Exploring complex dynamics in partnership and the inherent role of emotion

Catherine McConnell
University of Brighton

Abstract

Despite growing evidence of the benefits of partnership working between students and staff in higher education, how those involved experience the complex dynamics remains under-researched. This article presents the findings of a recent study into learning and teaching relationships in HE, conducted in one university in the south of England, UK. Taking into account the situated nature of partnership practices through the use of situational analysis (Clarke, 2005), this research provides an interpretive exploration of the experiences of 12 students and three faculty members working and learning in partnership. Findings demonstrate a wide range of sensory and emotional states described by participants involved in two different case studies of partnership. Derived through several processes of constant comparison analysis, the findings allied to emotion are divided into three main categories at the level of intra-, inter-, and extra-personal. A key consideration in the discussion of findings is that particular actions and behaviours which implicitly demonstrate emotions have an integral role in communicating our attitudes and intentions to those we are in partnership with.

Introduction

Whilst there is growing evidence available of the benefits of involving students as partners, the complex dynamics that can arise out of such collaborations are less reported in the available literature. Motivated by a professional dilemma in the context of the researcher's role as an educational developer in a university centre for learning and teaching, this study investigates from within the professional context, when students and staff collaborate through models of partnership working in higher education (HE). This article presents thematic data and findings from a substantial research project conducted as part of a doctoral study into the *complexities inherent in learning and teaching relationships in higher education* (McConnell, 2021).

Partnership values form attitudes and intentions

'Partnership' between students and staff in the higher education context is referred to both as a pedagogical process, and a relationship (Healey et al., 2014: 12). Student-staff partnership as a pedagogical process is broadly conceptualised, yet since it has become a ubiquitous term in the broad field of education, partnership must be seen as a significant educational approach. In terms of discourse, partnership is drawn upon substantially for different meanings and purposes, still, empirical studies have found that it is difficult to offer an exact explanation or concrete meaning (Marquis, Black and Healey, 2017). Used as a shorthand to refer to characteristics of a relationship, partnership is articulated through various sets of values which form attitudes and intentions, such as authenticity, inclusivity,

reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community, responsibility (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014: 13-14). Yet despite the burgeoning literature base, partnership remains a contested term in terms of theorisation and implementation (Matthews et al., 2019). The expansive applications in higher education policy of 'working in partnership with students', together with subjective interpretations of meaning in practice, have caused widespread variations of approach in practice (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2016; Cliffe et al., 2017). Whilst there is a level of understanding about the value statements set out by Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) and the guiding principles of partnership presented by Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten (2014, p1) which may be taken for granted, theoretical clarity about the concept is lacking in educational literature (Wenstone, 2015; Jarvis, Clark and Stockwell, 2016). Some argue that the result of this lack of clarity could, in some instances, lead to an uncritical adoption of partnership working leading to divergent outcomes and disruptive consequences (Bovill et al., 2016; Matthews et al., 2018; Martens et al., 2019; Martens et al., 2020), adding to the complex dynamics which this research study reveals. A key consideration in this study is that the absence of clearly demonstrated attitudes and intentions such as those which implicitly or explicitly display emotions, has an impactful effect on students' and staffs' experience of meaningful partnership.

The role of personal discourses in partnership

An individual's decision and ability to actively engage is shaped by, and even dependent on, a complex web of influencing factors which predispose certain attitudes and intentions (Wang and Decol, 2014). Students' expectations of their role within higher education are formed in part by how university is depicted by their previous education providers, mainstream media portrayals, and wider societal characterisations of being a university student. To add further complication, students' efficacy about their ability to engage and learn will be built on prior learning experiences, previous relationships with teachers and the curriculum, and their personal values and goals. Staff may also find engaging with the partnership concept difficult if for them it is associated with wider radical or consumerist discourses. Staff perceptions of partnership are not widely discussed in the literature available, yet it is seen as an important area to better understand in practice (Marquis, Black and Healey, 2017).

An emerging yet under-examined area of higher education research is a deeper understanding of the integration of person-centred factors impacting on engagement, and in particular the barriers which persist (Wang and Degol, 2014). Incorporating more insights from research into learning-related emotions, personality characteristics, individual motivation, prior learning experiences, influence of parental expectations, or peer pressure for example, may offer a richer picture of students' decisions and abilities to take up opportunities for active engagement. Pickford (2016) takes this up in her proposal for an embedded multi-dimensional student engagement framework incorporating 'body, mind and heart' as crucial conditions for holistic engagement strategies.

