Cultivating student-led digital transformation: Student partners' insights into best practices for investigating students' digital needs

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Introduction

In recent years, student-staff partnerships have gained considerable traction in higher education as a catalyst for student-centred, inclusive educational change (Ollis and Gravett 2020). Recognising the expertise that students have in their individual student experiences, this evolving approach highlights the pivotal way in which students can collaborate with staff to inform, evaluate and influence change in their educational environments (Cook-Sather et al, 2014).

When done meaningfully, such a student-staff partnership approach holds the potential to help higher education institutions adapt and innovate in the face of rapid integration of digital technologies into teaching and learning. As building technology into teaching and learning is no longer an option but a necessity, universities around the world are in the midst of digital transformations (McGill, 2023). While these digital transformations offer immense opportunities, they also present universities with a unique set of challenges: creating this new digital terrain requires institutions to re-evaluate pedagogical strategies and digital skills support, invest in technological infrastructure, and engage in a comprehensive rethinking of the culture of higher education.

This case study explores one institution's student-staff partnership approach to tackling these challenges. Its aims are threefold: to detail the project approach, to provide an

account of the dynamics and challenges that the students on the project encountered, and to offer guidance to academic institutions embarking on similar journeys.

Written collaboratively by five students and two staff from the project itself, this article was developed out of individual reflective statements written by students about their internship experiences. Staff authors integrated these reflections into a draft, which was then reviewed and edited by the student partners to ensured it represented their collective and individual experiences.

Project Details

In early 2023, the University of Oxford's Centre for Teaching and Learning designed a partnership project that would support the University's programme for digital transformation and post-COVID transition to digitally supported, in-person teaching. Recognising the importance of centring students' experiences in the university's digital transformation, the Centre designed a project that would enable students and staff to work in partnership to investigate students' digital needs and experiences.

To guide the project, the following focus questions were developed to target gaps in staff understandings:

- How and when are taught students engaging with digital tools to support their learning?
- How do taught students develop the digital skills they need?
- How do taught students want to use digital tools and digital skills to learn, collaborate and participate in a digitally transformed university?
- What barriers do taught students face when trying to use digital tools and/or develop their digital skills?
- What do taught students need to bridge the gap between their current and ideal digitally-supported university experiences?

In spring 2023, project staff recruited six student partners to take part in the project. Supported by the University of Oxford's Careers Service, the Centre for Teaching and Learning advertised the project to taught Oxford students of all disciplines and levels of study as a paid internship opportunity. Key staff on the project then interviewed student candidates and selected those who would take part based on each student's interest in the project, teamworking skills, desire to use their experiences to shape the project, and personal and professional development aims.

In the end, the six student partners came from the following academic backgrounds, levels of study and stages in their educational journeys:

- African Studies (Postgraduate) - Final Year

- Education - Digital and Social Change (Postgraduate) - Final Year

- English (Undergraduate) - Penultimate Year

- International Relations (Postgraduate) - Final Year

- Mathematics (Undergraduate) - Penultimate Year

- Mathematics and Philosophy (Undergraduate) - Penultimate Year

The students were paid to contribute 30 hours each week to the project, with their time equally divided between in-person and remote work. Core hours from 10am to 4pm Monday to Thursday were established to facilitate student and staff collaboration. The remaining hours were worked flexibly by the students at times that suited them best.

The Centre for Teaching and Learning arranged for these six students to be supported by, and work in partnership with, the following staff:

- Five staff members from the Centre for Teaching and Learning worked alongside the students on the project. Two lead staff members provided additional pastoral care, professional development support and project management support.
- A Project Advisory Group, consisting of students and staff from across the University, convened over three meetings to offer guidance on how the project could best align with the broader aims and operational landscape of the University.

