

Student Participation in Academic Education Conferences

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Abstract

Student-staff partnerships provide novel experiences for both parties, as active collaboration re-frames how they work in teaching and learning (Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2018; Cook-Sather, 2008). Benefits of such partnership include participants appreciating diverse perspectives, increased future employability, and the development of communication and interpersonal skills (Marquis *et al.*, 2019; Liogier, 2019). Projects incorporating student-staff partnership have focused mainly on engaging directly with curriculum reform and student experience while little has been said on including students within large-scale events whose purpose is discussing the implementation of innovative education strategies.

TeachECONference2021, the second annual conference on economics education hosted by UCL Centre for Teaching and Learning Economics (CTaLE) with Doug McKee (Cornell University), took place online from 28-30 June 2021. Four student partners were hired to lead on asynchronous session curation, reflection writing on presentations and discussion through the student perspective, managing the live event and engaging with international presenters to disseminate conference recordings and materials. The reflections show that the partners felt their involvement in an academic conference, especially on a virtual platform, enhanced their student experience by developing their soft skills, logistical problem solving and engagement in academic economics education discussions. The student voices helped to raise academics' awareness of student perspectives on innovative pedagogy and can benefit other students by creating more space for student participation in, and greater understanding of, the genesis and implementation of pedagogical change.

Introduction

In the era of rapid diversification due to digital advancements, academic staff engaging with student voices have shown the increasing importance in producing academic curricula and driving positive changes within the institution. To reap the benefits of student participation, the partnership between student and staff should be reciprocal in nature (Marquis *et al.*, 2015). Inclusive of academic and extra-curricular partnerships, student-staff partnership has proven to be beneficial for both parties (Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2018; Cook-Sather, 2008). On the one hand, students are likely to benefit from increased future employability, with enhanced communication and interpersonal skills (Marquis *et al.*, 2019; Liogier, 2019), alongside creating stronger relationships with educators and understanding their learning process (Walker and Logan, 2008). On the other hand, academics gain fresh perspectives from students on the newly curated interactive curriculum.

A gap exists within the literature and practice in which little has been said about involving students within large-scale events whose purpose is discussing the implementation of innovative education techniques and strategies. Past projects incorporating student-staff partnership focused mainly on engaging directly with curriculum reform and student experience (Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten, 2011; Felten *et al.*, 2013). Last year, UCL

Centre for Teaching and Learning Economics (CTaLE) had several student-staff partnership projects with student Connected Learning Interns designing and preparing a virtual UCL Economics First Year Challenge to accommodate the double cohort of 800 first year students (Chaudhury *et al.*, 2021b), as well as working together to redesign a more adaptable economics curriculum at UCL (Chaudhury *et al.*, 2021a), both of which were presented at the 2021 UCL Education Conference. As for TeachECONference2021, the event focused on providing a co-curated collaborative space between students and staff to explore innovative teaching techniques in the setting of an academic conference. Moreover, virtual partnerships in which both student and academics are working remotely in different locations and time zones have been largely undiscussed in previous studies but are vital, as digital partnerships are expected to be part of the new normal in the education sector. Hence, this case study unveils the experiences of both academics and students in a virtual student-staff partnership during the process of conducting an international academic conference.

Context

In 2020, the virtual economics education conference, TeachECONference2020, was launched within three months of conception as an initiative to fill the void arising from cancelled in-person events. Following a successful first conference and subsequent 'lessons learned' meetings, the management team decided to expand TeachECONference2021. The aim was to gain a larger conference reach, form greater connections within economic education, and improve student understanding of why they are taught the way they are.

Universities and publishers were invited to take part in the call for papers with 12 presentations accepted for the live element held on Zoom from 28-30 June 2021, and a further 19 organised into asynchronous sessions held on the CTaLE website and premiered from 14-18 June 2021. In addition to live sessions, which drew over 100 participants from around the world, the last hour of each day was designated as a Networking Mixer whereby participants and presenters could connect with each other, after a short demonstration from TeachECONference2021 sponsors Echo360, Ed, and MobLab. Through sponsorship and UCL ChangeMakers funding, students were hired for the first time to be involved in each step of the conference. This enabled them to enrich their employability skills and provide a platform to gain an understanding of the process behind the teaching of economics.

