

Making it up as we went along – co-creating an institution-wide curriculum design partnership

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Introduction

Academic developers, working with programme teams across the university to embed new community-created principles of curriculum design, recruited paid student consultants to help shape what was happening, to ensure the student perspective remained central even if learners from a programme were not present and to enact the institution's longstanding commitment to student-staff partnership and inclusive practice. Student consultants navigated frustrating administrative hold-ups and periods of uncertainty about their possible contribution to articulate confidence in the value and potential impact of their individual perspectives on programme design. They went on to identify clear advice for successors and to co-design induction plans building on their experience. Planned activities with consultants included conversational, reflective sessions aimed at building trusting relationships of mutual respect. This was successful within the immediate team but more needs to be done to prepare the next recruits to work confidently with a wider group of staff.

Context

The University of Hertfordshire (UH) is a post-1992 institution with more than 30,000 learners from 140 countries. More than 60% of its students are from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background and more than one third are first in their family to attend university. UH has an embedded partnership approach, and in 2022 had around 350 students working in partnership roles to support the student experience. Three such student teams – technology mentors, BAME advocates and student ambassadors – are managed by staff based in the Learning and Teaching Innovation Centre (LTIC, recently renamed Centre

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for Learning Access and Student Success - CLASS). Drawing on this expertise, a new role of Student Curriculum Consultant (SCC) was conceived to enhance the rollout across the university of co-created curriculum design principles. [Herts Learning Principles](#) (HLP) were collated during a period of reflection which began during Covid-19 and involved more than 500 stakeholders including students, academic and professional staff. The principles form a frame through which every programme team is expected to reflect on its curriculum. UH student and staff experience, along with established practice elsewhere (Jarvis et al, 2016; Livingstone Hughes et al, 2019; Cook-Sather, 2023), informed the writing of an initial job description (Appendix 2). This intentionally left scope for the first recruits to steer how it was realised in practice.

What happened? (Timeline in Appendix 1)

Five consultants were recruited, though one was unable to effectively combine the work with other commitments. All had to wait a frustrating seven weeks between appointment and starting. Although SCCs could not be asked to work during this period, they would have liked more contact, and the delay pushed the window in which they could contribute into periods of significant assessment on their courses.

When the team finally met, it was in an informal and roundtable setting with refreshments and a planned conversation with, rather than presentation from, staff. Everyone reacted positively to this initial discussion which included what names meant, brief educational biographies and an overview of the principles ('Prioritises student learning; Ensures coherent design; Offers opportunities for personalisation; Harnesses technology; Builds communities'). In staff's minds was an intention to establish the sort of open communication that would stimulate team engagement, a relationship of mutual respect and shared expertise (Bovill, 2020). There was an explanation that the role was to be shaped together and that staff considered students to be experts in their own learning - things which evidently proved difficult for consultants to conceive at this stage. Abigail's quote is typical of what each SCC said:

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I was very concerned it would be noticeable I didn't understand the role and that perhaps I had missed crucial information whilst the other team members would have fully understood. During the meeting, it was discussed that 'trusting the process' was key, which at the time, I was slightly unsure as to what that meant.

Following the meeting, each consultant was asked to reflect individually on their own degree curriculum using the HLP toolkit employed with staff. Their observations were discussed at a second team meeting. This triggered thinking about learning broadly, partnership with staff and potential ways to work on the project itself. In the process it also began to build confidence. Temitope commented:

I absolutely loved and enjoyed the reflective toolkit and how we were gently introduced to the Herts Learning Principles. Being left to figure things out, as it were, opened interesting thoughts in my mind which turned out to be more beneficial than I thought. Participating in the reflective toolkit exercise allowed me to critically assess my own learning journey.

Abigail noted:

[t]his seemed to raise more questions for me than solving, but this time, I felt more confident to voice these at the meeting. This led to a discussion about the different direction the role could take which helped me to understand the fluidity of the staff student partnership and as a curriculum consultant. In having these open conversations, where the other students involved talked about their courses and experiences and the staff input their experiences with working with schools across the institution, I developed a critical awareness when talking to other students outside the team, listening to their learning experience and framing their thoughts within the HLP.

