

# A view across UCL ChangeMakers and Student Quality Reviewers: 8 years of student-staff partnership at UCL

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## Introduction

UCL is a large and complex research-intensive UK Higher Education institution. It has over 50,000 students – the majority postgraduate - and 16,000 staff from over 150 different countries (UCL, 2023). Since 2014, UCL has made a commitment to empowering its students as leaders and full partners, as described in its *2016-2021 education strategy*, and reaffirmed in its recent *Strategic Plan 2022-27*. As reflected on by Dunne et al. (2014), such a commitment through an institutional strategy not only demonstrates that commitment to all but, perhaps more importantly, ensure that the values of student engagement or student partnership become part of the ethos or ‘fabric’ of the university. Certainly, this kind of visible commitment has led to UCL having robust, well established, and centrally supported initiatives for student-staff partnership. *UCL ChangeMakers* supports students and staff to work together on projects to enhance the learning experience of students. *Student Quality Reviewers (SQR)*, in partnership with UCL’s Student Union, involves students in meaningful roles connected to Quality Assurance (QA) processes and other institutionally driven priorities.

To really understand the culture of student-staff partnership at a university, you must also understand how those partnership values are enacted by individuals and at a grassroots level: the lived experience of partnership working. By that, I mean the staff who choose to work with their students as partners; the 600 or so project teams who have received ChangeMakers funding because they believe in making things better; the students who lead those projects and the students who get involved in the project activities; the 400 students who have embarked on a Student Quality Reviewer role and the staff who engage with them in constructive dialogue through those QA processes; and the Education Leaders who advocate for student-staff partnerships at a broader level as well as promoting locally to increase engagement. It is also reflected in the team of staff who run the schemes centrally, who are in a continual state of reflexive practice to ensure we don’t just appear to be doing student-staff partnership on the surface, but that what we do genuinely empowers our staff and students to work together and bring about change.

In this reflective essay, I look at these two aspects together to examine the impact they have had on ChangeMakers over the years and the value of the scheme to the institution and the individuals involved. To me, the needs of the institution and the needs of the community, for whom ChangeMakers and SQR hold such value, have always needed to be held in a careful balance. Tip the scales in favour of institutional needs and the scheme no longer resonates with the communities for whom it should serve. Tip the balance too far the other way and risk the value to the institution becoming obscured. The decisions we as a

team have taken have ensured this balance which has led to the endurance of both ChangeMakers and SQR. By sharing our journey with you, I hope you can reflect on your own schemes to make them as robust as possible to survive the ebbs and flows in the sector which feel constant and exhausting at times. Student-staff partnerships, in the current climate, feel as vital as ever to ensure our educational offering and university experience meets the needs of students who have experienced mass shifts in how education is experienced following a global pandemic and given the pressing global challenges we face.

### **UCL ChangeMakers: from student-led change to a partnership approach**

UCL ChangeMakers was piloted in 2014/15 with ten student-led projects seeking to enhance the learning experience of students at UCL. The scheme was originally based on the work of Dunne et al. (2011) at the University of Exeter, with the aim to empower student ideas and support them to make lasting change. As reflected on in a later essay (Dunne et al., 2014), the student driven aspect was vital, as it not only recognised that students had ideas and were well placed as current students to identify where improvements might be most beneficial, but it started to address some of the power hierarchies inherent in higher education structures. Suddenly, ChangeMakers opened an avenue beyond just giving feedback to actually taking action on an issue. It shifted students' roles to being active in a community that they had chosen to be part of and wanted to contribute to. They didn't have to wait around for staff to start to investigate why something wasn't working or what could be done, they could be instrumental in driving that change and making a difference.

“Imagine yourself as a ChangeMaker rather than a consumer of the education experience. I think that is key. To change your mindset about yourself.”  
ChangeMakers Student Lead.

This was seen by some as an antidote to a consumerist view of higher education where we are delivering a service and students are our clients, offering feedback on how satisfied they are with their course and the other services offered by the university. The NUS Manifesto for Partnership (2012), for example, advocated for student-staff partnerships to drive dialogue, discussion and negotiation as a way of reaching a shared set of values for education and joint responsibility for learning. Although these ideas still hold true today, arguably the conversation has shifted to a more holistic view of the role of student-staff partnership in building community and a sense of belonging. For our staff and students at UCL, this aspect has always come through more strongly than the transformational role it afforded students, which they tended to reflect on afterwards as a benefit of being involved, rather than a driver. Primarily, students wanted to build connections: within the project team, with staff, with other students and across year groups, levels of study and departments.

