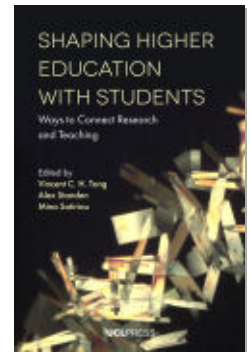




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1.4

Investigating student perceptions of student–staff partnership

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1. Introduction

As one of the academic leads of the R=T initiative, I worked closely with the students on the planning of the Masterclass series and focus groups. My close working relationship with some of them gave both me and them the opportunity to discover each other's roles and develop a relationship based on trust. My first-hand, positive experience of working in close partnership with students prompted me to delve further into the principles and theoretical perspectives involved in student–staff partnerships and investigate students' experiences of being involved in these. Specifically, I was interested in finding out what the students thought of the R=T initiative, which I consider unique as a structure.

This chapter will discuss the findings of interviews I held with five students who took part in the R=T initiative, and their perceptions of partnerships.

2. Background: from engagement to partnership and beyond

In 2011 Axelson and Flick wrote that 'few terms in the lexicon of higher education today are invoked more frequently, and in more varied ways, than *engagement*' (2011, 38–43). Five years later (2016) and the term 'engagement' is no less used. Furthermore, in addition to researchers, policy makers have also adopted it extensively, and it has become common parlance within the learning and teaching literature.

The term refers to how involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, their institutions and each other. Ashwin and McVitty (2015) provide a very informative account of the problem of defining student engagement. They argue that when we talk about student engagement it is important to focus on the object of engagement or what it is to be ‘formed’ through that engagement. With this approach in mind, Ashwin and McVitty define three broad objects of engagement:

- engagement to form individual understanding – how student engagement can help students to improve their learning outcomes;
- engagement to form curricula – how students can help to form the courses that they study in higher education;
- engagement to form communities – how students can be involved in helping to shape the institutions and societies of which they are part.

For the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the independent body which monitors and advises on standards and quality in UK higher education, student engagement is about students getting involved, raising their views, feeling empowered and shaping their education. The QAA



Figure 1.4.1 Nested hierarchy of the object of student engagement in Ashwin and McVitty (2015)

sees its role as bringing students and university staff together to influence decision makers, share good practice and ensure students are at the centre of the process (QAA 2012).

But is student engagement synonymous with partnership? As Healey et al. (2014, 7) argue, ‘all partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership’.

The distinction, according to NUS (2012, 8), is that, ‘the sum total of student engagement activity at an institution does not equate to partnership; this is because partnership is an ethos rather than an activity’.

The same philosophy has been adopted by the UK Higher Education Academy (HEA). In the foreword to Healey et al. (2014), HEA’s Deputy Chief Executive Philippa Levy argues that “‘student engagement’ has become a core aim for the [HE] sector’ (Healey et al. 2014, 4).

Where the QAA sees partnership as an outcome, Healey et al. (2014, 12) see partnership as a *process* of engagement. It is a way of doing things, rather than an end goal, in which all those 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.

The common denominator in all three initiatives is students. Students, therefore, were the focus of the R=T initiative. We invited current UCL students to express an interest in participating in the initiative, and the resulting testimonies demonstrate that students were interested in forming partnerships that will not only change their perceptions and help them gain knowledge, but also transform their education:

Encouraging students to engage more with current research, as well as attempt their own, leads to more natural and long-lasting learning. Research-based education also gives students the opportunity to teach their fellow students about their findings, therefore encouraging and reinforcing new ideas between peers. This sense of ownership over their degrees and learning outcomes leads not only to better scholarship, but a more confident interaction with the cultures in question. (Mary)

By going through the research-based approach, learners are able to realise their full potential by understanding how knowledge is created. Initiatives such as R=T initiative give learners and researchers the chance to see behind the scenes, to learn crucial skills early and be prepared to undertake research at any level, because innovation is possible at any stage. (Mariya)

3. Context

Although student–staff partnership is a well-researched topic nowadays, research on students’ perceptions of such partnerships is quite rare.

I was particularly interested in gaining an understanding of students’ perceptions of:

- student–staff partnerships in the context of the R=T initiative;
- criteria for successful partnerships;
- benefits of student–staff partnerships;
- teachers’ roles and purpose of higher education.

As a result, I conducted face-to-face interviews with five students who took part in the R=T initiative, and who also contributed to this publication. All five students – four female and one male – were postgraduate teaching assistants. They were from:

- Eastman Institute,
- Institute of Sustainable Heritage,
- Translation Studies,
- Institute of Education,
- Chemical Engineering.

4. Research findings

4.1 Perceptions of partnership

Partnerships can be seen as one-to-one, one-to-many or many-to-many. The R=T initiative is a many-to-many partnership which involves:

- students and academics (including academics leading the R=T Masterclasses);
- students and students;
- students and the academic leads in the R=T initiative.