The next step was for SCCs to observe workshops run by the staff team for colleagues undertaking periodic review: their first encounter in the role with staff beyond the project team. Staff had discussed that not all colleagues relished conversation about curriculum

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design nor understood partnership in the same way. Although intended to be observations when the workshops broke into smaller groups for discussion, it was natural for students to be included. By now they had both a wider vocabulary about educational practice and a more rounded understanding of the HLP than even some tutors. Abigail explained:

I... found it a little intimidating as a student to sit with staff and attempt to level the hierarchical balance. During the observation, I overheard staff members who ... did not understand the meaning of phrases used, such as 'scaffolded support'. This phrase had been discussed in the first team meeting, so whilst I wanted to explain to the staff member, I felt concerned I would be patronising. I wanted to steer the staff in the right direction but did not feel able to as a student, not staff member, but also did not want them to feel resentful toward the LTIC staff.

Prasaath did not identify discomfort in his workshop and found the discussion both fruitful and interesting. He also observed that seeing staff reflect on the same toolkit questions he had considered seemed to close the staff/student gap.

The consultants' appointment coincided with a session about curriculum development for staff on the PgCert Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. SCCs participated, extending their understanding of curriculum and increasing connection among themselves. In the session, four tutors explained their approaches, looking at very different perspectives from spiral curriculum and Conceive Design Implement Operate to radical social justice and inclusion models. Ally noted this as "very instructive" and he was particularly inspired by an account which advocated positioning learners as knowledgeable others whose expertise was the starting point on which to build, something aligned well with ideas of partnership. Temitope identified ideas he intended to discuss with a tutor and Abigail found it "hugely affirming."

The next whole team meeting gave everyone a chance to reflect together in preparation for the Change Agent Conference. A physical timeline on a long sheet of paper was drawn and everyone completed Post-it notes about their reflections at each stage. This collective activity crystallised thoughts and it became clear that, especially as all students were now

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approaching intensive periods of study, it would be best simply to focus on exploring and refining the SCC role. There would be no time for these founding appointees to engage in “frontline” consultancy work. Accepting this was a relief for both staff and SCCs, all of whom expressed confidence at this point that they could achieve key tasks: co-writing this article, drafting changes to the job description, producing a plan for induction and “top tips” for consultants. Staff member Karen noted:

On reflection, this was a more realistic goal and I should have been more reassuring that it would happen. I had talked about ‘trusting the process’ and knew useful outputs would emerge.

The consultants also attended the UH Learning and Teaching conference. Then everyone involved individually wrote and shared reflections. These were initially analysed by Abi who, together with Karen, completed the first draft of the article.

Discussion

Staff’s ambition in recruiting consultants was to realise something akin to Bovill’s definition of co-creation, where students “share decision-making and adopt increasing agency within the co-creation process” (Bovill, 2020, p 30). This was inspired by work both at UH and elsewhere in the sector. The intention was always to initiate the roles by making clear the values of partnership on which it was built (Mercer-Mapstone and Marie, 2019). Conference deadlines meant SCCs were asked about contributing to a shared presentation even before they had started work and the first meeting included as much discussion about *how* the team would work together as about *what* it would do. Even so, this emphasis on process and values was not where recruits expected to begin and all expressed uncertainty at the outset.

However, an approach based on relationships and dialogue, which Bovill (2020) emphasises, was adopted. Eventually informal, conversational meetings with refreshments on offer and staff actively seeking SCC perspective and reflection built bonds. Looking back on everyone’s

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reflections, Abi identified trust as an overarching theme, seeing strong teamwork and communication despite infrequent meetings and multiple commitments. She observed:

The root cause of this outcome perhaps stems from the open, honest conversation.

Prasaath also mentioned the candour of exchanges and advised his successors:

Provid[e] honest and unbiased inputs even if they are bitter sometimes.

Communicating directly with the learning and teaching team will establish an honest line of communication from the very beginning. As a student consultant, I found that being transparent in my views and opinions on either extreme was received very well and helped foster a collaborative environment. The opinions that matter to you as a student will be heard and will enable a shared understanding and lead to productive outcomes.

One goal of effective partnership working is a dismantling of the barrier created “by power relationships, different roles and responsibilities and perceptions of roles and of academic work and different language and locations” (Jarvis and Dickerson, 2016, p 5) and there is evidence here that this collaboration began to achieve this. Indeed, a sense of shared endeavour and responsibility is revealed in Abi’s observation that she was concerned about staff becoming resentful of LTIC staff.