'Body, mind and heart' features in pedagogical theories, and topics like compassion, kindness, and empowerment increasingly feature in contemporary literature on higher education pedagogies (Gibbs, 2017). Highly relevant in the context of partnership working and learning, compassionate pedagogies also draw upon notions of the ability of bringing

the 'whole-self' to teaching, and to learning, making time and space amidst the crowded subject-content curriculum for dialogue, reflection, and emotion-based work. Encompassing an ethic of care and respect, the social learning spaces of partnership have the potential to actively pursue critical conversations, invite challenging and problematic issues, and can go as far as to make time and space to engage uncertainty in the pursuit of making a difference (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020).

A social pedagogical perspective

Social pedagogy, an orientation to participatory practice in professions such as social work, community-care, family support, and youth-work, is a widely recognised approach to human development and lifelong learning across many central European countries (Kornbeck and Jensen, 2009). At present there is very little exploration of social pedagogy in the UK higher education context, yet having studied the similarities between the guiding principles underpinning partnership and those of social pedagogy, it is possible to see the potential for knowledge-exchange between the disciplines of health and social care, educating children and young people, and higher education. Social pedagogy is primarily concerned with well-being, learning, and growth, focusing on the strengths and meaningful contributions every individual can make to their wider community (ThemPra, 2015). Creating a nurturing environment for learning and growth is a primary concern, as opposed to shaping individuals according to our own practitioner ideals. This does present challenges within higher education similar to those identified in adopting critical and radical pedagogies, such as the constraints of the prescribed curriculum, navigating existing institutional structures and processes, and culturally inherited expectations of what education should involve. However, social pedagogy is also concerned with taking an ethical position on policy decisions that are made about how best to support and educate others; therefore, our individual moral orientation, known as *Haltung*, is an essential component of partnership practice and highly relevant as a method of articulating attitude and intention.

Haltung – stance, ethos, mindset

Deriving from the German concept, *Haltung* (which has no direct word in English translation) roughly translates as stance, ethos or mindset and relates to how people guide their actions by their moral or ethical values in their everyday life, including in their professional practice (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011). Partnership as an approach to pedagogic practice and co-creation in higher education might usefully be thought of as an orientation toward relationship-centred education (Bovill, 2020), and therefore *Haltung* provides a way to express our philosophical alignment through particular teaching practices. A range of factors contribute to the way an individual's *Haltung* is conceived (such as upbringing, cultural context, prior education, life experience) and is subjective yet not necessarily straightforwardly 'good' or 'bad'. An important part of social pedagogy involves empathetic understanding and positive regard for others, not just those people who we can relate to easily, or are drawn to through mutual affinities. Whilst this presents the challenge of actively recognising our biases and acting with integrity according to our *Haltung*, ongoing self-reflection can enable at least an increased awareness of the impact of our interactions and assumptions of others.

Research context

The initiating enquiry framing this study was to investigate: how partnership is experienced by students and staff when working together in learning and teaching in higher education, and what implications there are for future practice. To address this, two separately situated cases of partnership within a single institution were identified. In order to grasp how each partnership was framed, how each functioned, and how each was experienced by partners, three situational analysis maps were used to build a 'rich picture', capturing a multi-faceted representation of these partnership relationships as complex systems (Checkland and Poulter, 2006).

Case study 1: Student Learning Technology Ambassadors

Located within a central service department, operating a cross-university student partnership project. The Student Learning Technologies Ambassador (SLTA) role is to work alongside the Learning Technologies Advisers to support the use of learning technologies in the classroom. SLTAs provide support for events and conferences and support academic staff and their students in their use of learning technologies in the classroom.

Case study 2: Students as partners in learning and teaching

A course-based partnership, situated within a subject discipline, at undergraduate level. This instance is of an emerging partnership approach, akin to relational pedagogy (Bovill, 2020: 3), between an academic staff member and students in their everyday practices and interactions of learning and teaching, inside and outside of the classroom. Contrasting with the partnership example found in case study one, this case focuses on the pedagogical approaches taken, rather than any separate project or intervention.

