

Staff-student partnerships, power and opportunities: reflections from the Change Agents' Network Conference 2018

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In the final session at the Change Agents' Network Conference 2018, student panellist Kiu Sum posed a thought-provoking and timely question to the audience: "*Do students and staff have different definitions of what constitutes a partnership?*" This is a theme that resonated throughout the conference and continued afterwards.

For example, Jasper Shotts and Reece Taylor-Long (2018) outlined a project in which students were hired as 'Video Support Assistants', developing digital materials for Shotts' students. Both commented on the power dynamic and noted that true partnership required working with a student outside a lecturer's own discipline. "*How,*" they asked, "*can you have a partnership with anything approaching equality when you're the person responsible for marking a student's work?*" As Taylor-Long commented on their successful relationship, "*It doesn't feel like walking into someone's office and feeling like you're going to be taught something*". Similarly, David Shah (2018) reflected on this topic in relation to a number of CAN presentations, subjecting them to the "*meaningful dispersal of power*" test outlined in the NUS Manifesto for Partnership (2015: 8).

We can pursue Sum's line of questioning still further. How mindful are staff of those to whom they are offering partnership opportunities and of how they do so? I am certain that most staff feel that they are being equitable in the opportunities they provide and that these are open to the entire student body. I know this to be the case in my own department and there is often a sense that it is down to individual students to choose whether or not to engage with those opportunities. Indeed, we often talk about how to 'reach the disengaged'. But this is problematic. What constitutes 'engagement' and what assumptions are we making about students, their lives and their motivations? We know that students are not a homogenous grouping and that they are certainly not all eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds, entering higher education (HE) for the first time and with no home or care responsibilities.

A partnership opportunity of the kind I discussed at CAN (involving students in the recruitment of library staff) has always felt like a positive step to me, increasing the student voice within Library Services and offering them a unique perspective on the recruitment process (Pittaway, 2016 and Pittaway, 2018). On reflection, however, I find that there are some barriers to accessing this opportunity. It certainly disadvantages students who study subjects with high contact hours or with placement requirements. The offer is also unpaid. In HE, we tend to promote volunteering as a universal good, offering students a high return on investment in terms of career development, but unpaid work is simply not open to or desirable for all. For example, those with care responsibilities outside university, or those who need paid employment to live, may not have the time or energy for volunteering or other unpaid opportunities.

I wonder also whether there might be obstacles that are not obvious to me as a cisgender, white woman with no disabilities. Librarianship, for example, is an extremely white profession with 96.7% of the UK workforce identifying as white (CILIP and ARA, 2015) – might that influence students who identify as black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) in their decision to involve themselves (or not) in a partnership with Library Services?

CAN showed that a host of fabulous partnerships operate between staff and students in HE in 2018. Our challenge now is to ensure that future partnerships are equitable in their distribution of power and that as many students as possible are empowered to become partners and make the most of these opportunities. Identifying such issues is only a first step; next, we need to work out how to put the theory into practice.

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