SPECIAL SECTION: EQUIPPING STUDENT LEADERS AS PARTNERS FOR SUSTAINABLE HUMANITARIAN ACTION

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The potential of students-as-partners approaches for humanitarian developments

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the potential for students-as-partners models developed in the scholarship of teaching and learning and educational development fields to be expanded to new agendas such as humanitarian developments and other agendas related to the so-called civic university. There is a growing appetite for students and staff to work in partnership due to the mutual benefits for both parties (Mapstone et al., 2017), yet the majority of the published works on students as partners is almost exclusively reporting upon partnership activities relating to curriculum and wider student experience developments in higher education. This paper explores the literature on best practice for working with students as partners in order to create new recommendations for how the students-as-partners model can be applied successfully for community and humanitarian development projects, rather than curricular, teaching, or research projects By drawing on literature from student voice, student engagement in quality assurance, and co-design, this paper will highlight the great potential of student-staff partnerships for addressing other development agendas globally.

KEYWORDS

students as partners, humanitarian development, student engagement, student voice, higher education

There is a growing appetite for students and staff to work in partnership due to the mutual benefits for both parties (Mapstone et al., 2017). Developing a partnership mindset leads to valuing the difference and diversity people bring to a conversation, shifting the "us/them" mentality between students and staff to one of genuine enquiry and positively influencing the way we interact with people in the world (Peseta et al., 2020). When students and staff work together in partnership, they feel like valued members and partners of the institution and benefit from each party's expertise mutually. Partnership fosters positive relationships between staff and students (Felten & Lambert, 2020) and not only enhances feelings of belonging to the

institution, but also feelings of mattering, which has been found to be imperative for enhancing attainment, retention, and overall student success (Cook-Sather, 2022). Developing a sense of belonging can also support in developing social capital; elements that help to develop social capital are trust, reciprocity, and shared values (Ahn & Davis, 2020). This paper will explore the students-as-partners literature to expand on these benefits and make recommendations for facilitating partnership activities beyond developing education and for areas such as humanitarian development.

LITERATURE ON STUDENTS AS PARTNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Aspiring to increase our partnership work with students in higher education has remained a focus for educational developers, students' unions, and management teams for the last 10 years. The values of partnership outlined by Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014)—authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community, and responsibility—have stood the test of time and rallied support behind its aspirations. The movement of co-design and partnership has encouraged more staff and their services to work with students to create a more student-centred higher education. Theoretically positioning students as partners, rather than consumers or customers, has been well received, creating an ethos of dialogue, empathy, collaboration, and reciprocity. Yet there are still many challenges when putting partnership into practice for academic teams and professional services, which persist to create bumps in the road and even dislodge partnership as a realistic aim among our teams, which this paper will explore.

Much of the movement towards co-designing the student experience through working with students as partners came from three areas of influence. The first was a growing move towards working with students in educational developments in learning and teaching, leading to a vast sum of scholarship on the topic (Bryson & Callaghan, 2021; Healey & Healy, 2018; Cook-Sather et al., 2014). The second was the push from students' unions for their representatives to be taken more seriously and participate in wider university processes (Shaw & Atvars, 2018; National Union of Students [NUS], 2012). The final area of influence in the movement towards working with students as partners was universities themselves being quick to receive these students' unions' wishes, as working with students as partners is far more desirable than students seeing themselves as fee-paying customers or activists (Brooks, et al. 2015). Students-as-partners agendas has seen success through the appointment of students to university committee membership roles of responsibility, such as members of quality approval panels and even interview panels at universities including the University of Lincoln (UK) and the University of Chester (UK) (Lincoln Students' Union, n.d.; Healey, 2023). Partnership has also been successful at academic courses level universities, between academic staff and students, where the student-staff relationship has been positive and conversations about education are accessible due to high student-staff contact in weekly classes (see Healey et al.'s [2014] key values of partnership for success, discussed above). However, these partnerships are more difficult for professional service/student affairs elements of universities to facilitate where student engagement may be less frequent, service based, and/or transactional.

