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OPINION PIECE

Considerations of the challenges, conflicts and competitions when expanding student-staff partnerships across an institution: Perspectives from three UK Universities

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Abstract

In this paper we explore three major challenges for institutional student-staff partnership work. Firstly, we consider the example of partnership that arises from the ownership of a partnership scheme, comparing ownership by a central unit of the university, at local level by departments and shared ownership between the University and Students' Union. Secondly, we consider the importance of inclusivity in such schemes to prevent them exacerbating attainment gaps and undermining democratic processes. Thirdly, we consider the related issue of reward and recognition, considering the tensions created when working with paid ambassadors and student volunteers.

Introduction

Student-staff partnerships are increasingly seen as best practice for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL), enhancing the student experience and bridging the gap between Faculty, administration and students (Felten, 2013; Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014). The authors have been inspired by *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education Journal*'s Special Issue on the risks of working with 'students as partners' (see Woolmer, 2018; Shaw & Atvars; Ahmad & Cook-Sather, 2018 for examples), and therefore wish to reflect on institutional challenges of implementing schemes at UK HEIs that support a large number of students to work in partnership with staff. For this paper, the three authors will draw upon their experience from working to upscale and embed student-staff partnerships across three United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) since c.2012. The authors will reflect on expanding these partnerships in terms of ownership, the financial cost and the balance of these student-staff partnership schemes with existing democratic student voice systems such as Students' Unions/Associations and elected representatives.

In the UK context, Universities and Students' Unions have created countless roles and initiatives where students are engaged to make change, co-design, conduct research and work in partnership (Dunne, 2016), as a means to enhance the student experience in light of tuition fees, as an alternative to consumerism and as a theme of practice in the SOTL (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2015). A major theme within this movement is the expansion and embedding of individual student-staff partnership working through creating large semi-structured schemes which offer frameworks, deadlines and support for working in student-staff partnerships, such as those discussed in this paper (Sims, Lowe & El-Hakim, 2016; Marie & McGowan, 2017; Marquis, Guitman, Black, Healey, Matthews, & Dvorakova, 2018 for examples). However, implementing these schemes is easier hypothesised than conducted.

Authority and Ownership

As stated above, student-staff partnership initiatives have been adopted in several Universities internationally. These schemes provide a structure for partnerships to occur, offer support in the form of training, guidance in managing expectations, and opportunities for dissemination. These structures lead to the adoption and spread of 'students as partners' across an HEI and often lead to the creation of champions of Student Engagement and 'believers' in working in partnership for enhancement purposes. However, who owns or houses these partnership schemes can pose a risk to the value of partnership, and ownership of the students as partners scheme itself can affect the ethos of projects on the ground. Students as Partners schemes are commonly organised from the following areas in HEIs:
- ❖ Central Administration (Learning and Teaching Centre, Quality Office etc.);
- ❖ Students' Union / Association;
- ❖ Individual School / Faculty;
- ❖ Devolved to faculties with some central coordination;
- ❖ Jointly owned between a Central Administrative Unit and the Students' Union/Association;

Naturally, the origin of the scheme's coordination has an impact on the nature and aim of the scheme, its ethos and most importantly, the example of partnership that is set. If the partnership scheme is owned solely by a central administrative unit of the university (e.g. Learning and Teaching Dept.), as is the case at UCL, the structures are ultimately defined by staff for the benefit of the university. Cathy Bovill (2007) has previously argued that if you use Heron's model for decision-mode levels, you realise that decisions about partnerships usually begin at some level with staff. With University led initiatives, this is impossible to escape, even if a specific instance of partnership

within the scheme is initiated by students. Furthermore, in such schemes the emphasis can be placed on research rather than enhancement, with students 'on-boarded' or invited into a proto-academic space where publication and writing up is more of the focus than enhancement.

When a scheme is run out of the Students' Union (SU), the drive is often towards empowering students to 'make change' to enhance the student experience and will draw on already established student engagement systems such as elected democracy structures and activism (Brooks et al.., 2015). Sometimes, SU-only schemes can come across as unfamiliar to the University and are treated with caution, depending on the relationship with that SU. This can heighten the perceived risk of a student-staff partnership from the staff side. Growth and the establishment of trust then relies on current staff who already work closely with the SU/students.

