Staff-student partnership in an age of change: an editorial reflection

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The Change Agent Network (CAN) and Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change (JEIPC) were both founded in 2012, when student-staff partnership discourse and activity had a high level of energy across further (FE) and higher education (HE). When the University of Winchester bid to host the CAN Conference for the second time, in 2018, the team chose a title that reflected a period in United Kingdom (UK) education when the continuing marketisation of HE meant significant change (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009). Throughout these six years of the CAN network and JEIPC, the areas of 'Student Engagement' and 'Partnership' have remained a focus for Western FE and HE, with commensurate growth in contributor submissions to, and delegate numbers at, the annual CAN conferences, while elsewhere in this turbulent sector many other agendas have simply dropped off the radar. Practitioners, policy makers, students, students' unions, academics and managers have held on to partnership as a way of resisting consumerism.

The conference committee – and editors of this issue of JEIPC – therefore opted for 'Student-staff partnership in an age of change' as the title and theme of the conference. This issue features twenty apposite articles from across the two sectors, including new practices, reflections, opinions and research pieces – all on staff-student partnerships. The editors here reflect on their role in relation both to the theme and these articles; they also hope that readers will welcome this issue's vivid illustrations of the importance of staff-student partnership in inspiring conversations, bringing new perspectives, making new insights and encouraging innovation in our educational community.

Reflections from Maisha Islam, University of Winchester

From late 2017 until now, I have had the pleasure of growing and working within the HE sector and I cannot think of a better field to do this in than 'student engagement'. As part of the editorial team, I am thankful to have learnt so much and delighted to have been able to engage with pieces in this special issue that I might not ordinarily have come across – they exemplify how student-staff partnership and its practice are integral to both student and staff learning and teaching in this age of change. For example, in breaking traditional directive training techniques for IT skills, the deployment of student training advisers has allowed for more successful and engaging training, thus enabling a more fluid and responsive learning environment for digital skills development (see *Brown and Veliko*).

Additionally, I was excited to read about initiatives where deeper engagement at course level brings about transformational effects for students – not only do they develop their own skills,

but they are also held in high regard for their knowledge and experiences as part of partnership schemes. Such is also the case at UCL, where first-year Biomedical Engineering students were supported to use computer-aided design software by their third-year counterparts – a mutually-beneficial process for all parties involved (see *Nikitichev, Chikte, Ahmed, Desjardins, Vercauteren and Garcia-Souto*).

It is important in these challenging times to remain responsive to the shifting needs of an ever-changing student body. Fulfilling the expectations of an outcomes-orientated generation may be better achieved by understanding the motivations of the students and their perceptions of how activities undertaken at university may directly benefit them. This idea is further unpacked in the findings of a student-staff partnership project at the University of Winchester (see *Moore and Lowe*).

As my own research into student engagement has focused on student voice (particularly minority and under-represented student populations), it was a real pleasure to read about reflections on power and opportunities (see *Pittaway*). The author in this opinion piece highlights a dissonance between a) opportunities we may believe are equitable and b) reality: just how accessible are these really, in practice? This piece skilfully highlights how the intersections in our identities can sometimes inadvertently blind us from exploring these inequalities.

As a result, whilst these papers highlight great examples of staff and students coming together within their institutions to research or implement good practice, I believe a pertinent issue to consider when looking at such partnerships is how inclusive in nature they actually are. Mercer-Mapstone and Marie (2019), in their comprehensive practical guide to scaling up student-staff partnership, note that inclusivity of both student and staff diversity remains a limitation. Our ways of managing these partnerships must therefore be thoughtful and sensitive, so that we do not inadvertently disadvantage those who do not benefit from the privileges of belonging to certain social locations and backgrounds.