“ChangeMakers was indeed a changing experience for me. It made the academic year much richer, improved my understanding and provided key insights I otherwise would not have gained.” ChangeMakers Project Lead.

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“Our co-creation approach established a strong sense of community and trust between students and staff within [the department] which allowed us to have open dialogue about the challenges which students face.” ChangeMakers Staff Partner.

“Thanks to [ChangeMakers], we found a mechanism to bring together seven undergraduate programmes in the faculty and we have finally started to build a very interactive community of learners.” ChangeMakers Staff Partner.

It was this that shifted the scheme quite quickly from student-led projects to a partnership approach in its second year. Whereas student-led projects and ‘students as change agents’ - partly due to the language - seemed to privilege the views and ideas of students, the language and values of student-staff partnerships instead were rooted in the idea of partnership learning communities, as set out by Harrington, Flint and Healey (2014). This meant that what we were supporting at UCL went beyond the sum of the discrete projects and became about a wider culture change. In this way, ChangeMakers projects partly provided seed funding for research or to pilot a change, but also instigated a new approach to working together which would, hopefully, extend beyond the life of the project. It shifted our support away from skills training for students to deliver a project, and towards supporting teams to work in partnership. Key to this process was encouraging collaborative and individual reflection on the process of partnership working as much as what was gained from the project so that learning went beyond achieving the aims of the project. Again, Harrington, Flint and Healey note that this is a crucial aspect in building a partnership community as a way to re-examine power relationships and the deeper benefits of partnership work.

Talking about ChangeMakers as student-staff partnerships rather than student-led change was also helpful to really gain traction with staff at UCL. While it didn’t detract from the student role, it added to the role of staff within that partnership dynamic. Felten, Cook-Sather and Bovill (2014) in their seminal book, *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching*, discuss student-staff partnerships bringing ‘different but comparably valuable forms of expertise to bear on the educational process’ (p.7). This positions student-staff partnerships as an expansive approach to enhancement work where everyone involved in the partnership has something to offer to it and that unique contribution is equally valued and necessary to the process. The recognition of the value of this through engaging in a ChangeMakers projects, has been the real driver for culture change.

“having to think beyond the traditional divide and working with students as truly equal partners can bring vital insights for individuals that may well lead to lasting culture change across the institution.” ChangeMakers Staff Partner.

For students, it has helped them pause in their ambitions and work with staff to embed change, rather than power on ahead and do things that evaporate as soon as the project ends. It means they really learn from staff and develop a more sophisticated understanding of the history behind decisions and how change happens at university in the process.

“It was great to be working with staff on this project because you feel that the chance of longevity of the project is greater than if students create an initiative. This

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means we can hopefully have a longer lasting impact on the student community.”  
ChangeMaker Student Lead.

Staff value that better and richer understanding of who their students are, justifying the added time commitment in already busy workloads. The sense of genuine achievement, both through the project and in the longer term understanding and ways of working, are also greatly valued.

“We have a stronger understanding of how we can work effectively with students to bring about change, and the importance of really spending the time to collaborate with students on programme development and design.” ChangeMakers staff partner.

“It gives me more confidence about making impactful changes as I know it will be appreciated.” ChangeMakers staff partner

On a practical note, the shift to a student-staff partnership model enabled us to embed a partnership ethos at a greater pace. It meant that instead of having separate funding streams for student-led projects and staff educational grants, we instead combined the two so that all educational enhancement projects needed to demonstrate a partnership approach. Initially, this meant staff or students could identify projects individually and invite the other to collaborate, but over time, as the culture has shifted to an embedded partnership ethos, the majority of our projects are jointly initiated by student/staff teams.