Student-staff partnership

Four student partners were hired from within the UCL Economics undergraduate cohort through an application process focusing on the skills and experience required for the TeachECONference2021 roles. Two students led on asynchronous session curation, Networking Mixers, and reflection writing with a focus on disseminating student perspectives on the conference sessions. The other two students managed the live virtual event and engaged with presenters throughout to disseminate conference recordings and materials.

Team communication

The student partners were hired by the CTaLE Centre Manager three months in advance of the live conference. The students wanted to be able to connect with each other and the

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organisers as needed through chats and calls, and also required a virtual space to collate documents and spreadsheets, including meeting summaries, deadlines, sample blog entries, and guidance on virtual events. Utilising MS Teams facilitated this as the thread function allowed for quick response times and accessibility across different time zones. The team was spread across Europe and Asia, and taking examinations into consideration, the calls took place in the morning UK time. It was a two-way street in terms of communication and sharing of knowledge.

Engaging with presenters and sponsors

Having an asynchronous element was a novel aspect of TeachECONference2021. The student partners were able to take advantage of this creative freedom to work together and consider the best options for design and delivery of the conference website. Having received the details of the presentations, the student partners liaised through email with the presenters, whose background ranged from higher education instructors to members of the UK Office of National Statistics. Once all materials were obtained, the videos were categorized into themes (Data and Visualisation, Technology in Teaching, Creative Teaching, Student-Staff Interaction, and The Future of Learning, Academia, and the Field of Economics) and ordered according to the time of their YouTube premiere. The story-telling arc, timings, and time zones were factored in to maximise continuous audience interest.

It was important that presenters, chairs, sponsors, and student partners were comfortable with each other ahead of the live event and that everyone was familiar with the conference style and technology. For this reason, Zoom trials were held amongst the student partners and practice sessions were organised with presenters, sponsors, and chairs in which the students were also present to share their logistical and academic experience. The Zoom trials were helpful in that hypothetical scenarios previewed to make sure technical hiccups were resolved before involving the speakers. As the student partners were present at the practice sessions, the presenter, chair, and sponsor were able to interact with them prior to the live conference. Based on these trials and sessions, the Centre Manager created guides for the live event and Networking Mixers, which provided details on which team members would be available, when people would be speaking, and incorporated individual presentation requests. This helped alleviate confusion on the day and allowed the team to have the capacity to take on ad hoc issues and queries by conference participants.

The Networking Mixers were a place for online education business representatives, presenters, participants, student partners, and students to mingle. After the demonstrations, Zoom Breakout Rooms were opened, with rooms labelled after each conference session to encourage interested members to join. Lively conversations sprung up for the rest of the allotted hour allowing for higher education colleagues to hear the thoughts of students and vice versa.

Dissemination of knowledge

Data for the TeachECONference2021 outcomes came from two main sources: reflection blogs, and recordings and Q&A materials. Once the conference was finished, student partners used the following two weeks to write the blogs and liaise with presenters. One blog was written for each of the six live conference sessions, with the topics divided by interest and experience. The content involved presentation summaries mixed with student

perspectives. Presenter feedback was positive, noting that the students' quotes and ideas were insightful. Furthermore, the blog links were circulated through CTaLE's social media and mailing lists, UCL ChangeMakers case study feed, and UCL Economics department's Induction Week webpages. As for the recordings, the student partners paired individual presentation snippets with Q&A materials on the conference website. The Q&A document consisted of session questions formatted in a way that allowed each presenter to respond in greater depth to their respective questions, or in a more general manner for the full panel. The student partners created their own communications plan and document template to ensure clear and concise communication. Having the completed Q&A document enabled key links and insight to be paired with the session recording, all of which was accessible to anyone unable to attend the live conference.