A commonly accepted definition of student-staff partnership is "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation,

decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6–7). Importantly in this definition, members of the partnership may contribute in different ways; however, their contributions are of equal value. Equality in partnership between staff and students may be a challenging concept in universities where staff have greater power over students, not least because they are responsible for marking their work. Therefore, other terms used across the sector include co-creation, active student participation, or students as change agents (Dunne, 2016), which avoid some of the complexities entangled with the term partnership. Partnership has been further defined as being

> fundamentally about a relationship in which all involved—students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students' unions and so on—are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together. Partnership is essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself. (Healey et al., 2014, p. 12).

Taking this into account, it is important to note the benefits of partnership are not just in the interest of students, but that staff also gain from the process.

A focus on engaging students in the development of education has also gained traction due to market-driven factors in which there has been a push to encourage students to have more decision-making power, positioning them as active participants and agents in their education as opposed to passive consumers. Examples of ways in which students have been given more of an active role in their education is through student representation, student voice, and student feedback opportunities. Academic student representation involves course, class, and faculty representatives (Bols, 2020). Student voice is "any expression of any learner about education which can happen anywhere at any time" (Fletcher, 2020, p. 137). Although student voice practices vary, Fletcher (2017) argues that meaningful student involvement entails engaging students as partners as a cultural endeavour in which it is part of everything we do and strengthens commitment to education, the community, and democracy.

In application, although the focus on working with students as partners has grown in significance, there still remains great variance in best practice at universities. Although less present in the literature, there has been plenty of successful practices of students working with staff members for agendas beyond educational or curriculum developments. Going beyond the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), one of the largest charities for student mental health in the UK, Student Minds, have written an advisory document on working with students as partners to co-design mental health strategies (Piper & Emmanuel, 2019). Secondly, there is a wider movement of practice in American higher education known as service learning, where students are supported by staff to serve the local community in consultancy, volunteering, and fundraising capacities (Butin, 2010). Working with students as partners should therefore more be viewed as a way of working to address a development agenda or problem, as opposed to being siloed off to developing the curriculum only. The remainder of this paper gives advice for this area.

In the following section, we discuss six partnership areas and best practices for each derived from the literature. These six partnership areas are (a) project-based partnership, (b)

students' union-university partnership, (c) co-design, (d) alternative identities of students, (e) students supporting students, and (f) student engagement in quality assurance.

BEST PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP AREAS

Project-based partnership
Increasingly across the world, educational development teams are supporting opportunities for students to take up student-partnership roles, such as "change makers" (Marie et al., 2016), "students as partners" (Marquis et al., 2016), and "student fellows" (Sims et al., 2016). These activities, which may be either individual research student-partnership projects or large institution-wide schemes, see students actively contributing to enhance university processes, the curriculum, and the wider student experience (Healey et al., 2014). Often run as institution-wide schemes, dozens of student-staff collaborations occurring in one academic year confirms that enhancement through students as partners is becoming widespread in the sector (Sims et al., 2016). More broadly, student engagement in co-creation—championed and described by colleagues such as Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014)—recognises that the student role in change projects cannot always be an equally split 50/50 partnership between staff and students (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Examples include students' reviewing student transition and creating a buddy scheme on the Fashion, Media and Marketing Programme at the University of Winchester (UK) (Sims et al., 2016); enhancing technology in learning in the classroom at the University of Exeter (UK) (Dunne & Zanstra 2011); and re-designing the English literature curriculum at the University of Reading (UK) (Becker et al., 2018). Comparable detail of these schemes can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Example schemes of project-based partnership at universities

INSTITUTION	SCHEME SUMMARY	RECOGNITION FOR STUDENTS	PUBLICATIONS
University of Winchester, UK	Student Fellows Scheme: Students and staff partnered for development projects across the academic year.	£600-£1,000 bursary	Student Fellows Scheme at the University of Winchester Lowe et al., 2017 Sims et al., 2016
Birmingham City University	Student Academic Partnership Scheme: Integrates students into the teaching and pedagogic research communities (e.g., co-creating curriculum and	Up to £1,250 for up to 125 hours (£10 per hour)	Freeman et al., 2014 Millard et al., 2020