Over the ten weeks, this team of students and staff dove into establishing ways of working and understanding the institutional context for the project. With this foundation, they designed a research approach, collected and analysed data, and created outputs to communicate their findings and recommendations for change. A detailed schedule of these activities is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Project schedule

Project week	Activities
1	Staff partners led on: - establishing the student-staff partnership approach of the project - elucidating the support and feedback structures built into the internship - integrating the project within existing initiatives for enhancing students' digital skills, inclusivity, and academic support, aligned with the university's Digital Education and Transformation strategies.
2-3	Student and staff partners designed the data collection approach for the project to include a wide-reaching student-survey, up to 20 student interviews and two student focus groups. They aimed to collect open-ended, qualitative data on: - students' digital experiences during their initial transition into their studies - the range of digital tools students use - the digital skills students develop throughout their studies - students' access to digital tools and digital learning support - students' expectations and wishes for a digitally transformed university.
4-6	Student partners led on: - publicising the project on social media - distributing the survey to taught students across a range of disciplines, subjects, and levels of study - interviewing students - conducting focus groups.
7-9	Student partners led on the analysis of the data they collected and began creating outputs to convey their findings and put forward their recommendations for change.
10	Student and staff partners worked together to finalise the project outputs. Staff worked to publish outputs to the Centre for Teaching and Learning's website.

Throughout each stage of the project, student and staff partners actively exchanged feedback on the effectiveness of the partnership approach. This ongoing dialogue helped to

continuously shape and improve their ways of working throughout the internship, tailoring the process to suit both the project's objectives and their individual needs.

Student Partners' Reflections

For the students, the initial impression of the internship project was one of curiosity. They were drawn to the opportunity based on broad, intriguing terms like "digital transformation" and "student-staff partnership". However, the students reflected that they either did not know what to expect from the project or harboured doubts about whether their voices would be equally heard in a collaborative setting with staff. Questions also remained for everyone about how their efforts would translate into real impact.

On the student-staff partnership approach

On reflection, the students felt that across the internship they were able to work with staff as equal contributors to the project. By way of open and frequent acknowledgement of everyone's relationship as colleagues with unique contributions, the students felt they could take ownership of the project's processes and direction with staff. This outcome was encouraged by the group explicitly recognising and vocalising the different forms of expertise that students and staff could bring to the project, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of key student and staff contributions

Key student contributions	Key staff contributions
Expertise in what it is like to be Oxford students to improve the questions asked, the manner of getting in touch with students, and the interpretation of their responses	Understanding of how the project fits into ongoing initiatives across the university and the higher education sector
Ability to connect with their peers to enhance the data collection process	Expertise in educational research design and subject-based questions about digitally supported inclusive teaching
Fresh perspectives and innovative ideas for how to improve students' experiences based on the findings	Knowledge of 'what works' at the university

However, there still were moments of uncertainty for the students over how to work together as everyone adapted to the partnership approach to the project. Table 3 summarises the key challenges the students faced during this process and what helped them overcome these challenges.

Table 3. Key challenges student partners faced in student-staff partnership working, as identified by the student authors

Challenge	What helped	Outcome
Adapting to the levels of autonomy and independence inherent in a student-staff partnership approach	Staff consistently encouraged students to engage with them as colleagues. Over time, there was also a strategic withdrawal of staff involvement, providing students with a clear understanding of their independence and ownership of the project.	The project became research which was conducted by students, for students. This had the effect of fostering a sense of ownership and engagement among student partners and encouraging other students at the university to participate in surveys and interviews.
Preventing decisions from becoming staff-led	Key project staff had explicit discussions with all staff members involved in the project about the nature of student-staff partnership working and the students' co-ownership of the project. Staff prioritised listening to each student's experiences and insights ahead of sharing their own insights and making any decisions.	Staff became aware of their tendency to direct the project and instead began to negotiate ways forward with students based on both their own, and the students', opinions.
Ensuring the project did not shift into a solely student-led initiative	Student and staff partners discussed project responsibilities at the start of each week in a Monday group meeting, deciding which tasks to share and which to leave students to lead on.	While the project remained student-led, it did so through discussions and decisions based in student-staff partnership. Students were able to bring up when they felt that they were working alongside staff versus having to lead on a task with only ad hoc support from staff.

