the tasks based on our access to resources. For example, our staff partners had access to venue booking, whereas communication with the student groups would be best handled by us, the student partners.

This process of balanced contributions amongst partners, guided by dialogue and exchange of ideas, led to a reciprocity in partnership that recognized student expertise and positioned them in the project as equals (Jarvis et al., 2016; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Tamyka and Shreya felt that there was “a balance of power within the team,” Isini commented on staff partners’ approachability, and Tonchanok remarked that allowing her to choose the coordination of marketing and public relations boosted her confidence tremendously. In this environment, with a foundation of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, participants offered up their strengths and negotiated their boundaries to benefit the entire group and the project itself, like the examples of distributed or collective leadership described by Paskewich (2014).

Through co-creation and collaboration, we (the student partners) challenged ourselves to design and create branding that resulted in the creation of a promotional flyer and banner for the event. We used social media networks to advertise and promote the events. We designed online surveys using Google Forms to gather information about the students’ experiences, whereas further informal communications (updates, shared photos, and videos from the sessions) were through Facebook Messenger, Eventbrite, email, and shared online storage.

The staff partners recruited an expert dance instructor to introduce participants to a form of Indian dance style called Bollywood and to teach the routine. There were four one-hour dance classes—three in person and one online, with time for us (the student partners) to set up the venue, get to know the attendees and build student-to-student relationships. We were provided with the option of performing the routine at the SSP showcase, alongside other presentations in celebration of project completion.

The project stimulated a genuine interest in building resilient teams through an active involvement in a challenging and fun group activity and contributed to a healthy environment for students by reducing stress through dancing. As dancing involves artistic performance and creativity, it allowed both student and staff partners to express themselves in an environment that encouraged self-acceptance and self-expression.

## PROJECT REFLECTIONS AND IMPACT

This extracurricular SSP project set off to enable medical students to “share the equal realities of partnership” (Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017) in accordance with the SaP principles and the UQ Strategic Plan 2022–2025 relating to learning and student experience (see notes). It also was intended to focus on the importance of values in engaging student partners and to ascertain whether an extracurricular activity in the form of dancing can have a positive impact on wellbeing.

The SSP recruitment information called for “caring and compassionate future medical professionals” interested in undertaking a project with a focus on dance as a stress-relief activity that can foster meaningful relationships and a sense of community outside the demands of the medical curriculum. Following a competitive selection by the staff partners, the four students who joined the team as partners identified with the core values of the project, as discussed below.

#### CORE PROJECT VALUES

I (Tamyka) am a first-year MD student, aware of the difficulty of finding creative outlets to relieve stress and build meaningful relationships. I found both curiosity and calmness through engaging in joyful movement, such as exploring local forest trails on foot or exploring interpersonal spaces through acrobatic play.

I (Isini) am a second-year MD student. The unique stress and mental health challenges faced by medical students was a catalyst in my decision to join this project. I felt strongly about medical students’ exposure to high levels of stress and potentially confronting situations and saw the benefit of an extracurricular activity focusing on dance and music as a preventative measure to poor mental health.

For me (Shreya), a second-year MD student, it was clear how my fellow students were feeling due to the stressful and demanding nature of the course. As someone who uses physical exercise as my main form of stress relief, I wanted to share it with my peers and engage with them in a different way rather than in a study setting. I appreciate the advantages that a creative outlet like dancing can have on students’ mental and physical health, and I believe that my peers would greatly benefit from such an activity.

I (Tonchanok), a final-year MD student, can see incredible value in having a creative outlet and interests outside of academia. Being close to the completion of my studies, I know that engaging in these activities serves as a way for students to take care of their health, which transfers to better care for patients in the form of resiliency and coping skills that we can develop in our future as physicians.

#### PROJECT IMPACT

On reflection, during one of the final meetings, the student partners were discussing the positive impact the project had on them, and the challenges they faced. These are described below.

I (Shreya) felt out of my comfort zone about my participation in the rehearsals and performance in front of an audience, but the experience increased my confidence.

I (Tamyka) agree with you. Let’s not forget that when we started this project, none of us had any Bollywood dancing experience! I feel that as the project was unfolding, I started understanding the other student partners’ experience and empathized with them. The experience provided an opportunity to reflect upon how frequently we suffer from “imposter syndrome” as medical students and recognise that, as we set up these unreasonable standards for ourselves, there should be room for self-care.

For me (Isini), being open also improved our relationships amongst us and our staff partners. It made me appreciate that not each one of us is supposed to bring the same specific set of skills and that, on the contrary, co-creation flourishes with differing perspectives and skills.

I (Tonchanok) felt that despite initial anxieties, each one of us naturally took up roles suited to our skill set, which allowed us to successfully work as a team and accomplish our goal.

As staff partners, we could easily understand students' feedback and implement suitable changes in response, or, in the students' words: it allowed us to experience a group solidarity that stemmed from shared vulnerability as we worked to overcome our initial discomfort and inhibitions. We hope this positive experience will prepare us to deal with unfamiliar situations and similar challenges in our future careers.