INSTITUTION	SCHEME SUMMARY	RECOGNITION FOR STUDENTS	PUBLICATIONS
	educational development projects).		
University of Queensland, Australia	Student-Staff Partnership Projects: Projects can be proposed by any staff or student. Run over four rounds per year. Duration varies up to 21 weeks (depending on project round).	Grant variable up to $1,500 Students receive a stipend midway and at the end of the project.	Student-staff partnerships at the University of Queensland Coombe et al., 2018 Mercer-Mapstone & Clarke 2018
McMaster University, Canada	Students as Partners: Summer student-staff partnerships. Projects contribute to the enhancement of teaching and learning and students have also co-authored research articles and conference presentations related to their work.	$2,000 maximum per student partner.	Student Partners Programme at the University of McMaster Marquis et al., 2016 Marquis et al., 2018
University of Exeter, UK	Students as Change Agents and Partners: Projects seek to change and improve the student experience or the service that the University provides to students.	Accredited students as change agents on university employability achievement record. Project costs are covered and students can secure £250 or more via a spending plan.	Students as change agents at the University of Exeter Dunne et al., 2014 Kay et al., 2010
University of Westminster	Students as Co-creators: Three key areas include enhancing learning and teaching environment, discipline specific research, or curriculum design.	Formal recognition via a showcase event + £100 bursary Up to £300 for costs	Students as Co-Creators at the University of Westminster

Common themes for success in project-based partnerships
- Scaffolding, such as timeframes for the start and finish of projects
- Central staff support from learning and teaching teams

- Funding to recognise students' time
- Dissemination of projects following scheme
- Training for students and staff
- High level support for strategic guidance
- Alignment with learning and teaching strategies.

Further reading

Becker, L., Collier, J., & Setter, J. (2018). Students as change partners in the School of Literature and Languages at the University of Reading. *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, *4*(1).

Healey, M., & Healey, R. (2018). "It depends": Exploring the context-dependent nature of students as partners practices and policies. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *2*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v2i1.3472

Mercer-Mapstone, L., & Marie, J. (2019). *Practical guide: Scaling up student-staff partnerships in higher education*. University of Edinburgh. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10069252/

Students' union-university leadership partnership

At the top of our education providers, there is great potential for student-staff partnership—between university leaders and elected student officers. These strategic student-staff partnerships vary based on individuals on both sides, where there is variance in the desire to work in partnership year on year. Setting an example of partnership working between our students' unions' (SU) presidents, vice-presidents, and other student leadership roles is critical for university success in a tuition fee sector. As we encourage our professional services and academic departments to work with students as partners on a course level, it is important that higher management do the same with such elected officers. Although tensions can arise from disagreements on university policy, politics, and differing priorities, university managers and SU officers should be setting an example by meeting halfway for at least monthly meetings. Students' union officers should also be invited to sit on as many university committees and boards as possible, and we should address committees where students have not previously been allowed to attend. Although apologies may need to be given sometimes and disagreements may occur, starting these partnerships with a working agreement of professionalism and confidentiality can be fruitful. Also, looking for more informal partnership meetings can be of value to build relationships, such as meeting in non-boardroom locations.

Common themes for success in students union-university partnership

- Interest in partnership working from university management
- Interest in partnership working from students' union officers
- Time given, through monthly meetings between parties to build up relationships and prioritise student union input
- Mutual understanding that partnership has limits

Further reading

Brooks, R., Byford, K., & Sela, K. (2015). The changing role of students' unions within contemporary higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, *30*(2), 165–181. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2014.924562

LeBihan, J., Lowe, T., & Marie, J. (2018). Considerations of the challenges, conflicts and competitions when expanding student-staff partnerships across an institution: Perspectives from three UK Universities. *Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, *1*(2), 173–180.