Many schemes are devolved to individual schools/departments or are founded in the schools themselves, as with Students as Change Agents at the Universities of Nottingham and Exeter (Watts, Neil & Speight, 2017; Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). Significant advantages are developed here with locality of coordination through a staff champion and closer contact to local enhancement and dissemination opportunities. These schemes are often still supported by some central coordination which allows strategic oversight; however, strategy can be hindered when the devolved schemes evolve beyond a certain point to fit schools. Micro student-staff partnership schemes located solely within a school can benefit from the above positives; however, expanding beyond the school to straddle a University can be difficult. Central strategic and SU buy-in becomes harder to achieve, and so does the buy-in of the non-converted schools across the University.

> " Student-staff partnership is based on the concept that students are bringing their own experience of learning to the shared work (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p.7) "

At Winchester the scheme is jointly owned, funded and coordinated by the university and the Students' Union (Sims et al., 2016). The supporting structures are thus defined in partnership, bringing significant benefit to the ethos of the initiative, since partner bodies in the coordination represent the interest of both staff and students. Winchester has witnessed five years of this structure; however, the longevity of such practices depends not only on the University continuing to prioritise the scheme but also on the continued support of the annually-changing elected officers of the Students' Union. It is worth noting that SUs can often be viewed as central services, and so this model risks only offering a one-size fits all model, as when solely owned by a central unit.

Representation and Expectation of Students' Unions

As well as the ownership of schemes, who participates in them becomes highly significant when partnership practices are scaled up to an institutional level. Student-staff partnership is based on the concept that students are bringing their own experience of learning to the shared work (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p.7). In contrast, student academic representative schemes are based on the idea that the representatives consult those that they represent and present their views back to staff. They may not 'super represent' their own views as they must ensure their feedback is balanced democratically and is representative of their student cohort.

Partnership schemes that span institutions are highly unlikely to include all students. This creates a risk for partnerships that if they are not fully inclusive, the work will be informed by the experiences

of a small subset of students, those who are likely to be most engaged and who have more cultural capital. The outcome of the work is therefore likely to be most beneficial for these students. The danger is that this will increase the gap between those that are already advantaged and those disadvantaged by the university sector. For a process that is intended to improve education by empowering members of the university community that have traditionally been disempowered (students), this outcome seems, at best, counter-productive.

Of course, many forms of partnership work involve students conducting some type of research into student views and experiences, which in turn informs the partnership activity. The benefit of students being involved is that any such work involves interpretation and students draw on their experiences as students to inform this interpretation. Thus, ensuring the student partners themselves are representative of the student population is vital in the same way that it is vital for student representatives, as students are more likely to talk to representatives that they identify with.

The other important element of many student representative schemes is that the representatives are democratically elected. This is considered important for both the representatives' accountability and legitimacy. Student partnerships are seen as encouraging participatory democracy by empowering students to make their own decisions and learn to live with the consequences of them (Bergman & Westman, 2016). Using undemocratic processes, like appointment by application, risks undermining this aim, by suggesting that unelected people's own experiences are all that is required for decision-making. Partnership may be a step beyond staff making such decisions without consulting their major stakeholders but does it go far enough in promoting the values that underlie democracy? Selection can of course be made on the basis of projects, rather than individuals. However, when this happens does the scheme have responsibility to ensure that the partners on successful projects are selected democratically?

One further risk is that partnership schemes are seen as competing with student representatives, with changes being made outside the democratic system. If there are two disagreeing student voices in a department, to whom should the department listen? This concern is amplified where ownership of the student partnership scheme differs from that of the student representatives scheme. However, with thought it is possible to overcome such challenges. For example, at UCL this has been done by asking student partners to work with both the department and the student academic representatives to ensure that the student voice is properly represented in the department's annual development plan. It would be ideal to link up the issues raised in staff-student consultative committees better with projects undertaken by student partners.

Reward, Recognition and Inclusion

The potential conflict between different student-staff partnership roles is also highlighted in the scenario where staff are asked to nominate students to meet with important external visitors and senior staff, to provide 'the student perspective'. At Sheffield Hallam, the obvious student participants in this kind of event are student course and departmental representatives; course ambassadors, who are employed and trained to represent the university in a positive light; and student researchers, who would be expected to report on the visit afterwards. Putting aside for a moment the problem of providing 'the' student perspective (for in the scenario above, the students' views are hardly likely to be homogenous), there are other potential tensions in asking students to attend an event like this.

