

Editorial reflection

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has, and will continue to have, tremendous and truly life-changing impact, impossible to calculate right now. When it became clear that a lockdown was going to be announced, higher and further education institutions immediately stowed all the plans they had for the rest of the academic year. We put to one side research, conferences, goals, projects, hopes and plans, in order to focus on our priority: putting our students first.

The theme of the 2019 Change Agents' Network (CAN) conference at The Open University (OU) was 'The evolving landscape of staff-student partnership'. At the time, we asked our delegates to reflect critically on our collective progress to date and to begin to envision the future of staff-student partnership in a rapidly changing education sector. Now, 'rapidly changing' seems to have been prescient indeed.

The CAN community has every reason to feel prepared and proud. We may not have been anticipating a pandemic, but this community has always championed and supported change.

The network's events are an opportunity to witness genuine partnership between institutions and their students. Members of the network understand the direct relevance to our evolving staff-student partnership landscape of several important things: emerging practices, tools, approaches and – crucially – the mistakes we make along the way.

Witnessing the sight of colleagues and friends in universities and colleges in the United Kingdom and around the world reacting to the lockdown has been a privilege. Here is change. Here is wading in, finding new skills, learning from each other, caring for each other, helping each other, trying things out, finding things that don't work, trying to find a new way.

Curriculum has been adapted, sometimes not only for first-time digital presentation, but also for first-time digital *distance* presentation. Assessment strategies have been revamped, with judicious juggling of conflicting institutional priorities and ways of ensuring appropriate experiences and outcomes for anxious students, some of them on the verge of graduating into an uncertain world. Professional services staff have been keeping the lights on, throwing themselves into keeping learning management systems live online, supporting the use of learning technology... and students through the crisis.

CAN offers a unique opportunity to celebrate the power of student-staff partnership in practice, now recognised as a driver for curricular innovation and change. The OU has excellent examples of best practice in these areas, with a rich narrative of innovative partnership with students in the development of teaching and learning content, experiences, activities, tools and platforms.

I've been touched and honoured to see how many academic and professional members of staff from universities and colleges have looked to the OU's long-established mechanisms for distance learning and sought some of its online practical expertise during the past months as they have adjusted to this monumental change.

This issue of the Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change features a collection that bears out the goals, aspirations and experiences of the CAN community and offers insight that feels more relevant today than ever before. A brief review of the articles in

the issue confirms the splendidly varied and creative practices being undertaken, not to mention the professional perseverance of partnership colleagues and their honesty in acknowledging and addressing the challenges involved.

A summary of the content and scope of this issue of *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*

A powerful research article by Alison Cook-Sather, Launa Gauthier and Miciah Foster supplies an overview of responses to a survey – about what it takes, given inevitable institutional barriers and challenges, to launch and sustain pedagogical partnership programmes – sent to both the directors of and participants in partnership schemes at institutions across the globe. The authors explain how growth mindsets – rather than fixed ones – emerged as a theme and then discuss how ‘drawing on and developing growth mindsets constitute a generative way of thinking about partnership work’; their article itself represents their own distinct perspectives as partners as they co-researched and co-authored this piece. The findings, which include respondents’ advice for those planning to launch partnership programmes, corroborate what others have identified as key benefits and challenges. The adopting of appropriate mindsets, with consequent improvement in engagement, learning, work and achievement, as well as starting small and harnessing existing institutional partnership ethos and practice, seem, according to this paper, to have much to offer.

A less usual slant on student engagement is provided by Sam Jenkins, who reports on personal experience as Volunteering and Community Officer at the University of Winchester Student Union to demonstrate that engagement in volunteering constitutes an important part of the overall student experience, especially when volunteering opportunities are integrated into course curricula, as this makes the additional workload more manageable and confirms an institution’s commitment to the value of volunteering. This paper explores factors likely to encourage students to volunteer and outlines the consequent benefits to all stakeholders, from the students themselves – who reinforce and extend skills acquired through formal teaching and learning and gain real-world experience – to their institution, its staff and the surrounding community and to the external organisations which offer volunteering opportunities. The author paints a positive picture of the networks and alliances which currently support volunteering in higher education and of a personal initiative at Winchester, the ‘Faculty Community Ambassadors’ scheme, while also indicating the potential for staff-student partnerships in volunteering endeavours.