Shaw, C., & Atvars, T. (2018). Two sides of the same coin: A university and student union perspective on partnership and risk. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, *1*(24), p. 6. https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss24/6

Co-design

Working with students to develop education holds several titles, with perhaps "co-design" or "co-creation" being as highly referenced as students as partners, although it can be argued that co-design can be more flexible than more formal or structured partnership. Co-design, as an area of focus, is derived from both public and private sector consultation, where stakeholders work with providers to design a better service or product (Steen et al., 2011). Co-designing the curriculum, or wider student experience, can be infrequent or frequent, but offers the flexibility of not conforming to one structure as is common in the formal students-as-partners schemes highlighted above. Example practice extends from co-designing essay titles to dedicated timetabled workshops between students and staff on designing a module or whole curriculum (Bovill and Woolmer, 2019). The area of practice relies upon both student and staff buy-in, where gaining staff buy-in can just be as difficult as gaining students' buy-in, as co-designing one's education is not a common expectation of all staff, where students have often been enrolled upon exam and/or national curriculums taught to test (Bovill, 2013). Additional challenges persist relating to co-designing at scale, where co-designing an essay title with a single student can be easy, yet co-designing a curriculum across 500 students is far more difficult. Simple co-design questions like "do we have an essay or a presentation?" for an assessment can lead to cohorts splitting 50/50 in disagreements which can cause conflict and can potentially negatively impact the student experience. Finally, in regulation bound higher education systems with long timeframes for making course alterations, making real curriculum change "live" in the student experience is difficult when considering regulatory limitations.

Further reading

Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., Felten, P., Millard, L. and Moore-Cherry, N., 2016. Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: Overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity in student–staff partnerships. *Higher Education*, *71*, pp. 195-208.

Bryson, C., & Callaghan, L. (2021). A whole cohort approach to working in partnership between students and staff: problematising the issues and evaluating the outcomes. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, *3*(2), 176–196. https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/1023

Garcia, I., Noguera, I., & Cortada-Pujol, M. (2018). Students' perspective on participation in a co-design process of learning scenarios. *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, *4*(1).

Alternative identities of students

It is important to mention that studies and ideas relating to contemporary students-as-partners work do not constitute a solely modern phenomenon. As early as 1916, Dewey (1916) outlined his theory of a "democratic education," in which all parties—and, notably, the students—have the right to have a say in how they are educated. Taking a student-centred approach has been seen as one possible means of breaking down the barriers—outlined by Bourdieu (van Zanten, 2005) and argued by Freire (1973) as structures in place that to continue to oppress those not in power—that exist globally and prevent social mobility. Involving students in the process of developing education brings learners into the conversation, enabling them to contribute to the process of making education more accessible, its practices more inclusive, and the learning more engaging. Studies relating to pupil and student voice have been extensively researched in primary and secondary education: they outline the benefits to learning and engagement (Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011; Fielding, 2004) and inspire wider studies in higher education as part of exploring "good undergraduate education," as discerned by Chickering and Gamson (1987), with their core principle of encouraging "student-faculty contact." Students having a say in their education was even emphasised in 2011 by the United Nations, which declared that all students (under the age of 18) have a right to have a say in their education (Lansdown, 2011).

Further reading
University Mondragon. (n.d.). *Cooperative University*. https://www.mondragon.edu/en/meet-mu/cooperative-university

Students supporting students

In addition to taking on roles as part of university processes or pedagogical enhancements, students have also taken on responsibilities in supporting other students by means of peer mentoring, peer coaching, and peer support. Student-engagement roles in which students take an element of responsibility—to support other students—can often be referred to as "active student participation" or even "student agency" (Keenan, 2014). University-wide schemes commonly referred to as "peer-assisted learning" (PAL) are often supported by one or two staff members, yet engage as many as 150 student peer coaches/leaders who run development sessions and offer one-to-one advice across an Higher Education Institution (HEI), engaging hundreds of students in their academic skills-development and transition to higher education activities (Warren & Luebsen, 2017; Green, 2011).