Methods

This study used situational analysis (Clarke, 2005), a grounded theory methodology, to develop original understandings of the interpretations of partnership in the context of a single higher education institution. This research was conducted over a period of approximately 16 months, which allowed for an unfolding and emergent research design, accommodating different 'types' of data, as well as different collection formats. Data was collected through one-to-one interviews, focus groups, observations, reflective memos and field notes. These qualitative research methods explore the experiences of 15 participants actively working and learning in a partnership.

This research was undertaken as part of a doctoral programme, following review and agreement from the University's Research Ethics Policy. Through an inductive analysis of the data using the constant comparison method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), meanings, patterns and theories were thematically developed from the ground up; and analytical mapping and diagramming was used to tease out the relationships between categories found in the analysis.

Discussion of findings
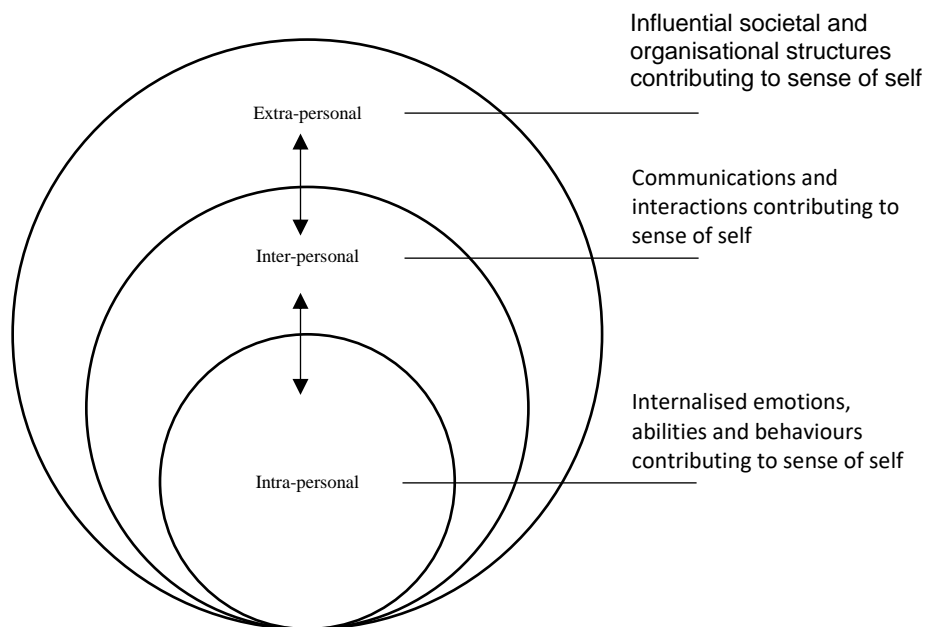
Three levels of emotion influencing partnership dynamics

Figure 1. Three categories of personal: intra-, inter-, and extra-personal

The role of intra-personal emotion

> *Emotions give shape and direction to whatever we do, and their primary expression is through the muscles of the face and body. These facial and physical movements communicate our mental state and intention to others.* (van der Kolk, 2014: 87)

Relating to 'within the self', reference to intra-personal in this context was identified as the internalised emotions, abilities and behaviours which were consciously expressed by participants within the data. Intra-personal awareness, or self-awareness/ self-regulation, manifested across a wide spectrum for students and staff. Intra-personal awareness had an influence on individual participants, and their self-perception in relation to other people; from negative feelings such as shame, embarrassment, confusion, stress, and fear, through to more positive feelings such as inspired, enthused, passionate, and caring.

The term self-concept was identified in the cross-comparative analysis to denote individuals' self-identity in relation to the partnership situation. Several identifiable characteristics in the data contributed to the construction of the sub-theme self-concept, such as beliefs about academic ability, physical or sporting interests, disciplinary alignment, professional identity and career aspiration. The students in both case studies emphasised that the types of interactions they had with course tutors and other students impacted on their self-belief system, and this stretched as far back as experiences in their secondary education. The resonating interactions described by students, such as being talked down to, disrespected, or dismissed, were viewed as antithetical partnership behaviours, and gave an increased

salience to what they understood as being in partnership with other staff. For example, students Caden, Holly, and Seb (SaPLT) explained:

> Sometimes there is a valid excuse why you're late [to class.] The other day I emailed the tutor [in advance], and he still jumped on my back in front of the rest of the class. […] So, then it's hard to engage with the actual lecturers themselves and get yourself the help. (Caden, SaPLT)

