

The course committee: How to work together to make it better

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Abstract

This case study presents a continuing project – run by the Student-Staff Partnership team at Nottingham Trent University – which aims to support the course committee, NTU's mechanism for student reps and staff to discuss together the health and development of the course. An inquiry into course-committee practice revealed patterns indicating that such committees do not work as expected. Resources have thus been developed in order to facilitate more meaningful member contributions to the committee meeting. Additionally, one-to-one support has been offered to a few course committees, helping move the current practice from a passive approach towards a more partnership-based one.

Background and context

In recent years, there has been increasing effort by higher education (HE) institutions in the United Kingdom (UK) to involve their students in university governance, as part of the growth of 'student engagement' practice across the sector (Trowler, 2010). Student involvement in institutional governance, such as quality assurance, curriculum development, strategic management etc. is judged to be central to student engagement, enabling students to be active participants in their own learning experience (Little *et al.*, 2009). However, there remain concerns that it is still the case that students are consulted mostly on decisions already made or on mechanisms already established and are not being involved in making those decisions themselves (Carey, 2013).

Consultative approaches as mentioned above sit at the more passive end of the spectrum of student engagement. According to Healey *et al.* (2014) and Foyle and Mutton (2017), student engagement can be described as a continuum from a more passive approach to a full, active partnership. Figure 1 demonstrates the three stages of the spectrum, along with the reach versus depth of each student-engagement approach. Whilst each stage of student engagement is suitable for different contexts, purposes and available resources, it would be beneficial for both students and staff to move towards the partnership end of the engagement continuum, where there is a greater sense of belonging and empowerment.

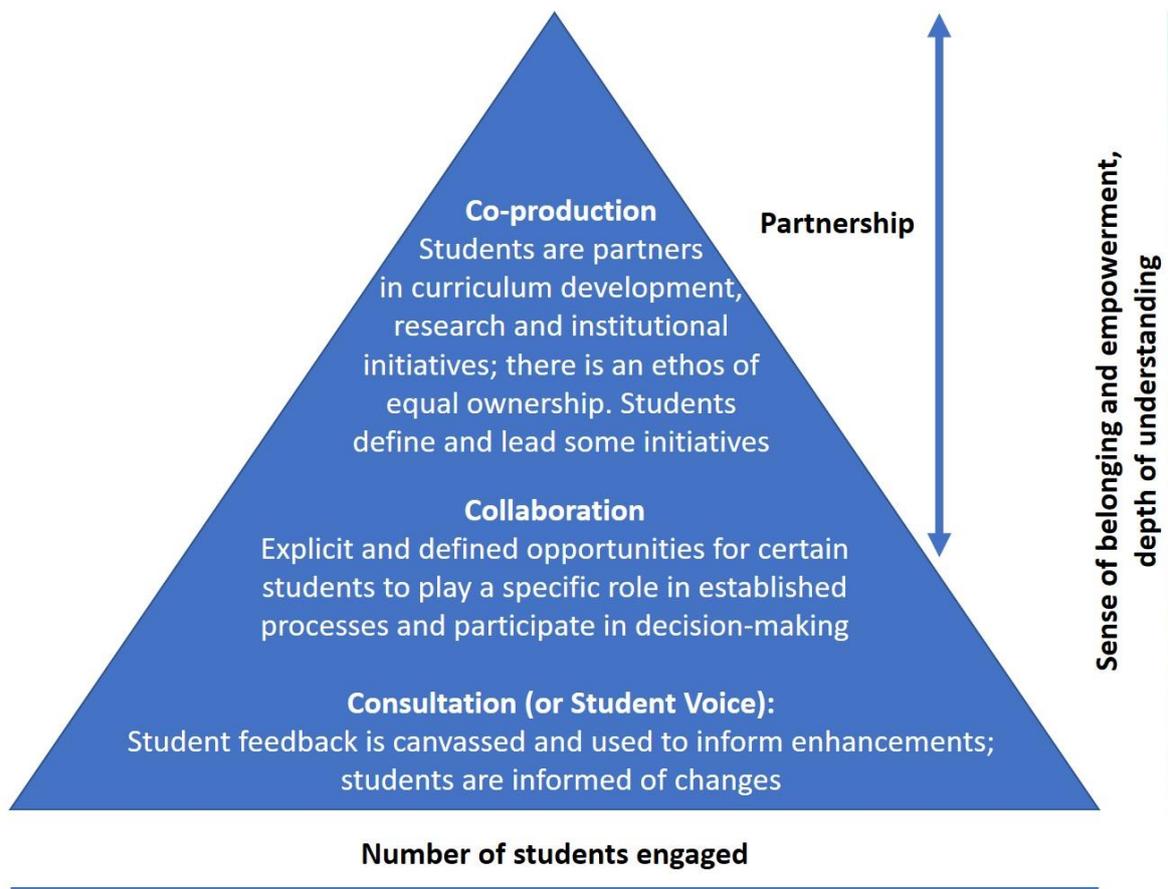


Figure 1. Reach versus depth of different student engagement approaches, after Healey *et al.* (2014) and Foyle and Mutton (2017)