Evaluation

The necessity of offering TeachECONference as an online event had several repercussions. Most notably, it created spaces for student partners to have greater engagement with an academic conference and acquire a range of skills. Conference management enhanced their soft skills, including logistical problem-solving and communicating, while the opportunities to contribute to academic education discussions with academics based in the UK, USA, and Europe enabled the student partners to deepen their understanding of economics education research. By contributing to interactive elements of the conference, such as a successful new asynchronous session and sponsored Networking Mixers, the students helped raise academics' awareness of student perspectives on innovative pedagogy. These positive outcomes demonstrate that the novel approaches to conference staging pioneered stronger partnerships which can benefit incoming and current students by creating more space for student participation in, and great understanding of, the genesis and implementation of pedagogical change.

For positive outcomes to be achieved in future events, factors that facilitate greater student participation should be priorities. Students' employability skills in general and communication skills in particular can be enhanced if attention is paid to ensuring transparent communications. Most team communication was done through MS Teams, which student partners considered a good experience as documents were on a shared drive, thus increasing file accessibility and reducing chat clutter, and questions could be answered on an ad hoc basis. Having briefing sessions and Zoom trials made student partners feel connected and informed. It is key not to make assumption about what others know about the project and to set work expectations at the first team meeting. This ensures the team is on the same page, and questions for each project stage can be openly addressed. Also, student partners were encouraged to introduce themselves during the practice sessions with presenters. Holding space within the meeting enabled an open dialogue between students, management, and presenters to acknowledge all parties' logistical and content expertise. With the team spread around the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the advantages of having the project entirely online (location, time, and working method) made the student partners feel included as they were able to participate from abroad. Moreover, working virtually harnesses students' digital capabilities to support staff while also preparing them for a highly digitised workplace in the future. Hunter does note that there are disadvantages to remote working, such as *"lack of interaction, project management and stimulation through face-to-face contact"* (2018), but the student partners did not feel this was a problem. It is

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likely the COVID-19 pandemic has made people more accustomed to working remotely, but also because the team worked in a very small group, working online barely limited social interaction. There was plenty of small talk during calls which created a good working environment, and the MS Teams organisation made project management seem more efficient. Though MS Teams is convenient for people in the same organisation, email is still the predominant mode of external communication. When corresponding with presenters through email, the student partners felt they were able to hone their skills in delivering information clearly and quickly. Hence, efficient communication must be consistently demonstrated to all stakeholders, via a variety of platforms including e-mail, Zoom, and MS Teams. This improves students' general employability skills, as effective virtual communication is vital in the workforce.

Providing greater opportunities for students to engage with academics has the potential to empower both parties, but it must be acknowledged that support work is necessary. As novices in the conventions of academic discourse, students might feel uncertain about engaging in discussions with established scholars, so a supportive and encouraging network should be provided, while the academics should be fully briefed on the students' participation and be prepared to engage in a welcoming and collegial manner that values students' voices. First year student partners had only a year's university experience, predominantly seeing their own teachers virtually. Being in a conference setting where liaising with speakers from different universities was an integral part of the student partner role came as a culture shock, as the deeply entrenched identity of academics made them feel tongue-tied. Students can feel afraid to interact with university academics due to cultural norms (McKeiver, 2013), which can be alleviated through a deeper understanding between the staff and the student. After a few practice sessions and email exchanges, the anxiety transformed into gratitude after listening to presentations on how the academics formulated strategies for a better learning experience. A student partner commented that "*the speakers demonstrated great humility and were down-to-earth throughout the event, which allowed students to feel comfortable to ask questions and voice their opinions despite the fear to liaise directly with academics.*" Students found they gained a new perspective on the education they were receiving; for example, why a certain data analysis project is assigned, or why economic jargon was constantly elaborated.