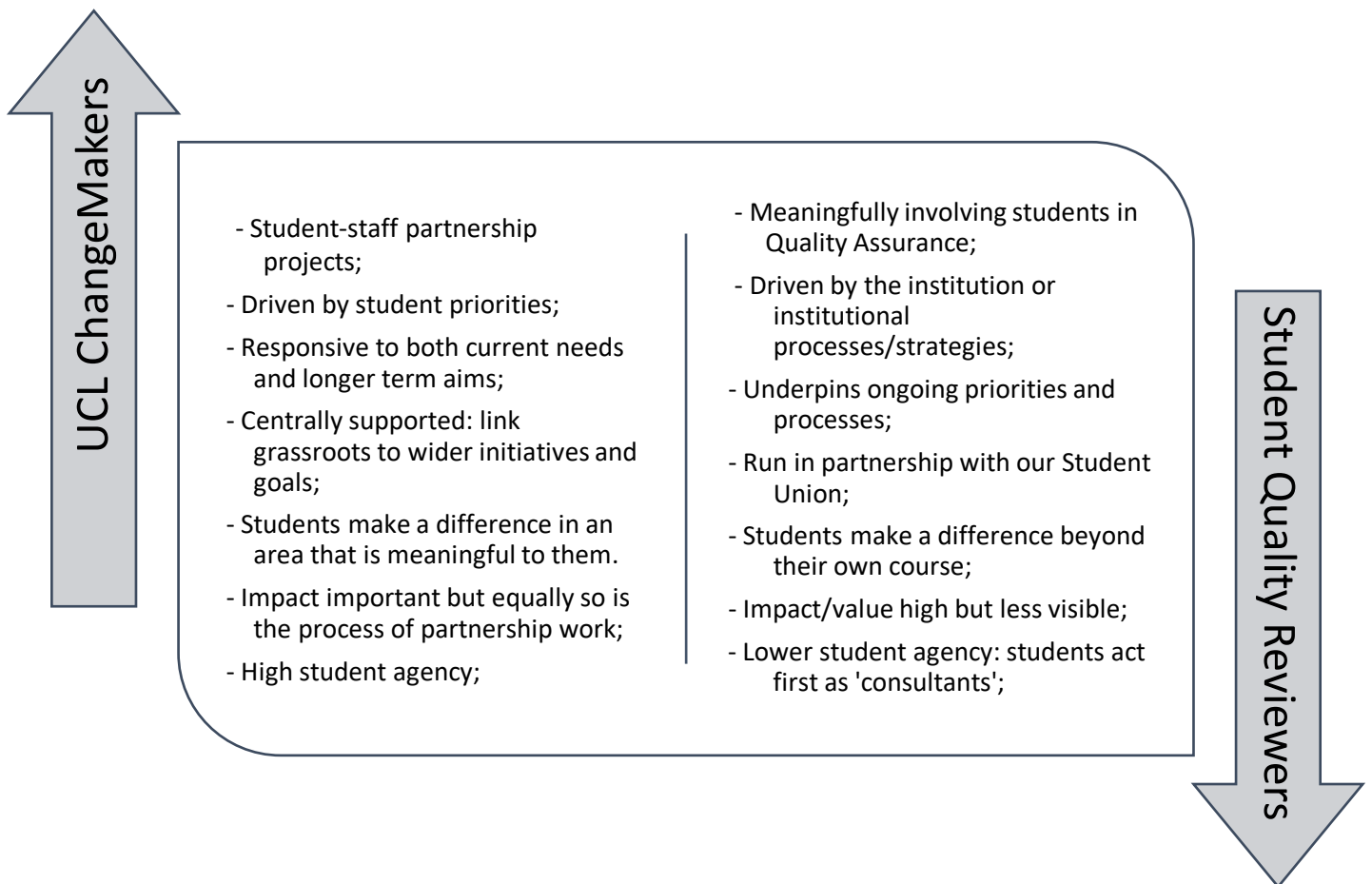
### **Supporting student-staff partnerships institutionally**

ChangeMakers and SQR are both run centrally by the UCL Arena Centre, UCL’s Educational Enhancement unit. In addition, SQR is a partnership with the Students’ Union. A central model for support and administration of the scheme, rather than a devolved model where each faculty takes control, has been beneficial to the success of the scheme. In the Arena Centre we occupy a position in the institution as a nexus between work happening in ‘the centre’ and the academic context in departments. Our broad view across the institution enables us to make important connections between institutional strategy/priorities, work happening in other central services and work between departments and faculties. This allows for ‘bottom-up’ ideas to surface which we can then help link with wider faculty or institutional aims, objectives and strategies, providing pedagogical advice and support. This serves to ensure that partnership work is both beneficial at a ‘local’ level, is evidence-based and impactful in terms of our strategic direction as a university and in addressing student priority areas.