This case study presents a project – led by the Student-Staff Partnership (SSP) team at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) – which aims to provide increasing support to the moving of course-committee practice further towards the partnership end of the spectrum. Not every student-engagement practice among the variety undertaken at NTU is partnership-based or can be supported quickly to engage students as partners. Consequently, the goal of the team is, gradually but steadily, to move all these practices respectively to: active consultation where there is passive receipt of feedback; collaboration where there is only participation to a certain extent; co-design/co-ownership between students and staff where some active collaboration is evident.

To provide some context, NTU is a young public research university in Nottingham, UK, with significant standing in HE. According to the 2017 National Student Satisfaction (NSS) survey, the University achieved an 89% satisfaction score in general, which placed NTU fifth amongst mainstream universities (HEFCE, 2017). Strong as it is in 'Student Voice', NTU ranks below the sector regarding students' involvement in partnership. Only 36% of NTU's respondents reported involvement in partnership activities, compared to 42% found in the sector average, according to the UK Engagement Survey in 2017. The University still has much to do if it is to engage students in a more collaborative and partnership-based approach, especially in University-level and course-level governance. A particular example is the difficulty of engaging course reps in course committees across NTU.

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At NTU, the course-committee meeting is held termly and it is considered the key forum where students and staff – including the course leader, course administrator and academic staff members – jointly discuss the continuing health of the course and the students' learning experience. Important as the role of the course committee is, in 2016-2017, only 50% of the course reps received accreditation for attending course-committee meetings and completing other course rep tasks. Course reps' disengagement has consequently led to consideration of whether the course committee is effective and whether there are any gaps that could be filled. Feedback from course leaders at NTU's Course Leader Conference in 2017 also highlighted the questionable effectiveness of current course-committee practice. Thus emerged the current project: 'Challenging the perception of the course committee'.

Phase 1: The inquiry into the course committee

In October 2017, the SSP team conducted a small inquiry into current course-committee practice at NTU. A survey was designed by the team's placement student (who had previously been a course rep), with questions asking the respondents about their experience regarding the course committee. The survey received responses from ninety-six participants across the University, fairly equally split between course leaders, course administrators and course reps, with a few responses coming from other academic staff and professional service staff. The team then conducted focus-group interviews – ten students and nine staff members participated – to explore further what had been found from the survey. Afterwards, observation of four course-committee meetings from four different Schools provided the team with more in-depth information on the current state of the practice.

The team found that, even though course committees were not run in a uniform way across NTU, there were some common patterns that potentially hindered (and still do hinder) its effectiveness. Firstly, the focus of course committees at NTU was usually student feedback and how to respond to it. In the survey, the majority of respondents, both student reps and staff alike, chose 'student issue resolution' as the most important function of the course committee, over items such as 'course development and enhancement' or 'course management'. Focus groups and later observations of meetings confirmed this pattern: much of the time in the meeting was spent discussing students' issues, rather than looking at such other items as the course development plan or external examiner reports. Additionally, it became apparent that 'student feedback' was the agenda item that student reps most contributed to, perhaps because only in discussion of that did they feel confident to raise their voice. In consequence, this became one of the drivers for the team's later resources development, to engage reps in other aspects of the committee meeting.

Another important finding was that no real training for the course-committee role was in place, either for students or staff. The majority of the staff reported having had no training or induction at all before attending their first committee meeting and said that there was more pressure for course leaders as they were usually the chairs. Student reps reported having had general training on being course reps, with specific focus on how to gather feedback from their cohort, but none for the course-committee role. It is perfectly possible that such a training bias might have led student reps to perceive the meeting as the place to resolve students' issues. Given such student expectations, it would also serve to explain the survey result which showed that students perceived the course committee as more effective than did the staff.