The complex and potentially challenging nature of partnership (Mercer-Mapstone, Marquis and McConnell, 2018) was not explicitly explored with this group, although they were alerted to, and observed, diverse staff perspectives on the learner-tutor relationship – for example, in the workshops and conference presentations. This seemed to cement their perception of the value such work can offer in a curriculum design context, as Abigail noted:

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[A]ttending the conference highlighted the need for staff student partnerships and a student-led approach, as one conversation revealed how disillusioned teaching staff had become in a particular course, because their students weren't responding to the course the way the staff had hoped.

Ally's reflections on experience left him ready to '*positively disrupt the status-quo..... [and feel] more confident and pragmatic in giving constructive views to the teaching staff, with the aim of enhancing my course curriculum.*'

Unfortunately, the timing of the project meant these consultants did not get the chance to explore their new insights with programme teams working on design, and one challenge for the next recruits will be reaching this point quickly enough to collaborate directly with staff outside LTIC. It will also be important for them to know that not all of these staff will relish candid opinions or suggestions of disruption.

A period of some uncertainty is probably inevitable in any new undertaking, particularly in one where a post is freshly established. Also, given that partnership working is founded on a relationship of respect, reciprocity and mutual responsibility (Cook-Sather et al, 2014), each project must build anew with its own participants. Even where staff are committed to this approach, it is likely that it will be novel for at least some of the students.

Three of the consultants were international students more familiar with teacher-centred educational practice, and research currently being undertaken by Ladipo (2023) on the impact of student voice on quality in higher education suggests the conversational approach adopted will have been helpful in enabling confidence:

Because [international students particularly from Africa and Asia] are from hierarchical educational cultures which encourage respect for 'authority figures' such as teachers, it is very difficult for them to settle into the collaborative culture in UK universities ... Based on this, it has become increasingly important for UK universities to focus first on building trust if partnership work must succeed. This could be

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through consistent and continuous informal communication, for example, roundtables at a coffee shop rather than a lecture hall

That is not to say any of this was more familiar to home student Abi, who noted that she had navigated UH for almost three academic years unaware of LTIC, partnerships or the HLP. In the end she concluded this was:

almost crucial... as it allowed me to come into the role without assumptions, pre-formed opinions or experiences that would influence as a result.

The SCCs' advice for the new induction affirms the emphasis on establishing relationships – through shared conversations about interests, hopes, dreams and expectations as well as education. They identify the importance of scaffolding together a critical reflection on their lived experience of the education system, university teaching and culture, their likes and dislikes. They name the importance of training in giving feedback to staff, discretion and confidentiality. They would like more staff storytelling of experience about student impact and they advise setting a fixed expectation from the outset that each consultant will share regular written reflection on how they are experiencing the role.

In their tips for the next SCCs they advise recruits to be themselves and be unafraid to bring their perspective to the table, they offer reassurances over feeling lost or confused, and urge continual communication, curiosity and questioning. It is evident that each of them understood the importance of staff planning the curriculum with students, as Prasaath put it:

Focus on what you want the system to look like. Each one of us has a unique way of seeing the world. When we learn a new subject or develop a new skill, we will have an opinion what could have been done differently or what could have added more value to it. Sharing our thoughts like this may help the educators understand what the student needs to learn better. When we provide our insights, this will help build a better learning system.

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Next steps will not only include continuing to work in this way with new consultants on curriculum design across the university, but also doing so in a way which attempts to highlight for staff the potentially transformational impact of this sort of co-creation with their own students (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill, 2023).

Conclusion

Informal conversational approaches enabled the relatively quick building of trust. Staff consistently sought, and explicitly valued, student responses, whether or not they were critical of existing practice. Candour in exploring challenges of academic development was also important and using the same tools deployed with staff helped to dismantle the staff-student divide. Trust and confidence go hand in hand, and more staff stories about how partnerships impact on practice and learning will be shared along with the first consultants' perspectives captured in multi-media ways.

Momentum was lost while right-to-work checks were completed and the impact of this could have been minimised by regular updates and communication from the team leader – although slipping towards the assessment period would still have been a problem unless recruitment was moved earlier in the academic cycle.