Dealing with uncertainty around not having the 'right' digital skills or institutional knowledge to contribute to discussions	During the first week of the internship, students and staff dedicated time to exploring the project's institutional context. Following this, students engaged in discussions with staff from various university departments to identify gaps in staff understanding of students' digital tools and skills. Subsequently, the students conducted desk research to further investigate these gaps.	Students and staff began the project with a shared understanding of the institutional context for the project, facilitating group collaboration and individual confidence in speaking to others about these topics. Speaking to staff and doing their own research, led the students to realise that their own digital experiences at the university provided them with sufficient understanding to carry out the project.

On investigating students' digital needs

Students and staff faced a variety of challenges in achieving the specific project aims of understanding students' digital experiences and digital needs. Table 4 provides a summary of the key challenges that the student partners faced in achieving the project aims and what helped overcome them.

Table 4. Key challenges in investigating students' digital experiences, as identified by student authors

Challenge	What helped	Outcome
Uncertainty around how taught students understand terms like digital skills and digital tools	The team conducted a Pulse survey to gauge students' understandings of the terms. They also spoke to staff across the institution about their experiences speaking to and surveying students about their digital experiences.	The team decided to avoid using these terms alone in their research, and instead contextualised the terms in the questions during data collection.
Avoiding questions that placed blame on individual students for 'lacking' digital skills	The team consulted with experts in academic skills development on how to avoid taking a 'skills deficit approach' to their survey, interview questions, and proposed recommendations.	The team concentrated on identifying the barriers and challenges students encountered in developing digital skills and accessing digital tools. Consequently, their recommendations aimed to eliminate these obstacles for students.

Uncertainty around taking on unfamiliar research tasks, such as conducting interviews or analysing data	Staff members, both from within the project and elsewhere in the university, conducted workshops and trial interviews to help students become acquainted with various tasks. Additionally, the staff consistently reminded the students that the project was intended as a learning opportunity. They encouraged everyone to embrace new experiences and to feel comfortable asking questions.	The students became comfortable tackling tasks they had no formal experience in, with the understanding that mistakes were not just accepted, but welcomed. This approach fostered an atmosphere where fresh ideas could flourish, positively influencing both the methodology and the outputs of the project.
Competing demands to create specific project outputs from non-project staff; balancing quality and quantity of project outputs	The team developed a list of essential 'must-have' outputs and additional 'if we have time' outputs. This prioritization was based on both staff insights and the students' own insights into what would be most impactful for students. Additionally, the students concentrated on cleaning their raw data, ensuring that staff could conduct further analysis after the internship concluded, if needed.	By concentrating on the 'must-have' outputs, the team was able to allocate the necessary time to produce the most impactful results. Importantly, this approach ensured that students did not feel pressured to exceed their contracted hours.

On the project's institutional impact

By addressing the challenges inherent in both the student-staff partnership approach and the project's digital focus, the project team created a comprehensive set of outputs that provide a clear understanding of students' digital needs. These outputs are actively being used to shape the University of Oxford's strategies for digital transformation and digitally-supported inclusive teaching. The outputs, which are readily accessible to university staff for use in enhancing their practices and for further dissemination, include:

- An executive report detailing key findings and student-generated recommendations for action.
- An executive slide deck summarizing key findings and recommendations, designed for easy sharing and presentation by staff to their colleagues.

- A series of detailed slide decks, each focusing on specific themes: digital transitions, digital devices, digital inequalities, digital skills, digital tools, and digital transformation.

On personal and professional growth across the project

Overcoming the challenges associated with working collaboratively on an investigative project contributed significantly to the personal and professional growth of the students involved. Reflecting on the ten-week experience, the student authors identified several key areas of development resulting from their involvement in the project:

- Enhanced interpersonal and professional communication skills
- Improved teamwork and collaboration abilities, both in-person and online
- Improved project management skills
- Refined qualitative research skills, including question design with data in mind, conducting interviews, and analysing qualitative data
- The ability to tailor tasks to meet diverse stakeholder opinions and needs
- A deeper understanding of higher education and its intricate digital landscape
- An appreciation of the importance of engaging in educational developments

Furthermore, the student authors observed that they gained broader perspectives on their potential career paths, a stronger sense of belonging to a community that includes both students and staff, and a heightened sense of responsibility as students to contribute to their educational environments.

