

Co-chairing and co-creating in Staff-student Liaison Committees: the experience of co-creating and running a course for staff acting as co-chairs

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Context

Staff Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs) can be perceived as the spaces where staff and students are invited to develop opportunities for partnership and co-creation at institutional level. These should, therefore, be spaces for open discussion, and active listening. They should be action-focused and offer opportunities for issues to be discussed and resolved, and next steps to be identified. SSLCs can work as co-creation incubators and contribute to a shift in culture at institutional level.

Student voice and co-creation are key drivers of Queen Mary's 2030 strategy (Queen Mary University of London, 2019). In the pillar of *Excellence in Student Engagement*, the institution is committed to ensuring that students 'have a clear voice in the development of the University, working closely with Queen Mary Students' Union'. In the pillar of *Education and the Student Experience*, there is a commitment to 'delivering an outstanding, inclusive, world-class education and student experience, co-created with our diverse student body'. Collaboration with students through co-creation is also a central dimension of the Queen Mary Education Approach which advocates for the involvement of students in the enhancement of education and the student experience. The institutional IPACE values (Inclusive, Proud, Ambitious, Collegial, Ethical) also put a clear emphasis on inclusion and collaboration.

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The Office of the Principal (Education) created a collaborative group with the goal of transforming SSLCs at Queen Mary based on the needs identified by programme evaluations, requests from Queen Mary Students' Union and the recommendations made in a 2020 Education Quality and Standards Board Paper on Staff-Student Liaison Committees. The areas for intervention included: collaboration between staff and students, promotion of open and genuine two-way conversations and disruption of power hierarchies by enabling staff and students to share decisions and responsibilities.

The first step was to embed the notion of partnership and co-creation in the way the committees are structured by identifying two key and complementary roles to be implemented in all SSLCs across the institution: a staff co-chair and a student co-chair. The second step was to design training to support staff and students in developing a co-creation approach in SSLCs. The group responsible followed a co-creation approach and included staff from the Queen Mary Academy, colleagues from the Professional Services and the Office of the Principal (Education), and academics from the three faculties and students (Queen Mary Students' Union). The variety of profiles involved represented the main stakeholders involved in SSLCs and the group was led by the Queen Mary Academy which had responsibility for educational development and staff training.

The student team members were elected representatives from the Students' Union, who had already received extensive training from the Students' Union on the higher education sector, co-creation, collaboration and public speaking. For this reason, the student representatives were confident in working collaboratively with university staff members. However, we recognise the importance of ensuring that the student representatives are met with behaviours and attitudes that encourage their continued participation, and it has therefore been a priority to listen actively to the student representatives, incorporate their ideas and make them feel involved in all stages of the project.

Specifications of the project

The definition of co-creation that guided the design of the course was brought to us by Bovill et al: 'a meaningful collaboration between students and staff, with students becoming more active participants in the learning process, constructing understanding and resources with academic staff' (2016, p 197). The course 'Co-chairing and Co-creating in SSLCs' looks at how to promote the development of strong partnerships between co-chairs and opportunities for co-creation in SSLCs. This course is aimed at educators acting as staff co-chairs. Participants are invited to reflect on their chairing approach and, by the end of this training, staff-co-chairs should be better able to: describe the principles of promoting student engagement through partnerships; apply those principles when co-chairing meetings; recognise & apply good practice based on the discussion of scenarios; devise effective partnership approaches as a co-chair and co-create completed actions that foster engagement and effect change.

When designing the course, we tried to frame it as a safe space available online. The course is delivered online and asynchronously (via the institutional VLE) to enable participants to fit the training into their busy schedules. They are able to complete each section in a flexible way that allows plenty of time for reflection on the activities and contributions from peers and for meaningful and constructive peer feedback. This mode of delivery also favours the development of an introspective and self-reflective approach, which is appropriate considering the issues discussed in the course involve power, relationships, communication, responsibility and openness to change. At the same time, the nature of the activities still promote interaction between colleagues, and opportunities to share experiences in a context that is relatively neutral, collegial and non-confrontational.

The course includes the following topics and activities:

- **Module 0: Engagement through partnerships and co-creation** - Participants are invited to share their views via a forum post about the principles of partnerships and co-creation presented in two YouTube videos about co-creation and disrupting power hierarchies (McMaster Institute for Innovation & Excellence in Teaching & Learning, 2014 and

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University of Edinburgh, 2020). Participants reflect on the benefits and challenges they anticipate, their perceptions of the role of co-chairs in this context and reflections on the importance of communication in the process of co-chairing and co-creation.