Common themes for success students supporting students
- Structured support and training for students taking up roles
- Central staff support from learning and teaching or student services/support
- Funding to recognise students' time
- Communicating the purpose of the student opportunity to engage students keen to support other students

Further reading

Green, P. (2011). A literature review of peer assisted learning (PAL). *National HE STEM*.

Keenan, C. (2014). Mapping student-led peer learning in the UK. *Higher Education Academy*, *8*. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/mapping-student-led-peer-learning-uk

Warren, D., & Luebsen, W. (2017). "Getting into the flow of university": A coaching approach to student peer support. *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, *3*(1), 262–269.

Student engagement in quality assurance

Student-engagement practices have also included students' participation in schemes which place them in positions of responsibility, either in formal positions as part of university business or as part of the student-student support functions of a university. Students now find themselves as equal members on national-, local- and course-level quality-assurance panels across Europe: the national quality associations—such as the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA, 2005)—and quality-assurance bodies are paving the way for the HEIs' training and enabling students to be part of HEI review (QAA, 2018). These bodies expect institutions to comply and so ensure a successful uptake of "student reviewers" who, as full and equal panel members, act as quality reviewers of documentation and courses at a local level (Owen, 2013). Students have also taken other formal roles—such as sitting on interview panels for new staff at the Universities of Lincoln and Chester—and conducting teaching observations—at Linghan University, Hong Kong and University College London (UK) (Marie & Azuma, 2018; Ho, 2017; Crawford, 2012)

Common themes for success in student engagement in quality assurance

- Structured support and training for students taking up roles
- Central staff support from appropriate services
- Funding to recognise students' time
- Headlining of student opportunity at the university to support retention and/or academic skills
- Training for students
- Strategic-level support to champion student engagement

Further reading

Isaeva, R., Eisenschmidt, E., Vanari, K., & Kumpas-Lenk, K. (2020). Students' views on dialogue: Improving student engagement in the quality assurance process. *Quality in Higher Education*, *26*(1), 80–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2020.1729307

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CONSIDERATIONS

So, what does the current body of student engagement in educational development, co-design, and students-as-partners research tell us for other agendas beyond developing higher education? We first need to take on board the values and recommendations above seriously, as they are the product of a decade of debate, research, and reflection. We cannot be hierarchical where we must be ready and open to negative feedback, and finally we have to be patient—students may not show up to our first three partnership events and may not want to engage how we want. We need to ensure there is equity of opportunities to engage with our co-design initiatives, which can be achieved with practices such as running events online at several different times of the day and in the locations where our students occupy—possibly not always running the feedback event in the most convenient location for staff on campus. Secondly, we need to be mindful of our student demographics and ensure we are engaging a diversity of students rather than just traditional students who represent those more advantaged in our institutions. We must be critically aware of the representativeness of the students who do engage to check that we are not changing our services based on one to three students' views for those three students only, rather than the wider student body. Finally, we have got to be ready for it to be difficult, for the conversations to become risky, and to recognise our positions of power to make change, but also, that we can be intimidating to our students as members of staff.

　　This movement of staff inviting students on board their educational development ship has seen hundreds of students and staff participate in transformative projects to enhance education. However, there is much space for development to build a students-as-partners ethos across wider higher education spaces. When revisiting Wenstone's *Manifesto for Partnership* (NUS, 2012), the manifesto encourages universities to make students partners throughout their whole organisation—in the classroom, in decision making, and working with our professional services. Yet, the great success of the students-as-partners movement has seen most activity and success in set projects, where the staff member(s) and student(s) come together, they discuss the values of partnership (Healey et al., 2014), and traverse into a new space without the traditional power dynamic and with a priority of reciprocity. Perhaps we only allow or facilitate partnership in safe project spaces, where staff still have control and limitations can be set before the 'partnership' begins. The more risky and difficult students-as-partners work needs far more attention to ensure our students are true partners across all higher education. Experiments have been tried in co-marking, co-feedback, and co-teaching, yet these innovations are often rare with the majority of degree programmes still operating in traditional student-staff power dynamics – where staff are in control. To make every student feel like a partner, staff need to step into new risky spaces beyond projects, or students will always only be partners in the spaces staff define and where it is easy. Our students should be partners in all spaces in higher education, which gives our movement plenty of work to do in the years ahead.