It has also helped us develop the Student Quality Reviewers initiative to expand the roles and opportunities on offer beyond students sitting on Quality Assurance (QA) panels. Given our remit in the Arena Centre is to enhance education, and due to our expertise in student-staff partnerships, the SQR roles have been developed to include an enhancement aspect, which I believe wouldn’t have happened if the scheme had been managed by the QA team, who understandably have a focus on ensuring certain QA conditions are met. This means, for example, students who sit on our Programme and Module Approval Panels are also

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involved in programme design development workshops which happen during the process of designing a new module. Students no longer just sit on the approval panel to give feedback on pages of programme approval documentation, they also get to contribute to the development of a programme (not, of course, the programmes they are involved in approving) and the experience of one informs the other. It also means we have the scope to expand the initiative beyond QA, developing roles that involve students in institutionally driven initiatives such as working with students as partners in reducing the Awarding Gap, as seen through [SQR Curriculum Partners](#). SQR, therefore, can be seen as 'top down' or institutionally driven, whereas ChangeMakers becomes 'bottom-up' or grassroots.



### Balancing grassroots ideas and educational impact

The value of grassroots initiatives, as discussed earlier, is enormous for the individuals involved and also for shifting how we work together in learning communities. At UCL, we are certainly more advanced in having a culture of collaborative learning communities where the different forms of knowledge, the diversity of experiences and range of perspectives enable us to work together to bring about more genuine and deeply beneficial change than we had 8 years ago. However, this isn't always direct change and some of those changes or impacts are hard to measure. How do you begin to measure cultural change? How do you begin to make claims that cannot neatly be described as a statistic or score for success? How can we show the value of 'failure' or risk within partnership work, but where the learning from that 'failure' triggers greater change or development in the future? The

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richness of partnership work is in the developing of relationships, the richness of understanding emerging from the work, moments of epiphany, of conversations with colleagues three years after their ChangeMakers project, describing how it inspired other projects or changes, and being told by a student that they got their dream job thanks to ChangeMakers. But these things become so hard to package up and quantify. More recently, this has been a threat to the survival of student-staff partnership schemes at times. There has been a significant shift to increasingly metrics-driven reporting, and the rhetoric of 'value for money' heralded by the media has placed enormous scrutiny on the sector and a need to show their impact.

The balance for us, then, is in walking the line between the needs of the institution to be able to own and demonstrate the wider impact of the scheme whilst enabling those partnership learning communities to flourish. This has led to some concrete changes to the scheme to ensure that balance is maintained:

1. **Link to student priorities:** All projects must link to a theme based on student priorities as identified by the Student Union and agreed at the Student Experience Committee.
2. **Demonstrate importance to their students:** Projects must demonstrate why they are important to students locally (e.g., within the identified module, programme, grouping, service), drawing on available data.
3. **Data collection:** Gathering robust data at the project application stage so we can report on the projects we fund through a variety of lenses, depending on requests for information (number of projects, spread across faculties and/or departments, data on where the ideas surfaced etc).
4. **Evaluation:** Consistent evaluation through reflective reports gathered at the end of the funding cycle. These look both at concrete changes as well as exploring the process of working in partnership.
5. **Follow-up funding:** Continuation funding is available to build on impactful work. This also enables us to work closely with Faculty Education teams to identify which projects would most benefit from additional funding to really embed changes or share what they have done more widely in the faculty, building in greater ownership at a faculty level.
6. **Impact reporting:** Impact reporting one year and two years after the projects to follow up and understand what wider impacts have been experienced that might extend beyond the initial aims of the project.
7. **Story-telling:** Through blog posts, conference presentations, poster conferences, case studies and short videos. These both inspire students and staff to think about their own potential partnership project and provide rich accounts of what happened and the potential impacts.

This enables us to report on the scheme in different ways and exact different understandings from it, depending on who is asking and what they need to know. It also means we can be confident that funding is going where it is most needed.

### **Value to the institution: building resilience**

Regardless of some of the tensions, having established student-staff mechanisms is an asset to UCL. Both UCL ChangeMakers and Student Quality Reviewers receive excellent feedback year on year and have strong support from faculties. In a more practical sense, having an established student-staff partnership initiative often helps UCL cope with the rapid pace of change in the sector and be more resilient to disruption. The pandemic was case and point. At a time when a shift to fully online learning was new to everyone and we all felt like learners in that journey, UCL already had a scheme that allowed students and staff to work together to understand and tackle that challenge. In addition, our knowledge and expertise contributed to the launch of the Connected Learning Internships in partnership with UCL Careers, to bring together a lack of intern opportunities with a need to create online asynchronous learning resources at pace over the summer period. A more recent example is the advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology: as the challenges around how to work with this technology and mitigate the threat to academic integrity have accelerated, we are already seeing projects emerge in this area. In addition, we are also involving our students as partners in exploring these challenges more widely through an institutional project led by Digital Assessment Advisors and supported by our SQR Assessment Design Student Partners.