Reflections from Dr Stuart Sims, University of Portsmouth

The very essence of being an academic developer is wearing many different hats. It is a role that can be equal parts academic, policy wonk, coach, agony aunt, administrator and busybody. You have to be *au fait* with the latest research, debates, policies and controversies in HE, as well as responsive to changing student and staff bodies. Supporting colleagues to make sense of all this and what it means for them in their practice is a core aspect of this role. For those unfamiliar with this area of work, Gibbs (2013) provides an interesting discussion of the dramatic development over the last few decades of academic development as a field. Viewing the rise of staff-student partnership as both a philosophy and a loosely-aligned set of practices in the face of increasing student numbers, competition for medals and political uncertainty raises a number of challenges for the academic developer. Partnership may be seen as the perfect antidote to the consumerist turn; on the other hand, done cynically, it is a convenient piece of spin to make the university as a corporate behemoth seem a little less evil. The diversity of approaches, the motivations behind them and the consequences are stark – across, and sometimes within, institutions.

The work represented in this special issue has given me a greatly appreciated pause for reflection on these developments. Though the issue is full of valuable work, a few pieces

resonated with my own experience of working in the area of staff-student partnership. At the heart of this is a potential tension between institutional and local approaches to partnership. In many ways, a cross-institutional approach is the most effective way of ensuring a coherent and impactful approach to facilitating staff-student partnership. The piece by colleagues at Lincoln is a fascinating account of an institution that has been at the forefront of the whole university approach, as it takes stock and refreshes itself after ten years of leading in this area (see *O'Sullivan and Pritchard*). In contrast, the account of the work at the University of Portsmouth as it takes steps to embed partnership wholesale is a useful blueprint for those seeking to redevelop their curriculum as a whole institution (see *Dunbar-Morris, Barlow and Layer*). Complementing this, with a specific example of the often-under-researched role of partnership approaches to quality assurance, colleagues from UCL provide an invaluable road map for how to engage students on the ground level of a more structured approach (see *King and Irarrazabal*). But institutional approaches are not without their pitfalls, namely the risk of stifling more individually innovative work that may not conform to a bigger-picture vision. This issue features a wealth of such individual good practice, reminding us that the variety of work going on in such a diverse range of contexts is a real strength of partnership work. Some ideas could thrive only locally – for example, 'engagement parties' (run by the Department of English Literature at the University of Reading) encouraged staff and students to plan a range of events and activities underpinned by partnership principles. Similarly, while institutional structures can support the development of a co-constructed curriculum, the practicalities of this must be accounted for in local contexts, as the example in genetic counselling from *McEwen, McLean and Jacobs* demonstrates.

I would suggest that a potential bridge between the institutional, structured approach and the local pioneering approach to staff-student partnership lies with good support from academic developers or other third parties. Integrating staff-student partnership approaches should be the norm when supporting colleagues, both informally (Thomson and Trigwell, 2018) and through their inclusion in programmes designed to support and develop the teaching practices of colleagues. Staff and students both need a scaffolded approach to engage in partnership work. To be sustainable, partnership must be scalable, but to achieve that, I would argue, we need to be less precious about what counts as partnership and more welcoming of colleagues and students who are keen to engage at any level. The risks of not getting partnership right are also raised effectively in this issue (see *Islam* for a compelling example) – only strengthening the need for supporting colleagues and students to ensure that the risks taken are the right ones and don't leave anyone behind.

Reflections from Dr Carol Shepherd, Andover College

This special issue of the Journal of Education, Innovation, Partnership and Change coincides with a switch in role for me, from that of research officer – working in student engagement within HE – to lecturer – in Access to Higher Education (Humanities) and A level at a local further education (FE) college. Whilst this has been a clear move from a research to a predominantly teaching role, several key threads have made it a more integrated and seamless transition than perhaps I initially anticipated. Key to both roles remain the arguably competing tensions of student as passive consumer of the educational product and student as an active change agent in a dialogue between educational providers, leading to a mutual shaping of the end product. There is perhaps an added dimension to my

additional role as Access co-ordinator which can benefit the HE sector in my local area: having worked in student recruitment in a university setting, as well as within learning and teaching, I have the ability to impress upon 'wannabe undergrads' the active role they can – and arguably should – play in influencing their learning at level 3, as a precursor to being proactive change agents when they embark upon level 4 studies at university.