- **Module 1: Co-chairing and making students' voice count: receiving contributions** - Participants complete a quiz asking them to respond to the following areas: how often they wait to hear an entire question or contribution by a student, interrupt students when they talk, suspend judgement (about what you think the student will say), use body language and nonverbal cues that demonstrate a focus on the speaker, give encouraging acknowledgements (eg. "Yes" or "I see" or nodding), demonstrate one is paying attention to what is being shared or discussed (paraphrasing and summarizing contributions), ask open-ended questions if they don't understand what students are saying or if they need further information, give empathetic responses, allow thoughts to wander (and change topic) when engaged in discussions, multitask during discussions (eg. check your email), hasten conversations using nonverbal cues such as facial expressions or gestures, paraphrase, check in shared understanding (clarify) and summarise key points, arrive at the best shared outcomes. After completing the quiz, participants reflect on the way they approach the several dimensions involved in receiving the contributions of others and share their thoughts in a forum by writing about their own strengths as well as dimensions that need improvement.
- **Module 2: Co-chairing and making students' voices count: communicating your position** - we provide a scenario (a recording of a SSLC meeting - roleplay by members of the team) to help participants reflect on their role as co-chair in terms of receiving contributions and communicating their positions. Participants reflect on the following prompts: *How would you react? What would you say and how would you say it? What are your strengths? What dimensions need improvement?*

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- **Module 3: Are you partnership ready? - preparing your work with your co-chair -**

Participants explore the five degrees of partnership identified by Wilcox (2000) and complete a quiz to identify the most challenging area of co-chairing and co-creating in SSLCs. After completing the quiz, participants write an email to their co-chair introducing themselves, their motivations and explaining the approach they would like to adopt when co-chairing the meetings considering the whole process - before, during and after meetings.

In the discussion forums, participants are invited to provide feedback to their peers. By completing the course online, participants are given the time and space to reflect, share views and concerns with other co-chairs. These collaborative activities facilitate the understanding of power complexities and allow reframing of any concerns participants may bring to the discussion. All data from the forums are collated and analysed, and participants receive a summary of their contributions and detailed feedback from our team. This type of facilitation through the provision of group feedback after the end of the course enables participants to have an additional opportunity to consider the issues involved in working with students as co-chairs from the perspective not only of their peers participating in the course, but also of the whole team involved in the design of the course. The feedback process involves the identification of actions to improve the course and support co-chairs in a variety of ways, for example through resources, contacts and additional information.

Some examples of feedback comments (and actions) organised into themes:

Power relations: *'As expected, the issues of power relations were pointed out but the need to develop a 'partnership synergy in an organic manner' was particularly insightful'. (Sept 21 cohort)*

Reflection: *'Great point about the need for 'resources' that go beyond time and imply perceiving SSLCs as spaces for reflection'. (Sept 21 cohort)*

Building Relationships: *'Interesting point about moving beyond reporting and actions, hence moving towards a true partnership' (Sept 21 cohort)*

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Communication: *'Particularly useful tip regarding the steps involved in promoting effective communication in order to reach suitable solutions: going through iterations of observation, analysis, learning and adaptation'* (Sept 21 cohort)

Trust and cooperation: *'We think the idea that unpopular decisions sometimes need to be made is very relevant and we agree that making sure the communication is clear and honest is the very best way to foster an environment of trust and cooperation'* (Sept 22 cohort)

Shared responsibility: *'A good idea is letting students know that they can have a pre-meet, catch-up, or subsequent meetings between SSLCs (which happen once per semester or more depending on the school) and there may be multiple issues arising between then'* (February 22 cohort)

Transparency: *'Action: it would be good to provide staff co-chairs the information that students receive on their student course to ensure a common understanding'* (Sept 21 cohort)

In line with the rest of the project, student team members are also involved in the feedback process and contribute to the feedback that participants receive. By involving student team members in the feedback process, we disrupt the power dynamics that normally exist within the university; roles are now reversed as students are providing feedback to staff members on their understanding of the course content.

Discussion of pedagogy/practice

Inviting opportunities for co-creation can drive innovation and development for students, educators and the curriculum. As advocated by Dunbar-Morris, Barlow and Layer (2019), we tried to develop a sense of shared purpose as a way to gain buy-in from all stakeholders involved to the change proposed.

The input of student representatives into all steps of the course was crucial. They were not silent contributors or invited voices. We wanted not just to consult students for their views, but to have students co-creating the whole course through its planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation. By following a team-based approach and adopting a reflective and inclusive perspective, students acted as co-learners, co-researchers, co-inquirers, co-developers, and co-

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designers and work was developed by a 'partnership learning community' (Healey and Healey, 2019, p 10).