Elliott Lancaster, Russell Crawford, Raphael Hallett, Timothy Lustig and Filippo Nereo offer a case study evaluation of a student-staff policy group investigation – by means of focus group – into student perceptions and understanding of Keele University’s new initiative, the Keele Elective Pathways (KEP), which sprang from a student-staff effort to enhance Keele’s interdisciplinary offer. Co-design has been a feature of the initiative. Each pathway focuses on an area with contemporary social relevance and, to enhance their studies, students can choose from elective modules within clearly structured pathway groups. This paper’s findings suggest a positive student response to the KEP, especially in relation to employability, and choice of pathway is clearly linked to the type of assessment deployed within each pathway. The study underlines how a staff-student collaborative partnership continues to support Keele’s founding principle of embedding interdisciplinary study in all aspects of the education on offer and is thus achieving innovation in teaching and assessment.

A conscious effort to alter the traditional relationship between lecturer and students – epitomised by the lecture theatre context – transformed the learning experiences and styles of students in what came to be termed the ‘guided individual study time’ (GIST) project at the University of Kent. As their case study shows, Maria Lehane and Fran Beaton aimed to shift the emphasis of an education and training module – for students from a variety of disciplines – from a teaching-led to a learning-led curriculum, with co-production of knowledge at its core. As the tutor involved, Maria describes how she set about facilitating formative feedback opportunities for students in both lectures and seminars, in order to ensure that learners ‘understood and recognised congruence between the learning outcomes, assessment method and grading criteria’, by creating collaborative opportunities for self-identification of both gaps in personal study skills and individual learning needs. Occasions for co-production of knowledge, helped by GIST, brought teacher and students together in increasingly open dialogue. Observed and measurable improvements in attendance, participation and achievement in summative assessments ensued in consequence of the measures adopted.

Samantha Clarkson, Lucy Bamwo and Tamara Benford-Brown offer a sensitive portrayal of student-staff partnership across the University of Hertfordshire at a time of institutional change, in the form of a new online learning environment. In the context of a decade-long tradition of ‘students as partners and change agents’, the role of ‘student technology mentors’ (STMs) was a fundamental driving force in promoting and implementing the pedagogical principles of the University’s ‘Guided Learning Journey’. The STMs were fully involved in the shaping of student communication, training and technical developments; they supported academic staff to engage effectively with the new environment; they developed personal skills with huge relevance to their future employment. In this case study, the authors include insights from student and staff participants, acknowledge the challenges faced in overcoming pockets of staff resistance to change and recognise that students could have been empowered earlier in the project and offered greater opportunity for involvement in strategic decision-making. The paper provides practical recommendations for the encouragement of work in partnership and confirms the overwhelmingly beneficial impact on both the institution and its community.

Bournemouth University’s tenth Global Festival of Learning (GFOL), in 2019 in Vietnam, continued the GFOL tradition of fostering internationalisation and cultural awareness, its focus being on developing and shaping effective practices for academic-industry-student-engagement (to bridge gaps between academic provisions and workplace needs). Its key activity was the ‘Developing Global Talent for the World of Work’ forum (#WoWforum). In their case study, Milena Bobeva, Kristian Landmark and Abu Khaled describe the event management by and the research work of the student team which supported the organising academic and professional staff, offering fascinating insight into this staff-student-industry co-creation project. A comprehensive data collection framework was developed to capture the complexity of the study and to support and provide evidence of the reach and impact of the #WoWforum and the rest of the GFOL activities on the participants. Very striking is the evidence of equality between staff and students, staff recognition of the maturity and contribution of the students, mutual trust, recognition and respect, as well as improved awareness of cultural diversity. The list of outcomes likewise speaks volumes about the partnership.