The student representative role is a volunteer post and the elected representatives participate out of a social duty, and because of the influence and respectability accorded those who fill the post. Students might be given recognition for acting as representatives (such as a certificate of appreciation, or an extra-curricular award) but they won't be paid as this would represent a conflict of interest. Student researchers at Sheffield Hallam are paid to attend meetings, and would also be paid for writing a report on the event, and so their way of taking part would be slightly different to their peers in other roles: they would be acting as evaluators as much as participants. The student ambassadors are likely to be paid for their time attending the event, but they perhaps attend with the expectation of acting as positive ambassadors rather than as free agents. That expectation is likely to be implicit rather than explicitly reinforced however.

Already then, it is possible to see the differences between the students and the burden of responsibility they might feel they carry. Their differing roles potentially affect how freely they feel they are able to comment or participate and with staff choosing who to invite, they can influence student participation levels. The different pay and freedom to participate will also potentially affect the students' perception of the value of their role. In a similar situation in our experience, the volunteer student representatives thought their words might somehow carry less weight because they were not paid to be there. This highlights some of the complexities in the position of current students, who are more personally responsible for meeting the cost of their higher education.

> " The different pay and freedom to participate will also potentially affect the students' perception of the value of their role… the volunteer student representatives thought their words might somehow carry less weight because they were not paid to be there. "

When students are being encouraged by a government quango, the UK Office for Students, to focus on 'value for money' and 'success' in their education (Office for Students, 2018), we need to think about what this means for our construction of students as partners, and how far that partnership extends to them as employees. Extra-curricular activities have been shown to enhance students' experience of university as well as improving their graduate outcomes (e.g. Kandiko & Mawer, 2013), but understanding the value of these activities, and the freedom or financial ability to take part might not be available to all our students equally (Stevenson and Clegg, 2012). Paying our students to work in partnership roles might make it possible for the less affluent or the more busy to be involved in extra-curricular activities -- for instance, if they have to forego paid work in order to attend a partnership event -- and offers an incentive to students who might not be able to recognise the non-monetary value of such experiences. But we have to consider the impact this has on volunteer work, if it is the case that students in representative roles do not see themselves as being valued because they are not being paid.

Frequently students are offered fee waivers for conferences, or their travel expenses are met to permit them to attend an activity, but is more unusual for them to be paid for their time in the way that salaried university staff are. One model we are using successfully is to employ students in specific partnership roles through our campus jobs agency, and to pay them for their time after they have filled out a reflective timesheet. The sheet allows the students to give details about the activity they have completed, but it also has structured prompts or space for reflection to encourage them to think about their own personal development. It is then encouraging an evaluation of the work that goes beyond just the paycheque.

The cost of these wages is significant. Frequently, partnership roles are attached to particular projects that have their own pockets of funding, but to make the system more comprehensive, there has to be either a very clear and substantial budgetary commitment, or a meaningful way of recognising and valuing the student work hours by other means; in most cases, the only real alternative to money for students is academic credit. Once costs become significant, the funding body expects to see a return on its investment and pressure exists to ensure partnerships work first and foremost for the institution, whether it be the university and/or Students' Union, rather than primarily for the individual participants. The age old question of how to evaluate staff-student partnerships is asked again here as a means to answer the questions of 'what impact is this having' when the purse becomes lighter across UK HE.

Conclusion

The above considerations of the challenges, conflicts and competitions when expanding student-staff partnerships across an institution are part of the conversation colleagues and the authors are having as HEIs attempt to embed student-staff partnership as a means of enhancement across an institution. The authors have found it extremely useful to compare the practice and experience of working with cross-University, staff-student partnership schemes through the spaces created by national networks such as 'Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement' (http://www.raise-network.com/) and 'Realising Engagement through Active Culture Transformation' (http://www.studentengagement.ac.uk/newsite/).

When institutionalising partnership schemes, the authors recommend that thought is put into ownership at the outset, and throughout, consideration is paid to their inclusivity, and to whether they are competing or complementing other student engagement roles, such as student representatives. We must think through the values and aims, to ensure that we do not unintentionally act against them. Thought needs to be put into who gets paid and what effect this has on the perceived value of partnership roles and on the scrutiny that will be placed on them by different bodies, seeking a return on their investment.

We recognise that creating partnership *en masse* is a positive challenge the authors face, as the institutional adoption and funding of such schemes is still lobbied for elsewhere. Patience, determination, persuasion and flexibility with regard to audience are all skills needed to spread partnership across an HEI with mixed priorities and motivations. The authors would recommend prioritising stakeholder engagement, continual reflection on the partnerships created and a willingness to reshape practice on an annual basis.

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