> I feel like sometimes people will be like 'I don't want to go to that lecture, like I'm scared to go, or not "scared" to go, but I don't want to get jumped on or attacked or whatever' - so you'll just feel like oh I'm not going, it's embarrassing sometimes, and then it's like oh why would I turn up to someone who's going to do that to me. (Holly, SaPLT)

> Based on that, people wouldn't be willing to go to a tutorial with that tutor […] and go face-to-face with them behind closed doors. (Seb, SaPLT)

Conversely, positively perceived interactions contributed to feelings of encouragement, warmth, motivation and self-belief. How people interpret and internalise the actions and behaviours of others is not often explicitly talked about in terms of learning and teaching. However, the sensory environment, particularly interoception – the sense of internal state or bodily sensations providing the basis for emotional experience – are critical to an enhanced understanding of the complexities inherently present.

The affective elements of identity such as feelings of connection through forming meaningful bonds to the course, content, each other, to the teacher, all added richness and complexity to the dynamics within the relationships the student participants described. Viewing emotions as essential features of the partnerships studied, enmeshed with identity rather than seen as a separate issue, enabled a greater sensitivity to the individual internal systems contributing to the partnership situations.

A great deal of focus has been on the students' reports of intra-personal factors; however, this theme was as applicable to staff. Within their accounts, staff participants surfaced several negative emotion states in the descriptions, such as relating to professional teacher identity, feelings evoked by the perceived threat of internal scrutiny of teaching, of their curriculum design decisions, and the conduct of the partnership project:

> For me at the moment it's time. There isn't enough time, and it's where I'm being pushed and pulled. (Amanda, staff, SLTA)

> I'm carrying a [curriculum] manual around with me, with what I have to achieve as a course leader […] I understand you've got to have consistency, but I'm sorry to say but I'm quite disillusioned. (Robert, staff, SaPLT)

> There's some uncomfortableness there, it's the casual contract nature […] I feel bad that I'm not offering them a guaranteed wage […] they're not being treated like proper members of staff. (Jennifer, staff, SLTA)

Staff accounts which demonstrate emotion were as highly charged as the student accounts, but for significantly different underlying reasons. Dichotomous examples of extreme feelings included Robert's (SaPLT) love of teaching and facilitating the learning of his students, his *Haltung*, running in stark contrast to his contempt for the organisational structures bearing down on his sense of professional autonomy. Similarly, Amanda (SLTA staff) described the constant feeling of being stretched in different directions, and the guilt which ensues from spending time on the seemingly unending administrative aspects of academic leadership, when her professional nourishment comes from her time spent alongside students. Finally, Jennifer (SLTA staff) expressed her moral feelings about the treatment of the SLTA student partners, and the inner dilemmas she regularly experiences. Contrasting her belief that SLTA students should have rights to a guaranteed part-time wage, consistent hours, and access to employee development, Jennifer also described the tension in how involving and employing students was simultaneously seen by colleagues as enriching to the department, yet a threat to the case for increasing the number of full-time learning technologist roles.

The role of inter-personal emotion

> *Social support is not the same as merely being in the presence of others. The critical issue is* reciprocity*: being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone else's mind and heart.* (van der Kolk, 2014: 92)

Relating to the types and qualities of interactions between group members, inter-personal in this context was signified through elements in the data such as care, recognition, mutuality, and authenticity. The tendency in positive relationships was towards the amount of time spent together, the accessibility and perceived commitment of others to the partnership, and how participants felt supported by one another. In contrast, interactions that were seen to be antithetical to a partnership approach revealed long-lasting adverse effects on the relational dynamics.

The types of interactions that students felt demonstrated 'care' involved being given the opportunity to speak and be listened to without interruption, in particular being treated like an adult through respectful verbal exchange. A balance between formal and informal environments for dialogue appeared to facilitate an enhanced feeling of care, denoting that occasions where students and staff could get to know one another informally enabled the formation of an authentic relationship. Being able to 'be yourself', and bring your 'whole-self' to the group increased student Nicole's sense of belonging to the SLTA team, and accelerated her feeling of group identity within the partnership. The reciprocation of care and empathy from students towards staff was present in the learning and teaching partnership, in which participants reflected within the student focus group on whether Robert (SaPLT staff partner) was 'doing too much' – a recognition of the emotional investment he made.