The many positives of student/staff partnerships have been well documented in the literature; it is thus both refreshing and fascinating to read the cautionary tale of Paula S. Karlsson, Paul Ferri and Alison Gibb, who offer, as a frank afterword to their previous published encomium on the subject, a case study outlining the potential challenges to successful partnership and demonstrating that things can go wrong. The three authors, all Management lecturers, had worked successfully with third-year Computing Science students at the University of Glasgow to develop software that would digitise the traditional One Minute Paper assessment and feedback tool; however, their subsequent unsatisfactory attempt to encourage two apparently willing students to develop their very promising software prototype proved the absolute necessity of clear-sighted partnership risk assessment. Bravely honest, the authors helpfully provide a list of the main stumbling blocks, admitting their naivety in having made various assumptions about the students' preparedness for taking control and in having failed to recognise that all partners have the power of withdrawal from the partnership, intentionally or not.

Co-creation lay at the heart of the design of an online module produced by the 'Transforming Transitions' project that focused on closing the higher education outcomes gap between BTEC vocational students and those with A levels, as well as on improving the retention of the former. The project, involving four 'selective' universities and partner further education institutions, had – in its consideration of the perspectives of the full range of students regardless of their prior qualifications – the potential to support and improve transition for all students. This case study, by Sandra Huskinson, Helen Mackenzie, Keith Pond and Richard Goodman, focuses on one of four evidenced-based interventions and on its application within one of the institutions, Loughborough University. Twelve students (former BTEC students, second-year undergraduates and PhDs) were recruited to shape, create and develop the module's content. The case study's findings constitute a rich resource for anyone determined to focus on measures for successful transition, regardless of individual student background and experience, in order to increase students' sense of community and belonging. The authors also make the important point that a joined-up approach, involving student services and student support, with good information about how students may access help, needs to be firmly placed within the wider context of institutional support.

In their case study, Emma Jones, Mychelle Pride, Carol Edwards and Rob Tumilty describe the development of a co-creation project in a wholly online environment, undertaken by members of The Open University's Faculty of Business and Law; this faculty-wide project aimed for the co-production (by staff, students and associate lecturers, who assist student learning) of a toolkit of resources to support student mental health and wellbeing. The process involved four hour-long synchronous online sessions, accompanied by an asynchronous online forum. The authors report that technological issues and perceived power imbalances constituted significant challenges; they suggest that prior discrete training sessions on the use of the online tools and a mixture of face-to-face and online interactions might serve to remedy these matters, though they do present, respectively, geographical and confidence-related barriers. Efforts were made by the projects' instigators to build community by judicious choice of language and terminology, consistent emphasis on the participants as co-creators and careful planning to achieve balanced contributions that fully reflected the views of all co-creators. The authors retain their belief that online co-creation is viable, despite the difficulties unique to this context.

Another case study perspective on co-creation compellingly invites us to see the parallels in relationship between tutor and student intern and between that intern and disadvantaged young people in the community during a research project whose aim was to get those young people to tell, illustrate and digitise their own stories, with the support of writers, artists and post- and undergraduate students. The tutor, Candice Satchwell of the University of Central Lancashire, introduces Amy Tempest, whose very personal account of her experiences as an intern in the project forms the main body of this paper. Amy movingly presents her own educational background, circumstances and aspirations as she describes her motivations for applying for and carrying out the internship and subsequently, as a volunteer, for seeing the project to its fulfilment. This personal narrative leaves us with some powerful messages about inclusivity, elimination of hierarchical inequalities, trust, mutual respect, communication and creative cooperation, with unmistakable gains for all partners in co-production, especially in wellbeing and self-expression.