From my experience, shaping learning and teaching comes in many forms and this is indeed reflected in some of the contributions in this issue. Here, Charles and Wyn-Williams outline how student newsletters at the University of Greenwich have successfully been utilised as a means of communicating feedback between students and faculty, in a way that marketised and sanitised university-driven output cannot. Meanwhile, Bohnacker-Bruce of the University of Winchester highlights the value of student-staff collaborative research projects in both achieving student engagement and in closing the expectation gap between undergraduates and staff mentors. Even the more problematic aspects of the 'Winchester Research Apprenticeship Programme' (WRAP) – aspects which Bohnacker-Bruce terms 'clashing expectations' – represent an opportunity to identify and address mismatches in student and staff expectations, thereby informing future practice. Herdan, Reilly and Warren similarly uncover such discrepancies between staff output and student experience, this time through asking students to review an online learning platform for maths and accountancy courses. 'Feedback fatigue' as a common challenge for all those working in the field of student engagement again comes to the fore, highlighting the need for logistical creativity in the timing and the methodology of engaging students in critical feedback. An exciting 'snowballing' of student engagement is discussed in Madeleine Davies' case study of a student-led research conference within the English Literature Department of Reading University, which also spawned follow-on events and a publication. Citing Krause in Trowler (2010), Davies closes with a cautionary warning – to safeguard against the ever-present threat of inertia among those who would view themselves as service-users, rather than service-shapers. This is an area I am aware of and plan to tackle within my current role in FE.

Reflections from Cassie Shaw, University of Winchester

I was heartened to see, at the 2018 Change Agents Network conference, colleagues from across the sector braving the storm of change and managing to flourish amidst the ever-evolving landscape that is FE and HE. I have always had a passion for student engagement and student involvement in educational development. I spent over two years working as the 'Student Engagement Assistant' in Winchester's Student Union before moving to a new role working in the University's Learning and Teaching Development Unit for the past three years. Student voice and engagement is always at the heart of what I do and is embedded in the ethos of both the Union and the University. However, this is not achieved without its challenges and potential risk (Shaw and Atvars, 2018). The importance of the partnership relationship between the university and the student union is emphasised in the piece by Leslie and Gardiner, which provides a case study of their work to bring more effectively together their respective institutions' important and valuable individual contributions to the student experience. They discuss their attempts to avoid duplication of efforts and the confusion that can be perceived by students because of a lack of communication. They highlight the key aspects to effective partnership work between their institutions and provide recommendations and reflections moving forward.

In my previous role working in the Union, I coordinated the 'Student Academic Representatives' system, so the submission from Dinh Hung Vu was fascinating to read. In this, he explores a project he undertook to improve the issues I imagine many student academic representatives and their coordinators face. His preliminary research revealed the intimidating nature of the committee meetings that students are attending and the HE jargon with which they are continually faced. He also emphasises the importance of ensuring that students understand where their feedback has gone and what has been acted on as a result. The students consulted in this case study felt alienated by the processes and disengaged by failure to close the feedback loop. Dinh Hung Vu proposes a tool developed for the purpose of engaging students with the course committee processes, so that the students feel informed and the committee processes are more clearly purposeful. This tool is a valuable proposition and offers a great opportunity for those seeking to find a way to ensure that course representatives remain engaged in the process and outcomes of their role.

Harrison and Pinfold provide a clear example of how partnership work can lead towards making incredibly valuable changes in the development of education. They discuss a project conducted under the 'Student Associates in Learning and Teaching' (SALT) scheme, which sought to explore and solve the oft-considered thorny issue of group work in assessment. They emphasise how vital the student partners were in this project for communicating with the body of students, who felt more comfortable speaking openly with their peers. Engaging students in partnership approaches such as this can lead to the most effective change relating to issues that seem to evade staff and persistently trip them up. As we all weather the adverse conditions led by a marketisation of education, I believe the more we can do to encourage, foster and create processes and opportunities for a partnership approach to educational development, the greater our chances of survival will be.