OVERCOMING THE ABOVE CHALLENGES

So how do we overcome the above when we are establishing student-staff partnerships for new agendas such as humanitarian causes as part of civic universities? Well, we first must break down barriers to application methods by not always relying on written applications, as we know many students are not yet at a stage where they know how to write the higher quality personal statement or application form—perhaps these are the students we need to be engaging to better enhance our services. Next, we need to be mindful of the contact time of our feedback opportunities. Do we need to ask students to volunteer endless time? Do we make it quick and easy for students to participate? What are the pros and cons of casual one-off opportunities vs more time-intensive projects? And do we pay students to take part, whilst risking students becoming employees and losing their voice? Finally, we need to ask ourselves, do we want to take a co-design approach in everything we do across our whole service, or are there some things we cannot work in partnership with our students on?

REWARD AND RECOGNITION OF STUDENTS

Reward and recognition are important for building trust and rapport among students and staff as they indicate valuing students' time and feelings of being peers. While financial payment is debated in the sector (Lowe and Lowe, 2023; Marie and Sims, 2023), it is important to value students' time, especially students who are under an enormous amount of pressure and who may not have spare time to give. This is not only to incentivise students, but also to recognise their time as we do with staff. Examples of rewards and recognition that have emerged from the literature (e.g., Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019) and are specifically relevant to the context are outlined below:

- Payment
- Certificate
- Showcase / celebration event
- Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR)
- Vouchers
- Course credit
- Contribution to institutional award scheme
- Contribution/award/grant application
- Contribution to employability through developing transferable skills
- Invitation to join a community of practice
- Development opportunities (e.g., conferences and opportunities to share and disseminate work)
- Profile on a digital platform such as a website
- Names published on any resources created as a result of the project
- Access to opportunities (e.g., career advice, mentorship)
- "Behind-the-scenes" access to events such as museum events, installations, or exhibitions
- Opportunity to publish in an academic journal with a staff member

TOP TIPS FOR SUCCESS

When considering embarking on a student engagement project, study, or discussion, here are seven considerations to be thinking about (adapted from Lowe & El Hakim, 2020):

1. Start with the why: What are you trying to do? To improve accessibility to your service? To work with students to run events and boost attendance?
2. What are your values?: Write out your projects' values? Are they student centred, inclusive, aiming to engage diverse students and staff?
2. Be flexible: Your project or scheme will not run exactly the same as University College London (UCL), London Metropolitan's, or Winchester's. It will be become individual, mould itself into your higher education culture, and take its own shape. No one model fits all, so do not be frustrated when it does not work perfectly the first time.
3. Evaluate with caution: Evaluating student engagement initiatives is messy. Testing the impact of an intervention in any individual student's experience of higher education is incredibly difficult, owing to the number of unknown variables that cannot be controlled. Do not be disheartened if you do not see an "impact," because often you simply know it did great things. Pursue and gather mixed, experimental data and tell the personal stories of the students and staff involved.
5. Continuously reflect: Reflective practice tells us a great deal about improving how we work in many professions—and the same is true of student engagement. Reflect on who you are engaging and how you are engaging; ask if your practices and approaches are accessible to the diverse student body; reflect on your values and aims to see if you are still doing what you set out to do.
6. Try again: Nothing works as you expect when trying it for the first time. It is important to reflect and try the initiative, forum, or study again, for small changes can have a large impact. Keep trying, stay persistent, and have conversations with students, asking why they thought the project went the way it did.

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