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This discrepancy between staff and student perceptions of the course committee is not the only difference between their viewpoints. When asked about student contribution to the development of the course, most reps expressed an interest in that, but many of them felt ill-equipped to participate. For example, they voiced their unfamiliarity with terminology – say, of ‘quality assurance’ – and their inability to see the relevance of an agenda item like ‘course admission statistics’. Some of the staff, on the other hand, believed that students were not interested in discussing the course’s development. Such an assumption might well have prevented staff from engaging the reps in discussions beyond students’ issues, which in turn would have served only to perpetuate their view that students were unwilling or unable to contribute. The relationship dynamic might also have influenced the attitudes of both staff and students; it could be argued that the traditional power relationship between lecturers and students exists also in course governance, as suggested by Carey (2013), with student reps leaving the developmental aspect of the course to the ‘expert’ staff.

Meetings’ being issue-oriented, the lack of training and the different mutual perceptions of students and staff are the three key themes emerging from the inquiry into the course committee which made it difficult for student reps and staff to collaborate in a meaningful way on the development of the course. A few other barriers to students’ attendance and engagement with course committees came through in focus groups, including: not being able to see the results of their feedback (*“We usually don’t hear anything about our feedback until the next meeting”*); the inconvenience of the timing of the meetings; the cycle of the meeting, with the first meeting before rep training and the final session during the assessment period.

Phase 2: Developing and introducing supportive resources

The workshops aimed to challenge perceptions and encourage self-reflection among all those involved in influencing course committees. The resources developed sought to address the concerns identified through the inquiry phase, by equipping staff and students to hold more effective meetings as the first step to promoting more meaningful collaboration on course development. Historically, given a lack of training, committee members figured out how to work in course committees by learning along the way, following what was done by others. Thus, the meeting was run as it had always been run, irrespective of the effectiveness of the approach.

The basis of new approaches introduced to course committees was that the majority of the time and effort spent should be devoted to the preparation and follow-up stages, as opposed to participation in the meeting itself, in accordance with the principles set out in ‘Meeting together’ by Graessle, Gawlinski and Farrell (2006). The inquiry pointed out that neither the preparation nor the follow-up stage was effective, as members knew neither what was expected of them nor what ensued after the meeting until they attended the next one.

In order to support the committee in meeting preparation, the team developed an agenda-planning tool to ensure that every agenda item would be recorded in terms of purpose, required action/s and outcome/s desired. This purpose/action/outcome approach would help address members’ concerns about not knowing what to expect and assist them in preparing for the meeting. It would support reps to seek feedback from the cohort to enable discussion. Furthermore, it would also support the course administrator in identifying the key outcomes

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for the minutes of the meeting, instead of trying to capture everything (see paragraph on minutes below).

At NTU, planning the agenda for the course committee is often the job of the course leader and/or course administrator. Making it clear to other members how this is done can create a much more transparent and collaborative environment. However, it is the intention of the team to engage student reps also in the planning process, either formally, in an agenda-planning session, or informally, in a chat with the course leader, discussing which items students would like to add to the agenda and giving them some background to other agenda items.

Regarding the follow-up stage, as the current minutes are considered rather long and not student-friendly (and not very useful, as they are often sent out only before the next committee meeting), the team developed a new minutes template with an integrated action-tracker. The new template includes key discussions, with actions planned, due date and the people in charge, along with updates about the process at the time the minutes are sent out. They therefore are much quicker to record, identify clearer outcomes, have actions easier for tracking and are also shorter, so that members are more likely to read them. The minutes can be publicly published so that all students, not just student reps, can be informed of the results of their feedback, as well as of other matters discussed by the course committee. This will help close the feedback loops and encourage students to engage more in course governance.

The above tools help facilitate more meaningful contribution from both students and staff and make meetings more effective, but it is essential to provide all members, especially student reps, with an introduction to the course committee, so that they all have shared expectations of its nature, role and functions. With inputs from the survey and focus groups (and, later, the workshops delivered to committee members), the team created a booklet and a series of videos containing essential information about the course committee, along with some 'top tips' to make each member role more productive.

In January 2018, four workshops – with all the different committee roles presenting in each – were delivered to forty-seven staff members and seven student reps across the University. The goal of the workshops was to create in participants a shared understanding of the course committee's purposes, to develop an understanding and appreciation of their own as well as others' roles and to facilitate discussion regarding the shortcomings of current course-committee practice and possible solutions to them. Having understood the barriers and difficulties that each committee member was facing, both staff and students then collaboratively discussed how to improve the current practice, providing valuable inputs for the team to update their resources.