For us, the staff partners, this attenuation of power imbalances and the resulting free flow of ideas is consistent with the experiences described in observational studies of collective leadership in student-staff partnerships (Cook-Sather et al., 2018; Jarvis et al., 2016) and other environments where there exists hierarchical asymmetry, such as multidisciplinary health care teams (Fox & Comeau-Vallée, 2020).

My involvement as a senior lecturer (Suja) in the weekly dance rehearsals and my participation in the final performance made a noticeable difference, encouraging more students to opt for performing, and inspiring them to be more passionate about engaging in a holistic and creative physical activity. My participation inspired a feeling of connectedness, acceptance of vulnerability, and looking out for one another, which added to the success of the partnership.

Being part of this SSP project as a participant was immensely helpful as it allowed me to eliminate the notion that a staff is "superior," an often-disruptive force between student-staff dynamics.

Being an academic professional staff, I (Anna) felt that when Suja joined the rehearsals with the students, learning a new skill side by side with them, she managed to break down the barrier of power dynamics, which obstructs attempts to develop equality within relationships. My own relationship with the student partners was slightly more formal, as I joined the rehearsals as the photographer of the group, making me more of an observer than of a participant. Mutual respect and collegiality, however, was evident.

## CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE PROJECT

Few projects proceed without challenges; this one was no exception. The original project proposed by the staff partners incorporated a music component that the whole team was excited about. However, due to limited musical resources and budget and a tight project timeline, the music component was not materialized. This proved to be a wise choice—given the difficulty of mastering the dance in time for the performance, the initial proposal was likely too ambitious.

Our next major challenge was environmental. Massive afternoon thunderstorms are common during Brisbane's warmer months, and one such storm unfortunately coincided with the window during which most students were travelling to our venue on public transport. To the team's delight, this only delayed and did not deter the participants, who soon showed up wearing sodden clothing and excited smiles, keen to get started.

COVID-19 presented further challenges that would be familiar to most readers: lockdowns, rules on room occupancy, mask mandates, and a general concern for the health and wellbeing of our participants. However, despite government restrictions limiting the allowed number of participants, the project successfully engaged 12 MD students in a series of four 1-hour dance classes—three in person and one online. The online session was hindered by various internet connection speeds; despite this, several students commented on it being a “wholesome” or “lovely” meeting. This inclusive, positive learning environment along with the combined effort by all partners and project attendees enabled the student partners to develop, mature and discover in dancing a preventative method to boost mental health (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015; Mercer-Mapstone, 2019).

Though the project was successful both as a partnership program and as a wellbeing initiative, it only came to realisation because the staff partner used part of her funding grant to pay the dance instructor’s fees. This makes it unsustainable, and the embedded approach recommended by Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) to either redesign the project as part of the curriculum or seek dedicated grant money needs to be considered.

## CONCLUSION

This reflective essay explored the values and dynamics that underpin partnership practices presented in recent SaP literature. The success of this project lies in the power of a shared enjoyable experience for all participants, including the showcase audience. It created a space for new relationships, creative expression, and physical activity that both students and staff can draw upon to overcome the challenges of their respective careers. The project encouraged student-staff partner dialogue, sharing, and empowerment through this learning process, highlighting that SaP can work as a strategy to enhance the student experience.

This SSP project offered an insight into the benefits of student-staff partnerships through an extracurricular activity that promotes positive relationships and a healthier way of living life under stress and highlighted the following key points:

- The feedback received from participants was very positive with several of them saying that they would participate in such an activity again. Overall, the consensus was that this activity was stress relieving and allowed the medical students to engage and foster relationships with their peers. Students had their voices heard and contributed to the choreography of the performance in a very engaging and enthusiastic manner. The activity built a sense of community and belonging for students in the MD program.
- The “ethic of reciprocity” (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017) enabled an equity in roles and responsibilities and consequently made both student and staff partners to feel at ease using their expertise to contribute to the success of the project.
- The use of social media in student engagement and promotion of activities, helped students in developing communication skills that boosted confidence and knowledge.

In conclusion, a take on new roles and perspectives for staff and students is a challenging work in progress, but one with encouraging results in the shared power and collaboration

involved in a student-staff partnership project. There are practical barriers in place, and the stage of curriculum design or re-design may be an opportunity for universities to involve extracurricular activities in medical curriculum to enhance the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which students learn.

By recognizing the three Rs of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility that underpin alternatives to standard hierarchical organizational structures (Parker et al., 2014), institutions can better support staff and students to develop interpersonal partnerships that can consequently act as a stimulus for change in thinking and behaviors and eventually lead to better patient care.

## NOTES

1. The term “student experience” encompasses all aspects of student interactions with their respective institution, which, apart from their academic and intellectual development, also refers to any extracurricular social/emotional activities and networking. [UQ’s 2022–2025 Strategic Plan](#) highlights the importance of experiences that foster a sense of belonging and wellbeing, while developing opportunities that foster their leadership, entrepreneurship, and civic duty.

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