Arguably too much space was left for recruits to co-create the role – undoubtedly this was a factor in the initial uncertainty that was felt. Staff normalising this by drawing on SCC accounts will help with this to an extent, as will the new, more detailed job description. SCCs have also suggested mandating weekly reflections building on the informal encouragement initially given to record thoughts and perspectives. Explicit focus on the process of reflective practice will feature in the new induction along with working together on how to handle difficult or challenging conversations. UH commitment to partnership for some staff involves what Cook Sather et al (2014) identify as good practices which do not move beyond a customer service relationship. A more detailed look at ideas of partnership is needed, especially if SCCs are to talk about and showcase the power of a more progressive approach, and navigate potential resistance to that. It was serendipitous that SCCs could attend the

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PgCert session, and inviting staff to discuss a range of curriculum models – including radical ones – will also be part of a systematic induction. It perhaps goes without saying that the pedagogic practices involved in induction need to adopt student-centred and empowering approaches which, as Temi said, involve ‘being left to figure things out.’

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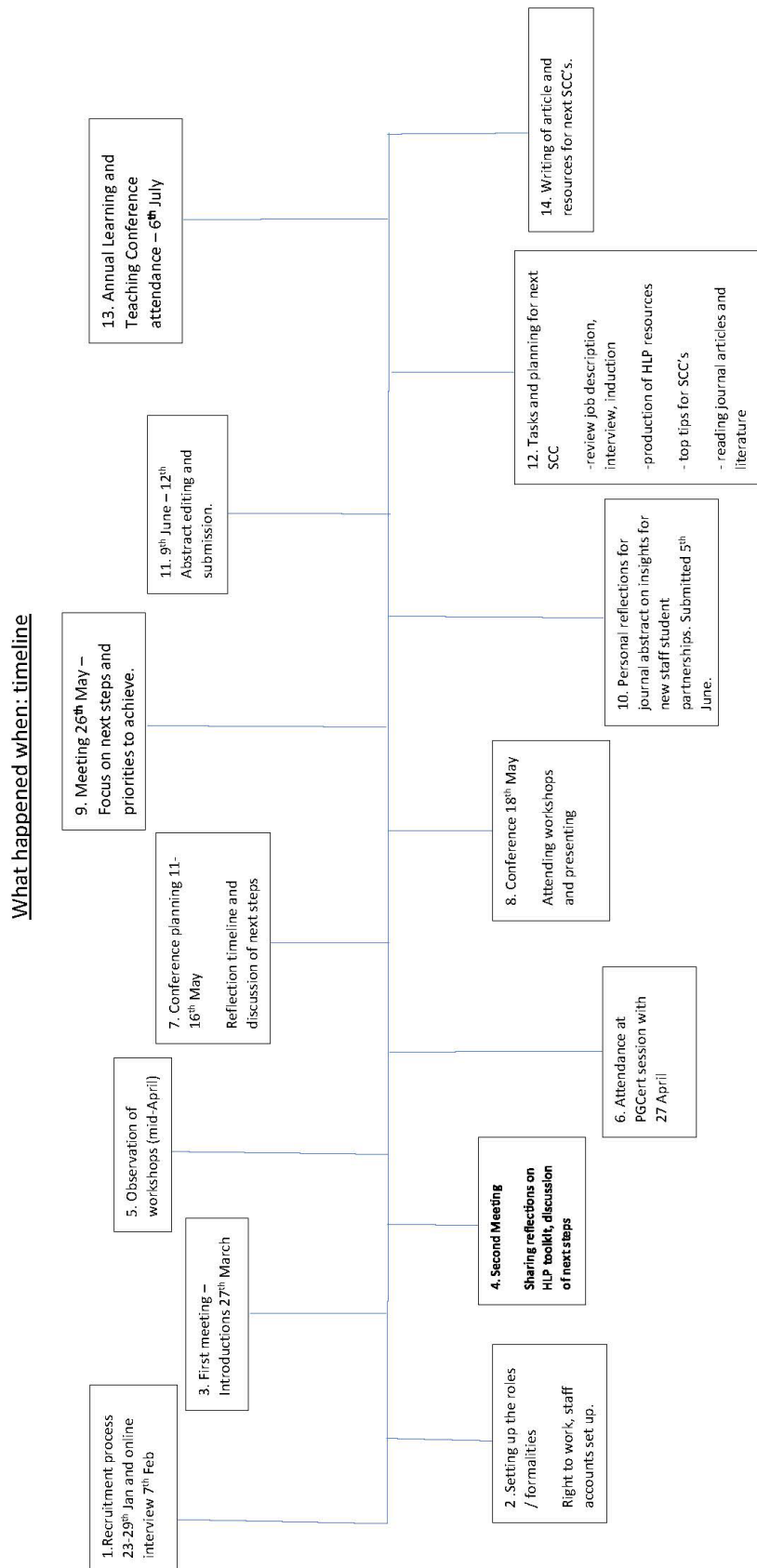
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Appendix 1: Timeline