The notion of empathy was important to surface across the elements of care, recognition, mutuality and authenticity, as the ability to empathise with one another was perhaps an implicit need and expectation on the part of students. They expressed their need for staff to understand what they were going through, such as Nicole (SLTA student) explaining to Jennifer (SLTA staff) that she was struggling in her student accommodation; and Caden (SaPLT student) in the first-year focus group thought that course tutors could take into consideration his hour-long commute to campus. Students' perceptions of receiving empathetic signals from staff partners highlighted the effect of emotion on their engagement,

on their self-concept, and their sense of attachment and rapport. Interpersonal communication infused with empathy had a powerfully stabilising effect on the relationships between staff and students, demonstrating an intersection with the theme of partnership trajectories, in particular where the quality of interaction facilitates or inhibits the course of the partnership.

> *Jennifer helped me through quite a lot in that sense, and she helped me through. She made me see things a bit more rationally, but she was very caring in the sense that she asked how I'm doing, and yesterday she asked that again so it didn't leave her mind because she was still worried because I am part of her team.* (Nicole, student, SLTA)

Amanda illustrated her need for frequent physical presence in relationship creation, and the potentially damaging effects of student (or indeed staff) absence:

> *It's the same as human interaction generally; if you're not close enough to someone either because they don't see you enough, either they've missed the class you're teaching them, or they're not there, then you can't develop a relationship with someone that isn't there if that makes sense.* (Amanda, staff, SLTA)

The sub-category of inter-personal has focused on the nature and impact of inter-personal interactions, and their importance to the relationship between staff and student partners. More broadly, it is evident that positive interactions enabled student participants to feel they belonged to a collective effort, that they were appreciated by the other partners, and that they had a sense of valued contribution. Staff participants recognised the importance of the inter-personal level interactions; however, their focus was on their expectations of students' interactions, and less so on reflecting on their role in the interactions.

The role of extra-personal emotion

Elements in the data that related to emotion, but that were beyond the personal domain were categorised as extra-personal. These elements were seen to have an effect on participants' identity and/ or emotion, yet were mostly outside of their control. Three levels of external influential elements were found, at the level of the 'course or department', the 'institution', and at the level of 'society'. The sub-category extra-personal sees an explicit link between the individual participants and many of the situated factors revealed in the situational analysis of each case study, such as institutional strategy, policy, and macro-level influences.

Within this sub-theme, the extra-personal elements discussed by participants appeared to manifest in inner pressures, such as worrying about the future, external scrutiny, and judgements made by other people or groups. The major factor that all staff participants described was the continual increase in workload, coupled with retraction of resources and funding, resulting in stress and overwhelm. For the students, concerns about knowing what to do in assessments, and future career direction were two of the main extra-personal factors affecting their emotional determination.

At the level of the institution, in the SLTA case study, working in partnership revealed to student Nicole the inner workings and inner politics within the department, and at a university level. Nicole described that her experience as a partner helped her understanding of local structures, the reasons behind decisions, the bigger picture, how it all fitted together. Feeling a part of that decision making and planning process helped Nicole to realise that, despite being exposed to some of the politics and deficiencies that exist at the university level, she could better understand the functions of learning technologies staff and their role within the institution; in turn, helping Nicole to figure out how her role fitted within the system.

The students in the learning and teaching partnership case study described frustrations with the institution and the perception that it took a 'laissez faire' attitude towards student attendance. The first-years in particular voiced their opinion that attendance should affect module grades, and that this was exacerbated by the fact that first-year grades do not count towards the final undergraduate degree classification.

When considering the impact of societal attitudes, discourses, or agendas, the perspective that university should provide 'value for money', and promise a 'graduate level job' resulted in a conscious tension for Robert (SaPLT staff). As course leader, he explained that he internalised this pressure as stress, leaving him feeling like he could never meet the expanding expectations of students, their parents, and other stakeholders who make high expectations and demands of higher education. Amanda (SLTA staff) on the other hand described feeling exhilarated by partnership and the potential in society for authentic change, when diverse groups and different generations work together to find new solutions to existing problems.

The three preceding sections have presented the findings relating to the links between emotion in partnerships, the resulting impact of these emotions on participants' experiences, and perceptions of the attitudes and intentions of their partners. The voices of participants have illustrated the nuances of their experience, and the subjective meanings drawn from their accounts of being a member in partnership. Carrying out research observations provided contextualising information, and helped to understand the rich complex dynamics within and surrounding each case study.