A case study evaluation of the effectiveness of the Leeds College of Music (LCoM) 'Digimentors' initiative, which annually partners with the technology-enhanced learning team a dozen students as digital mentors to their peers, takes account both of the perspective of the students involved and their impact upon the wider student body. The authors, Ruth Clark and Adam Harding, report that institutional research into first-year undergraduate digital literacy had indicated lower student confidence in digital capabilities related to conservatoire systems and academic practices than to 'social', where peer support was strong; there might thus be some gain in providing student peer support to the former. Some key messages spring from the text of this paper: the power of working in partnership with staff and other mentors; the digimentors' confirmation of skills acquisition with employability relevance; growth of confidence in both digital-related skills and in interpersonal communication; improved engagement with the institution; positive impact upon LCoM itself; desire by staff other than the digimentor management team to include digimentors in other initiatives. The willingness of those behind the scheme to assess its effectiveness and consequently to improve it suggests that it is a model that will stand wider scrutiny.

Brandon Sabourin, John Freer, Isabella Bobbie, Marissa Bumanlag, Alexander Derbyshire, Liz Huntingford and Swati Sharma jointly explore how their research activities as members of the 'Partnerships for Research in Education Program' in Ontario have been influenced by their adoption of *Basecamp* as a project management platform. They point out that student-staff partnerships can benefit from using a digital project management platform tool for organisation, but that implementing digital technologies in such partnerships requires consideration of how such tools help to promote partnership values. Their paper reviews the platform and considers how it suits partnership work; the authors also reflect on whether it has assisted in promoting the values of their particular partnership. Their careful strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis of *Basecamp* is very interesting and helpful in offering the reader a precise and objective appraisal of this tool, but it is perhaps their final advice – that other staff-student partnerships should similarly assess how their chosen technology influences their work in partnership – that most strikes home.

Colette Fagan's very detailed study of a collaborative project to embed employability in MSc programmes in the Department of Food and Nutritional Sciences at the University of Reading demonstrates how staff, students and employers may together enhance teaching and learning by making the curriculum relevant to current employment contexts and thereby

skilling students appropriately for the application of multi-disciplinary scientific principles to the workplace. By means of workshops, curriculum and assessment mapping sessions, output creation and analysis, the project described by the author has improved and made explicit institutional communication between staff and students about the systematic development of employability skills. This paper confirms the importance of capturing and valuing the voice of all three groups of stakeholders in a working partnership to achieve a shared purpose; where this can happen, teaching methodology adjusts to encourage deeper learning, better student experience and, ultimately, the building of skills to meet the expectations of employers.

Afterword

This editorial began by suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic has already had a considerable impact on higher and further education staff and students. As institutions develop alternative online assessments to replace end-of-term in-person exams, it is likely that the impact will be profound.

Furthermore, institutions are already in the mature planning phase of devising blended modules capable of supporting active learners who may have to tackle first hand the challenges of online participation at the start of the new academic year. While universities and colleges will endeavour to do their best to design high-quality engagement, the effect of learning, in these times of continued disruption, on students' degree outcomes and experience will be significant.

It is very timely therefore that we continue to innovate – encouraging students to be flexible and informed – and make whatever changes to our practice circumstances demand and collaborative professional judgement deems appropriate. Far from turning our back on the crisis, some suggest that the pandemic may provide us with exactly the opportunity we need to carry through the innovations in delivery, assessment and community-building that we have hitherto found difficult.

However, this can be successfully achieved only if we position our students clearly within a model of partnership, where their voices can be amplified. Without a strong and passionate commitment to placing our students at the heart of our institutions, we are likely to suffer the consequences of Eric Hoffer's perceptive comment: "*In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.*" (exact reference unknown)

We hope that readers of this journal will draw upon the experiences of the authors in both this and previous issues and draw confidence from the many lessons learned. As always, we should be delighted if you would share your ideas and experiences in any of the journal formats, so that we can all become better equipped to deal with the 'new normal'.

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