How we have designed ChangeMakers and SQR has undoubtedly aided success in this area. We have a flexible model that allows for us to pivot to focus on emerging challenges as they arise whilst upholding continued partnership values and supporting work that will remain a priority, such as a focus on inclusive curriculums and assessment and feedback. Ensuring our two schemes allow for innovation and enhancement to happen so that students want, and are able, to step up as our partners will be important to continue to cope with the challenges ahead. In addition, we aspire to maintain our position as leaders within the sector for student-staff partnership which will mean pushing the boundaries and looking for other ways to collaborate with our students as partners, such as a Learning Lab or Co-Creation space to develop, experiment and design new assessments fit for the future.

One thing we have always been keen to reiterate is that UCL ChangeMakers is not the only way student-staff partnerships are enacted at UCL. They are one way with central funding and support. But partnerships can happen, grow and flourish anywhere because they are not a product. As identified by Mercer-Mapstone and Marie (2019), they are a way of thinking, a way of engaging and a way of working and, as such, cannot be owned by anyone. We simply provide a workable and supported framework. It has been rewarding to work with individuals and faculties within the university to develop their own partnership approaches and initiatives outside of ChangeMakers and, I believe, this demonstrates the changing culture at UCL to one that values working in partnership with its students.

### Next steps and future challenges

From its small beginnings, UCL ChangeMakers now supports around 70-80 projects each year. This sounds like a lot – and I guess it is – but considering the size of UCL, at times it can also feel like the tip of the iceberg. For me, a huge consideration has always been who we are reaching and who feels empowered by ChangeMakers to be able to make change. Within an educational enhancement unit, there is always constant deliberation about whether we are working with the same people, those who already get it, and, in terms of students, the already engaged and privileged to be able to engage with us. But this concern goes beyond that, and the work of Matthews (2017) and Mercer-Mapstone (2020) reminds us to continually reflect on where partnership work is heading and challenges us to consider who student-staff partnerships benefit and whether, through them, we are reinforcing existing privileges and structural inequalities in education. Given research shows that partnership practices have a huge potential to contribute to the success of minoritized groups (Cook-Sather, 2018), we should remain troubled that student-staff partnership may not be empowering under-represented students. Mercer-Mapstone, Islam and Reid (2021) remind us that although student-staff partnerships have the potential to benefit minoritized groups most, they also often impose the same barriers experienced elsewhere in higher education that prevent engagement, especially given student-staff partnership initiatives often happen as an extra-curricular activity. The onus, therefore, is on us (the institution and the teams running student-staff partnership initiatives) to liberate student-staff partnership spaces. At UCL, our new *Student Life Strategy* will be instrumental in looking at better embedding our extra- and co-curricular offering within the overall university experience. It's exciting in that it recognises the important developmental role of this wider offering and its role in helping students realise their individual aspirations for higher education.

A related and key issue at the moment for us – and one which is raised at almost every conference I have ever attended about student engagement and student partnership – is the reward, recognition and remuneration of students and staff working in partnership. Many of us run schemes like ChangeMakers on a shoestring, which is understandable given the demand on university resources, and our increasing need to do more with less. Payment of students lowers barriers and ensures more students are able to engage. I have had so many conversations with students over the years who stitch together multiple low-paying university roles to supplement insufficient student loans just so they don't have to take on bar or shop work. But not all students have the cultural capital to know how to do that. I certainly didn't as a student. I worked 30 hours a week in retail, commuting to and from the university, rarely able to engage in much unless it fell directly after timetabled teaching. I think the cost-of-living crisis will only exacerbate this and is certainly prompting us to revisit our funding models. But does this mean it will reach the students who really need it?

UCL ChangeMakers and SQR could be described as being in a steady state, which I feel puts us in an advantageous position as we start to look across the current challenges facing HE. The pandemic accelerated a lot of changes that universities were beginning to discuss, such as blended learning and digital assessment. It has also brought key issues that have always affected our students more sharply into focus, such as accessible education and enabling students to engage with their studies in a range of ways that suit their needs and aspirations. Tremendous gains were made during the pandemic around accessibility, access,



and closing attainment gaps, as well as causing us to consider mental health and pedagogies that foster care and community. All these issues will remain priority areas that we need to continue to explore with our students, not just thinking about what it means for their education now, but setting a vision for education in ten or twelve years' time.

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