In my discussions with the students, I was particularly interested in exploring their perceptions of ‘partnership’, and how they saw their partnership within the R=T initiative.

The majority of the interviewees described partnership as a network of people or one-to-one relationships, where participants are

working together towards the development of an idea or project with all the parties involved. Partnership was seen primarily as engagement in learning and teaching. In the words of one interviewee, ‘the object of the partnership is for students to understand teaching and staff to develop that teaching’ (Dallas).

A similar view was also expressed by another interviewee who defined partnership as ‘students talking to teachers about what they want to learn or need to learn . . . [Partnership is when] the student and the teacher are collaborating in the actual course content’ (Ellen).

Partnerships, though, require a structure that is formed by the exchange of ideas and agreed by all participants. As one interviewee (Preeti) described it, ‘a partnership is an open window for dialogue’. For the dialogue to be effective, a sustainable long-term plan is necessary. As such, the students identified continuity as an essential criteria for forming a partnership. Another interviewee (Eirini) argued that ‘the aim of the partnership is not to be on–off, but to be . . . long term; it is something that can be repeated in the future and involve more people’.

In every partnership, it is also necessary to have a context for implementation. Preeti also commented, ‘there are three settings [in] which students and staff interact: the classroom, research and assessments. Student–staff partnerships should negotiate the rules of engagement on all these areas and students and staff should articulate the scope together’.

Evidently, the interviewees see partnerships as an opportunity to actively contribute to the development of their teaching, learning and research experience, and be co-developers of their curriculum.

4.2 Criteria for successful partnerships

A variety of authors have identified a number of essential criteria for successful partnerships. Healey et al. (2014, 14–15) summarise these as:

- authenticity – all parties have a meaningful rationale for investing in partnership, and are honest about what they can contribute and the parameters of partnership;
- inclusivity – partnership embraces the different talents, perspectives and experiences that all parties bring, and there are no barriers (structural or cultural) that prevent potential partners getting involved;
- reciprocity – all parties have an interest in, and stand to benefit from, working and/or learning in partnership;

- empowerment – power is distributed appropriately and all parties are encouraged to constructively challenge ways of working and learning that may reinforce existing inequalities;
- trust – all parties take time to get to know each other, engage in open and honest dialogue and are confident they will be treated with respect and fairness;
- challenge – all parties are encouraged to constructively critique and challenge practices, structures and approaches that undermine partnership, and are enabled to take risks to develop new ways of working and learning;
- community – all parties feel a sense of belonging and are valued fully for the unique contribution they make;
- responsibility – all parties share collective responsibility for the aims of the partnership, and individual responsibility for the contribution they make.

Many of these same criteria were also identified as critical in my interviews with the students.

In terms of the structure of the R=T initiative, however, two criteria were highlighted as particularly important: ‘community’ and ‘reciprocity’. It is important to note that the aims of the R=T initiative were developed and agreed in collaboration with the students and as such all participants felt a sense of ownership or, in the words of one interviewee (Preeti), ‘it is [as] much your baby as it [is] mine’.

It should be said, though, that a consistent and a regular dialogue was also identified as a critical element for building and sustaining partnerships. Interviewees felt that limitations of time and a lack of continuous engagement can affect a partnership and its outcomes. For this reason, all interviewees valued the regular contact with the academic leads of the R=T initiative, which helped to build up trust and commitment.

4.3 Benefits of student–staff partnerships

In their report, ‘Developing successful student–staff partnerships’, Killen and Chatterton (2015) discuss the numerous benefits that such partnerships can offer to students, staff and institutions:

- gaining knowledge and experience of leadership and influencing change;
- gaining experience of using research to shape change;

- recognition of achievements through accredited leadership and extra-curricular awards;
- increased confidence and skills (e.g. communication, team-working, management, research skills);
- enhanced networking with the wider professional community;
- improved employability and job prospects;
- driving the development of the digital environment for students at their institution.

Similarly, the HEA is promoting student–staff partnerships as an effective way of developing student engagement and enhancing learning and teaching (HEA 2016).

My interviewees also discussed the perceived benefits of participating in the R=T initiative. They described gaining knowledge, improving skills and enhancing networking, as identified by Killen and Chatterton above.

While networking with the wider community was of particular interest to all interviewees, partnership was seen as a way of finding out what is happening in the institution. In the words of one interviewee (Eirini):

I have been a postgraduate student in smaller universities where every student activity was easier to disperse and easier to be heard of. While in UCL (because it is very big) there are too many information and you need to prioritise. It is very difficult to find the group of people you want to talk to and this partnership looked like a way to come closer to people who have similar interests. It was also a way to understand what is the goal of the institution. [sic] (Eirini)

Interviewees also claimed that the partnerships in the R=T initiative offered the opportunity for bilateral negotiations and ideas: it was seen as an iterative process where ideas were continuously created. As the result of this process, any perceived hierarchies were dissolved and diluted, and all partners effectively had equal rights: ‘in a partnership all parties have responsibilities, otherwise it is a leadership’ (Ellen).