After the workshops, the resources were made public and some of the tools were taken up by a few early adopters, to be used in their course committees and even other meetings, providing valuable feedback on whether they worked. The new minutes templates received positive feedback from the administrators, who were usually the recorders of the meeting minutes. The new minutes-taking practice has received positive feedback and is reported to be much easier and quicker, with clear and concise actions noted, as well as the people in charge and the outcomes expected. The SSP team has, at the time of writing, not yet been able to collect feedback from other committee members, as the minutes were adopted at the

last committee of the year, but it is the team's intention to do so and to update the template according to the feedback.

The new agenda-planning tool has yet to be adopted in course committees, but it has been used by the Student Engagement and Academic Representation (StEAR) steering group, jointly run by the NTSU and the SSP team. Upon receiving the new agenda, the reps involved in StEAR found it effective in helping them understand what to expect in the meeting, as well as what was expected of them. Student reps have not yet been included in the planning stage, but this is the transition needed to familiarise them, as well as the other committee members, with the agenda-planning tool, so that a more partnership-based approach will be enabled. The same applies to course committees.

Phase 3: One-to-one support

Meeting tools can help make meetings more productive and facilitate meaningful contributions from both students and staff, but a change in culture towards a more partnership-based approach is much harder to achieve, which is why the SSP team offered one-to-one support to a few course committees to help them implement more challenging changes. The support will be personalised according to each course committee's current situation, but, in general, it includes some observations of meetings to give feedback and develop a plan to suit needs, together with identification of good practice to be shared across the School and the University. Reps' inductions will also be supported, as well as adaptation of meeting templates, closing of the feedback loops and making room for course developmental discussion among all members in the course committee. Additionally, more opportunities for students to lead different items in the agenda will be considered. The team is currently working on supporting two different Schools, preparing for the next course committees at the beginning of the next academic year.

What's next:

The project is currently at the one-to-one support phase. Feedback from this stage will help evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. The next step is to implement changes on a wider, University-level scale, moving the current practice towards a more partnership-based approach. Evaluation of the project will include methods used in the inquiry into the course committee, together with comparison and analysis of the changes.

Reflection and lessons learnt:

The course committee at NTU has been run as it was always run. Staff and students alike have learnt from existing practice and neither group has felt confident to question it. The inquiry has revealed some shortcomings of this practice, but they are of no surprise to the committee members. What is interesting for members to know, is that, more often than not, staff and students have been holding very different views and perceptions and they have not been aware of those differences. It is beneficial for both to understand and appreciate others' viewpoints, in order to develop mutual respect and create a supportive, collaborative environment.

Another barrier preventing students from contributing to course-committee discussion and planning, and perhaps to University governance in general, has been their perception of staff as experts, leading them to feel unprepared and ill-qualified to raise their voice. Further

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changes towards more partnership-based approaches are still needed, but they are not ones to happen overnight, instead, this is a transition that needs to be brought about gradually. Students need to be introduced to University governance to understand what that is and how it is run so that they can prepare themselves for making contributions. More importantly, they need to be supported, to be seen as partners and to be given opportunities to work as partners alongside staff, making decisions regarding the health and development of their own courses.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

BA (Hons) Nottingham Studies Course Committee agenda			
Date: 28/02/2018			
Location: Chaucer 101			
Item	Purpose/questions to think about	Action before meeting	Approach/ Intended outcome
1. Apologies	To note who is able to attend and contribute to the meeting.	Any apologies to be sent ahead of meeting. Provide a deputy where appropriate.	Outcomes of meeting to be communicated to those missing.
2. School development plan	No discussion needed.	Read and note.	Ask for responses or confirmation of reading via email, instead of bringing to the meeting.
3. Course development plan	To update members about the health and development of the course and have an action plan. To discuss possible changes to the course and agree on actions.	Course leader to send course information (admission, attendance, etc.) along with questions to think about. Course leader to send proposed changes and rationale. All: to read and think of questions and feedback to give in the meeting.	Actions regarding course. Discussion which leads to decision on whether to approve course changes. Course change forms to be updated and forwarded to SASQC.
4. External examiners report	Celebrate things that are good about the course. To confirm quality of the course.	Course leader: To highlight key points (positive and recommendations) and pose questions for CC before the circulation. All: To read and think about actions.	Discussion in small groups in the meeting (each group to include a student). Shareable good practice identified.

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	Agree how to respond to any recommendations.		Ideas to address recommendations. Agree a response to External Examiner.
5. Students' feedback	To help the course team to understand the student experience. To identify areas for course enhancement	Course reps to ask peers for feedback. Course reps to let course leader know of agenda items before the meeting. Course reps to provide an appropriate and representative view of the student experience on the course.	Good practice and areas for improvement identified. Actions to take to develop and improve the course.

Table 1: Example of the agenda planning tool