We created 'third spaces in ways of working, identity, and impact' where no individual was perceived as 'the expert' and where each student representative was perceived as 'more than just a student' (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019, p 34). By adopting this relational pedagogical approach (Bovill, 2020), the educational developers in the team invited students to be active and authoritative collaborators, supported dialogue across differences of position and perspective, fostered collaboration and served as intermediaries, facilitating new relationships (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011). We tried to promote ongoing reflection, as individuals and teams, on our partnership practices and to remain mindful of our conscious and unconscious habits and behaviours (Mercer-Mapstone and Abbot, 2020). We also created structures and processes that supported the development of partnership relationships, shared values and a strong sense of community and belonging that was consistent with the institutional values and strategic priorities. As argued by Healey, Flint and Harrington, if 'partnership is to extend beyond individual projects and initiatives, it makes sense to approach this holistically, with an eye on institutional culture and ethos' (2016, p 13).

Implementation

Course uptake

The course was designed in 2020/21, piloted in February 2021 and launched in March 2021 during the Festival of Education promoted by the Queen Mary Academy. In the 2021/22 academic year, there were 53 staff co-chairs across Queen Mary and a total of 31 participants (58.4%) attended the course. These participants came from our three faculties: 5 from Humanities and Social Sciences, 12 from Science and Engineering and 14 from the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry. We report regularly to the Education Strategic Advisory Team (currently Education Strategy Steering Group) in terms of general uptake and numbers from each of the faculties and schools.

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The course is perceived as part of the Queen Mary Academy contribution to promoting co-creation and learner engagement at Queen Mary. It is not compulsory, but is recommended by heads of schools and programme directors, emphasising the benefits of taking the course to improve student-staff discussion and relationships. Faculty and school education managers make sure new chairs and those chairs who have not yet taken the course are informed of the opening dates of the course. The lists of participants is sent to schools after each edition of the course and an attendance record is kept. We are also designing a plan that will help us determine the number of editions we need to offer per year depending on the number of new or returning co-chairs. The evaluation of the course and the one-year follow up evaluation we are conducting will help us determine if we would like staff co-chairs to repeat the course if they keep the role for two or three years or return after a couple of years.

Evaluation of the course by participants

Seven participants agreed to evaluate their experience using our course evaluation survey:

Evaluation survey:		
1. How useful was this course?	5-point scale: from 1= Extremely not useful to 5= Extremely useful	4.3
2. The course:	5-point scale: from 1= Strongly disagree to 5= Strongly agree	
	•was convenient and flexible (asynchronous delivery)	4.5
	•presented content in a well-organised manner	4.5
	•revealed a thorough/in-depth knowledge of the topic	4.3
	•included clear explanations of important issues and principles	4.1
	•allowed participants to contribute with views and comments	4.8
	•provided relevant feedback to stimulate further reflection	4.1
3. Overall, the course was effective in meeting its stated objectives		4.3
4. I am likely to use what I learned during this course		4.4
5. Will you make changes to your practice as a result of this course?		Yes – 3 Maybe – 4 No – 0

Table 1: Course evaluation survey results

Participants have regarded the training as very useful (4.3) and (strongly) agree the course has been efficient (all areas presented have achieved mean values above 4). Participants have regarded the training as very useful and strongly agree that the course has been efficient. Most participants consider the possibility of making changes to their practice as a result of attending this course.

Evaluation

Feedback from the student representatives who have been involved in the co-creation of the SSLC Co-Creation project has been very positive. Representatives have felt that their contributions were valued and identified several factors that they found important for a successful co-creation approach:

Building a genuine co-creation context

Student representatives felt that the staff members in the project had a 'genuine interest in co-creation', and their involvement in the project never felt like a 'tick-box exercise'. This project has afforded all parties an equal opportunity to contribute to pedagogical conceptualization, decision making and implementation processes.

Working with staff as equal partners

One of the students involved in the design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of the SSLC course highlighted the benefits of a co-creation approach: 'Working together in partnership with staff is about respect and understanding. We create, share and build upon our ideas to deliver high quality outcomes for our students. This co-creation is at the heart of our most successful projects, where we come together as equal partners with shared values and aspirations'. The adoption of this co-creation approach has fostered the development of 'shared responsibility and ownership and new forms of student and teacher agency, making all of them more democratic, inclusive, and dynamic' (Cook-Sather & Matthews, 2021, p 243).

Dealing with power imbalances and disrupting hierarchies

The experience of designing and running the SSLC course emphasised the need to acknowledge the issues involving power relations and develop shared identities as partners. As pointed out by one participant in the SSLC course: 'Communicating and sharing power as SSLC co-chairs can be tricky as staff and students have such different perspectives. But nurturing the communal identity of the SSLC as a space for partnership will, I hope, enable constructive conversations and

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effective actions' (Jan 22 group). In order to address these issues, we tried to promote ongoing reflection (as individuals and teams) on our partnership practices and to remain mindful of our conscious and unconscious habits and behaviours (Mercer-Mapstone and Abbot 2020). Student representatives valued the opportunity to engage in reflective conversations that not only contributed to change and development but also bridged hierarchical interactions.