Appendix 2: Job Descriptions

A) Initial Description

1. Main purpose of job

The UH community has co-created a set of five principles which inform the design of all programmes of study: Herts Learning Principles. A rolling programme of workshops (face-to-face and online) is underway to enable all academic staff to engage fully with these curriculum design principles and reflect on their application within their own settings. UH is committed to working with students as partners in the embedding of the principles through conversations, workshops, review of materials and production of self-guided resources. Student Curriculum Consultants (SCCs) will play a key role informing approaches taken through participating in all stages from planning and facilitating of workshops to follow-up work with programme teams and the creation of resources.

SCCs will work with a small friendly team of staff from the Learning and Teaching Innovation Centre (LTIC) who are liaising with programme teams in all Schools of study. The work links well with that of other student partners currently employed within LTIC (Technology Mentors and Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) student advocates.

The ideal candidate will be curious about their own and peers' experience of study at university and have experience of working and/or learning with a variety of people of all ages and backgrounds. They will have effective team working skills and be an organised and positive individual. We'd like to hear from students in all Schools of study and from a variety of different cultures and backgrounds.

Training and support will be provided for this role including understanding and applying Herts Learning Principles, reflection on personal educational experience, speaking in public and managing professional relationships.

2. Main responsibilities and duties

Embedding Herts Learning Principles of curriculum design

- To collaborate with LTIC staff to plan and evaluate work embedding Herts Learning Principles.
- To facilitate with staff workshops online and in person for programme teams from across the university.
- To work with academic staff in workshops and one-to-one exploring how to embed Herts Learning Principles in their modules and programmes of study.
- To gain insight into students' experiences of their programmes of study and gather student feedback through discussion, poll, survey and/or focus groups.

3. Values

We aspire to be friendly, ambitious, collegiate, enterprising and student focused in all our work and expect that the successful applicant will be able to demonstrate all these qualities.

B) Amended Job Description

1. Main purpose of the job

Student Curriculum Consultants (SCCs) will work with staff and students across the university to explore and enhance the way the university's teaching and learning principles are embedded in programmes of study. These are known as our Herts Learning principles. They will work closely with staff from Centre for Learning Access and Student Success (CLASS) to collaborate with others across the university who design and run modules and programmes of study. Work may involve participation in workshops, conversation with individuals, gathering perspectives from staff and students, the creation of resources and presentation of findings.

2. Main responsibilities and duties

1. Provide input and insights by reflecting on and sharing personal educational experiences and perspectives to enhance the understanding and application of the Herts Learning principles to curriculum design.
2. Attend training sessions and receive support to develop a comprehensive understanding of the Herts Learning principles, enhance public speaking skills, and effectively manage professional relationships.
3. Work collaboratively with staff from Centre for Learning Access and Student Success and other student partners (such as Technology Mentors) to ensure effective coordination and support in the implementation of the Herts Learning principles.
4. Produce self-guided resources about embedding Herts Learning principles for academic staff and students.
5. Assist in planning, organising, and facilitating workshops aimed at engaging academic staff in understanding and applying the Herts Learning principles.
6. Collaborate with programme teams across different Schools of study to gather feedback, insights, and ideas related to curriculum design.
7. Assist in the review of programme materials and provide feedback on their alignment with the Herts Learning principles.
8. Engage in follow-up activities with programme teams to support the implementation of the Herts Learning principles and address any questions or concerns.
9. Promote staff-student partnership by actively participating in conversations, workshops, and other initiatives aimed at embedding the Herts Learning principles through meaningful student-staff partnerships.
10. Embrace diversity and inclusivity: being open to perspectives other than their own, fostering an inclusive approach in engaging with academic staff and contributing to curriculum design discussions.