Summary

At the three different levels of attention (intra-personal, inter-personal, and extra-personal) the involvement of emotions appeared to either regulate or disrupt relations, revealing that emotions were an intrinsic aspect of the two partnerships studied. Though each partnership experienced complexities of navigating the different emotional factors, both partnerships have successfully contributed to the foundations of further institutional partnership work. In the case of the Student Learning Technology Ambassadors, this student role has become embedded within annually allocated digital learning partnership funding. And in the case of Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching, students now have a recognised and remunerated role in institutional policy for curriculum development and enhancement (Hall, et al., 2022).

The role of emotion in partnership acknowledges the affective elements and emotional dynamics inherent in learning and teaching relationships. This key component found in the present study of partnerships advocates for an active involvement and responsiveness to individuals' feelings, emotions, and attitudes within social relationships in the educational environment. Disappointingly, scholarly works in the field of students as partners rarely acknowledges the role of emotion, evidenced by a recent literature review (Felten, 2017) which concluded that [s]ystematic absence in the scholarly literature suggests that emotion is not a commonly studied facet of partnership (p. 1). The presence and articulation of emotions deep-rooted in the data in this study indubitably steered the analysis and interpretation towards serious consideration of the role of emotion in partnership work. This corresponds with a small number of more recent empirical studies which have encountered emotional presence in partnership, and how the incorporation of emotion work can support resilience and wellbeing (Hill et al., 2019), legitimising and recognising emotions as a natural and inherent part of partnerships (Healey and France, 2022) as well as fostering appreciation and the sense of feeling accepted and valued (Hermsen et al., 2017).

When bringing together literature on emotional reflexivity and emotions in social research, Lumsden, Bradford and Goode (2019) citing Bloch (2002: 113) found that emotions and academic research are more often than not viewed as 'incompatible entities'. Similarly, in the learning and teaching domain emotion circulates in the relational space, and is present for individuals, and in communal learning. Yet emotion is frequently under-discussed in pedagogic literature and arguably a feared notion within academia, leading to divisions between what is regarded as 'rational' as opposed to 'emotional' orientations towards knowledge (Burke, 2015). Neoliberal imperatives that have flooded higher education in the forms of employability, excellence, commercialisation and competition, reinforce notions of individual performance and rationality (Furedi, 2010), resulting in uncomfortable tensions for staff who do not wish to suppress aspects of care and emotion from practice. The competitive aspects of the current academic environment present a potentially unresolvable dilemma for staff trying to balance their personal philosophy, or *Haltung*, with career progression and professional recognition.

Conclusion

This research has recognised the complex nature of partnerships in a higher education context, and has identified a range of themes which coalesce around the central acknowledgement that emotions are inherently important in the dynamics of partnership. Furthermore, the actions and behaviours that demonstrate emotions have an integral part to play in communicating the attitudes and intentions of partnership participants. This gives rise to particular implications for different groups of stakeholders, including students, academic and professional services colleagues, institutional policy makers such as heads of departments, senior managers, educational researchers, and academic developers.

Through increasing collective consciousness of the enabling and destabilising emotional factors that contribute to their partnership experience, students should be able to develop their sense of agency, advocate for change, and challenge perpetuating practices such as marginalisation, misrepresentation and in-group behaviours. For academic staff who wish to bring a partnership approach into their educational practice, the findings presented through

this study offer additional insights based on the real-world experiences of students and staff in partnership. Becoming attuned to the complexities, and the emotional elements present in the learning and teaching arena, will support staff to build enhanced relationships with students, addressing appeals in contemporary literatures for compassionate pedagogies (Gibbs, 2017) and relationship-rich higher education (Felten and Lambert, 2020). For institutional policy makers, including senior managers, the findings from this study point toward the need for a clearer understanding of the complexities inherent in student-staff partnership, and an appreciation of the time and resource investment needed to support effective work in this area. There are cross-cutting implications for example from human resourcing (i.e., recruitment, working conditions, staff development), to structural and systemic processes (i.e., quality processes such as course validation, committee meetings, student-staff forums, virtual learning environments). For educationalists, having an enhanced understanding of the complexities of partnership puts academic developers in a good position to facilitate group reflection on such challenging issues as emotion work, and in professional conversations with colleagues to think about the impacts of attitudes and intentions, and how these might be addressed in context.

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