Reflections from Tom Lowe, University of Winchester

As noted above, the FE and HE sectors have been increasingly marketised in recent years, leading to increased competition between institutions for student numbers, league table rankings and facilities, but also to increased emphasis on student outcomes, including employment readiness, learning and engagement measures. Institutions and their staff at all levels are increasingly being asked to foster 'student success' which, like 'student engagement', means different things to different people. Student success measures from the English HE regulator state that success is measured simply by progression into the next level of study or graduate employment (Office for Students, 2018). Students themselves may view success as achieving a graduate output or personal project which drew them to FE/HE in the first place (Jary and Lebeau, 2009) and many academics still hold on to traditional definitions of success – such as becoming a critical thinker, scholar or citizen (Bryson and Hand, 2007). Although many argue that an outcomes-orientated and outcomes-measured education system draws stakeholders away from the true purpose of post-secondary education (MacFarlane and Tomlinson, 2017), the sector has come under considerable pressure to increase student engagement via technology enhanced learning, student-centred approaches and employability interventions, which, it can be argued, enable students to succeed. As a HE stakeholder who has held several roles alongside the growth of staff-student partnership work and scholarship (student representative, student union officer, research project manager, student engagement manager and acting head of

careers), I have been witness to all sides of the complex 4D shape of student and staff engagement motivations relating to education and I know that student success, currently being emphasised, is certainly as multifaceted as student engagement.

In this issue of JEIPC, the emphasis on staff-student partnership work is highlighted by Vikki Liogier from the Education and Training Foundation, who showcases the uptake of partnership work in FE, offering an alternative case study to the numerous published accounts which already exist in HE (see *Liogier*). The paper argues how important work in partnership is in FE, recognising that challenges exist, but that the benefits can empower students to take ownership at a time of increased emphasis on student-centred learning. Liogier also draws upon the growth of 'Technology Enhanced Learning' (TEL) in FE, which has seen considerable growth as education technology companies have targeted a modernising sector with endless offers of apps, platforms and data analytics to assist students with learning, provide measures for engagement and establish new student voice pathways. This issue also features an article from the University of Liverpool, where the Students' Association worked with the University Library to create a community project for students to share their unneeded textbooks with others, thereby providing a cyclical giving-and-receiving of core textbooks via an online interface (see *Schulkins and Mohan*). This article emphasises the importance of departmental partnership work – between the Students' Association and Library Service – to ensure that the project was a success.

Staff-student partnership has seen students take up such contemporary roles and responsibilities in education communities as co-researchers, representatives, peer supporters and even national reviewers of whole universities; this continues to be the case. Sue Beckingham, from Sheffield Hallam University, offers an insightful case study which inspires reflection about the use of social media in learning and teaching. The case study showcases the benefits of working with students as partners to enhance the online digital skills of staff and students – where "*engagement is flexible*" as part of the SMASH team project of staff and students (see *Beckingham*). An emerging tricky area of partnership work is empowering students to be observers of teaching, which has been trialled with volunteering faculty only at a handful of HE institutions globally. One article in this issue includes an example of this practice from Birmingham City as part of the HEFCE '*Improving learning and teaching through collaborative observation*'. This article gives a case study of this innovative practice, which provided the authors with a unique opportunity to reflect on and evaluate the performance of teachers in partnership with students (see *Turville and Pressick*), offering another area of contemporary practice to the ever-growing multitude of student-engagement activities.

These four articles – as indeed do all contributions to this issue – showcase the diversity of staff-student partnership work across FE and HE, as well as the emerging practices and new spaces that are likely to be found wherever partnership can take place. Where an outcomes-focused sector places staff-student partnership is not necessarily clear, but what *is* clear from this issue is that partnership is still happening in widely different educational contexts. Possibly this way of work is becoming the norm and will continue to adapt, shape and find new places in our education institutions whatever the changes that impose themselves.

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