Overcoming resistance and doubt

Although the majority of the feedback from participants in the 'Co-chairing and Co-creating in SSLC' course was positive, one staff co-chair participant commented on the challenges associated with embedding co-creation: 'I worry that we are promising something that a) can be misunderstood by students; b) create a sense of entitlement from students; c) asking of students something that they have no skills or experience to provide' (comment from anonymous training participant - Sept 21 group). This comment exemplifies that co-creation initiatives can be met with doubt or even resistance, and it showcases that even in an institution where co-creation is central to our strategy and has strong support from senior leaders, cultural change can be slow. In line with the aims of the training and the institutional culture, we have responded to this resistance by giving feedback and entering a dialogue about the benefits of co-creation and the challenges that colleagues may face. These outcomes are consistent with Bovill et al (2016), who have identified the need to overcome resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity as potential challenges in co-creation.

Having the time and resources needed

Encouraging educators to participate in building and adopting these approaches has not been (and will not be) a smooth task. It requires a culture shift, risk taking and being open to change. As mentioned by one co-chair participant from the SSLC course: 'Be aware of the complexities of power relations with students and aim to be collaborative and reflective – this requires dedicating enough time and resources to co-creation' (Sept 21 group).

Promoting consistent engagement and continuity

The project has run across more than one academic year, and this has highlighted a challenge related to changes in student leadership and engagement. The student representatives that shaped the original project idea finished their term in office halfway through the project and were replaced by newly elected officers. While it can be positive to get input from a wider group of student representatives, this also poses a challenge, because there can be a gap in engagement during the handover process, new officers may take some time to familiarise themselves with the project before they can contribute fully and priorities may vary between generations of representatives. To overcome this challenge, a permanent staff member from the Students' Union took part in the project to provide continuity and help the new representatives to familiarise themselves with the project and the work that had already been undertaken.

Making an impact and fostering change

Representatives appreciated that their contributions had a direct impact on the project, and they were 'able to see clearly how their input had shaped the course' (2021 cohort). These outcomes are consistent with the ones identified by Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill (2021), who analysed the outcomes in the form of transformation and development, which included: developing positive relationships and community, engagement and enjoyment, taking risks and overcoming challenges, and academic achievement and retention.

Reflecting on and sharing the outcomes of the experience through co-presentation/ publication

Our co-creation work has resulted in a number of presentations and publications, in which student representatives are co-authors.

One year, follow-up evaluation

We are currently gathering information about the impact of the course. The 2021/22 cohort (two editions) has received a one-year follow up impact evaluation survey covering topics such as how often: participants have applied the principles of promoting student engagement through co-

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creation and staff-student partnerships, received contributions using active listening, taken care to communicate clearly and effectively, using a tone and approach that invited co-creation, co-created completed actions and solutions that fostered student engagement and effected change, and devised effective partnership approaches as a co-chair. Participants are also invited to provide examples from their practice, rate the overall impact of the course on their practice and suggest ways to improve the course and make it more effective.

Lessons learnt

Staff Student Liaison Committees offer a vital mechanism for listening to the diversity of student voices on a programme. However, in order to effect change, the institution and participants in these forums (staff and students) need to ensure that they offer space for authentic listening, engagement and action planning. SSLCs can, in fact, work almost as institutional incubators and generators of the impetus for co-creation.

Key lessons we have learned so far include the need to promote transparency and authenticity and invest in the development of relationships with students acting as co-chairs based on trust and shared responsibility. The worst outcome in this context is to have students interpreting their involvement as tokenistic or the result of a tick-box exercise. Following on from the creation of this course for staff co-chairs, the Students' Union has also reviewed its training and student co-chairs are now offered training about co-chairing that mirrors the one offered to staff. The wider impact of the project will be felt across the institution over the next few years, as it will take some time for colleagues to engage with, and adopt, the co-creation approach.

Early examples of co-creation in action are now starting to emerge. One example is of a course representative and academics who worked together on a project to better understand student mental health within that course. The representative had conducted a short survey among their cohort to find out if students were facing any issues, and mental health was a major theme. The representative fed this back to their SSLC, and an academic happened to have noticed the same patterns and was planning to do further work to understand and improve mental health among

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students. As a result of this, the representative and the academic are now working together to investigate the problem and develop solutions together.

Changing mindsets and promoting shifts in the institutional culture are major challenges. Making staff and students aware of the transformational potential of co-creation and the benefits it can bring in terms of the student journey and sense of belonging is important. Co-creation can also benefit staff professionalism and enjoyment, as well as enhancing the effectiveness of institutional responses to students' needs. Staff-student liaison committees can be a safe space for staff and students to unlearn hierarchies and develop new forms of agency that foster democratic, inclusive, and dynamic ways of co-constructing change and develop ownership and belonging.

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