To take things a step further, students were prompted to rethink their strategies in learning economics to better utilise their course resources and provide feedback for interactive two-way learning. Such insights have been useful for the students in their learning experience. A presentation by Kinghorn and Shao (2021), which compares economic diagrams to a language, confirmed one student partner's belief in the importance of fully understanding seemingly basic conventions and spurred them to dedicate more effort into comprehending models. This proved helpful for courses such as microeconomics, where missing a small component of a model can hinder the understanding of many significant concepts. During Networking Mixers, student partners felt they could share their own perspectives as part of the open discussions. On the topic of online learning experience, a student partner pointed out to academics the significance of assessment changes and positive feedback for online learning. They gained greater confidence interacting with academics, which is particularly important as this student aspires to join academia and felt this experience was a positive first step towards their future goal of conducting academic research. Academics who attended felt that having student participation in the conference was of great value especially through

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discussions and blogs, which provided *“different insights than we get from our peers and the fresh pair of eyes ideas on how to organise the conference online was really helpful.”* With the success of student-staff partnership for TeachECONference, one academic mentioned they now involve students with their economics education seminars during term time through asking them to write a blog on what they learned from a student perspective, with insights added where needed from an academic.

A conference which provides space for both parties to learn from each other can also change the way students and academics work together as active collaborators in teaching and learning (Mercer-Mapstone, Marquis and McConnell, 2018). The strength of this interactive partnership will determine other outcomes, such as the potential for the conference to expand due to greater interconnectivity within the field. In the case of TeachECONference2021, the potential of this partnership was not fully realised, mainly due to the small number of students who participated. Students can provide important perspectives that academics may miss. More direct feedback from students would be useful in discussions around education as they are the potential recipients of that education. The students could also benefit from learning even more about the intentions behind the design of their course.

Increasing the number of student participants would also allow for them to be allocated a wider range of roles. During the TeachECONference2021 lessons learned meeting, student partners mentioned that conference marketing could have greater emphasis in the future with a focus on student attendance. Therefore, roles could be widened to include marketing, communications, and promotional activities, which could tap into a greater range of employability skills as well as the students' own interests. Ensuring that students form a significant role in the organisation of the conference will also create an atmosphere of collaboration between providers and receivers of education, which could help to attract more student attendees. While non-students might be more experienced in organising an academic conference, student-staff partnerships create a valuable opportunity for students as they are the direct beneficiaries of improved teaching techniques.

Longer-term benefits are also acquired by students as they are trained to work in a professional academic setting. Students, being able to contribute what they are good at, feel empowered to voice their opinions which enhances the process of student-staff collaboration in producing strategic solutions. However, the number of opportunities is still rather limited when considering the vacancy-to-student ratio, with only four students hired out of the approximately 1300 strong UCL Economics undergraduate student body, leaving plenty of room for improvement in future partnerships. The limited amount of funding available was a determining factor in the number of students which were hired, which in turn hinders student participation.

As the TeachECONference organisation team is small, there is a limited capacity to train and manage new team members, yet student-staff partnership does not have to stop at the end of the project. Another positive outlet of TeachECONference2021 is the involvement of two student partners in the writing of this case study. This experience has enabled staff to reflect on the event, and how to provide students with a space to voice their opinions and gain valuable skills whilst also furthering their experience of formal academic writing.

Conclusion

The student-staff partnership that emerged from the need for virtual conference management during the COVID-19 pandemic produced a number of benefits for all parties. Students enhanced their technical, communication, and management skills and gained a greater understanding of relevant research and teaching, while the student voice provided fresh insights for academics to incorporate in their professional work. The experiences gained from this event open up a range of possibilities for expanding the scope of this collaboration, thereby increasing the potential benefits. However, close attention needs to be paid to the quality of the organisational infrastructure and the preparatory work that is necessary to ensure that students and staff alike are able to surmount the many challenges and develop a fruitful collaboration.

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