It is worth noting, however, that although the interviewees confirmed the benefits cited by both Jisc (an organisation for digital services and solutions in the UK; see Killen and Chatterton 2015) and HEA, they also indicated a distinction in the focus of the partnership. Specifically, in contrast to the Jisc and HEA results, where attention appears to be on the outputs, our results from the interviews demonstrate instead a focus

on the process of the partnership, as discussed by Healey et al. (2014), in order to form communities (Ashwin and McVitty 2015). According to interviewee Eirini, the partnership offered her the opportunity to discuss with other members ‘how the educational system can be changed or transformed’.

Another benefit for the students of the R=T initiative, and acknowledged by the interviewees, was interdisciplinary knowledge awareness. Specifically, the students valued the knowledge gained by the interdisciplinary character of both student–staff and student–student partnerships:

I particularly liked that many people [were] involved in the partnership and their voices were represented. I attended Masterclass sessions by people from different disciplines than mine and I gained by watching them. I saw how their methods applied in my area. You can get an overview of what is going on in academia especially if you want to teach afterwards. (Eirini)

Such an approach is closely aligned with the views of Brew (2006), where partnerships lead to the development of an inclusive scholarly community.

4.4 Teachers’ roles and purpose of higher education

Flint, in his Jisc report (2015, 3), argues that

partnership is a particularly useful lens when looking into change agency, as it focuses on the role of staff and students. As a relationship and a dialogic process, partnership presents opportunities to start new conversations and to open up new spaces for learning, change and innovation. It offers transformative potential because it prompts us to question the assumptions we make about one another and the learning process, in a way we don’t often make explicit.

The current roles of teachers and students were topics that came up in the interviews, and the interviewees argued that a redefinition of roles is required if student–staff partnerships are to be successful. In the words of one of the interviewees (Preeti), redefining the role of teachers should begin by asking ‘what are we doing in the class, [and] why are we doing it?’

Similar concerns were echoed in the R=T Masterclasses by the invited professors. I was particularly taken by the views of Professor Jeremy Levesley, who argued that ‘my work is not to give answers; my work is to ask questions. My work is to stimulate confusion. Because learning is all about learning and resolution, in my mind. You have to destroy your old to create your new’ (2016).

It was clear that the students felt that their involvement in the R=T initiative gave them the opportunity to voice their views and question the educational status quo. In her chapter 2.4, Agathe Ribéreau-Gayon argues that ‘traditional educational models are no longer suitable for today’s students’ needs’. She ‘explores the suitability of research-based teaching as a new education model’.

It remains to be seen if the research-based education model is a suitable educational model for all higher education institutions. However, the need to redefine the purpose of higher education is a necessity argued by all interviewees.

Students got the mentality that education is education for jobs. This is what needs to be questioned. We prioritise the wrong things. (Saya)

Saya’s views are also reflected in the students’ chapters here, and it is worth taking a moment to question the current system and in particular the purpose of assessment. It appears to be a consensus among the students that assessment, as it is currently practised, ‘is of learning rather than assessment for learning’. The fact that students’ success is defined as ‘the correct answer’ is an issue that needs to be addressed.

5. Conclusion

My interaction with the students in the R=T initiative, and the in-depth interviews conducted with a number of them, offered me the opportunity to question my own views and practices. While generally the emphasis on student–staff partnerships is on the students and what they will benefit from partnership, I would argue that in this particular initiative I gained more than I put in.

The interviews with the students allowed both me and them to question what we thought we knew and to learn from each other. Although the students who took part in the R=T initiative focused initially on the object of engagement to form individual understanding, during the process it became apparent that they were interested in shaking up the status

quo: ‘students want their voices to be heard so they can change the institution they are in; and through this you also change people’s experiences and what they take after leaving the institution’ (Eirini).

Students’ involvement in the R=T initiative created a precedent for future UCL partnerships. Students were instrumental not only in the planning and execution of the tasks assigned by all parties, but also in the development of ideas for the research-based education approach that UCL champions. Engagement was not restricted to forming understanding or curricula or communities, but to forming all three dimensions.

The aim of the R=T initiative was not only to create a student–staff project which would enhance students’ learning and provide pedagogical examples for staff development, but – crucially – to create an ethos of partnership in the whole institution and initiate a dialogue between students and staff.

The success of such an institution-wide initiative can only be possible if all partners share the same values. The students who took part in the R=T initiative were the co-creators of the research-based education approach, and their views in this book, as Preeti says, is an ‘open window for a dialogue’ for all of us in higher education.

Students’ perceptions as discussed in this chapter can help institutions plan their educational strategy with students in mind. Although the R=T initiative is based on research-based education, what it is important to stress is that whichever approach an institution applies, student–staff partnerships are a crucial element for success in higher education. Students want their voices to be heard.

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