Discussion and recommendations

The experiences and outcomes of this project clearly demonstrated to the student authors the immense potential of uniting students and staff in investigating students' digital experiences. However, this outcome did not arise without challenges, many of which resonate strongly with existing literature on student-staff partnerships in higher education. Challenges such as adapting to levels of autonomy, being uncertain around how to contribute, and dealing with power dynamics have been extensively discussed in academic

works exploring student-staff collaborations (Cook-Sather et al, 2014; Ollis and Gravett, 2020). The experiences shared by the students involved in this project mirror the findings from these studies, underscoring the universality of these challenges and highlighting their significance in the context of student-staff partnerships. In this student-staff partnership project, the students found that openly addressing challenges was crucial to overcoming them. By acknowledging and actively responding to issues like undefined roles and power dynamics, the team was able to effectively balance fruitful collaboration with student leadership.

Specifically, the student authors identified several key strategies that contributed significantly to the success of the project:

1. **Compensating students for their time**: Paying students helped to make clear the university's valuing of student contributions and facilitated students' dedicated participation in the project.

2. **Ringfencing staff time**: Allocating sufficient time and resources for staff members to collaborate with students was essential for establishing an equitable partnership. This approach allowed for a balanced dynamic where staff could transition between advisory and collaborative roles as appropriate.

3. **Situating students and staff as colleagues**: Integrating students into the staff working environment and including them in staff meetings and social events helped to foster a peer-to-peer dynamic.

4. **Continuously negotiating a partnership approach**: Informed by principles of partnership working, the team was able to collaboratively decide on their approach to the project. Regular check-ins and anonymous feedback opportunities then helped to remind everyone of their agreed approach and allow for necessary adjustments.

5. **Sharing knowledge**: Mutual learning between students and staff about experiences, the institutional context, and digital terminology boosted student confidence in contributing to discussions and decisions.

6. **Promoting peer collaboration**: Utilizing inclusive collaboration strategies, such as rotating facilitators, small group discussions, think-pair-share, and anonymous suggestion boxes (Krantz and Smith 2020), helped mitigate potential power dynamic problems and encouraged equal contributions.

7. **Establishing student support structures**: As emphasised by Reid (2023) and Mercer-Mapstone et al (2021), the students found it important that staff supported them with managing their workloads and navigating potential ethical issues, especially as they were interviewing other students about topics relating to equity, discrimination, and inclusion.

8. **Publicizing student ownership**: Highlighting the student-driven nature of the project in social media made it clear that the students' involvement in the project mattered, and encouraged further student involvement.

9. **Prioritizing student-led recommendations**: Ensuring students had time to develop their recommendations based on their findings helped chart a clear course for student-centred institutional change.

Utilising these strategies, the project team successfully navigated the challenges so often associated with student-staff collaborations. This enabled the group to continually negotiate their working relationship at each new stage of the project, ultimately producing valuable, student-centred insights that are instrumental to the institution's digital transformation. However, it is important to recognise that these strategies also highlight the inherently contradictory and often uncertain nature of student-staff partnerships. For instance, while this case study underscores the significance of student ownership in the project, it simultaneously reveals the potential for staff to perceive this approach as shifting away from a true partnership model. Determining the correct balance and achieving it remains a

complex question. It is likely that such questions are best addressed by those engaged in their own specific partnership projects. While it is tempting to prescribe a definitive model for what partnerships 'should' look like, the challenges and contradictions encountered in this case study suggest that decision-making regarding collaboration methods should be left to the discretion of the students and staff involved.

Conclusion

Through deliberate conversations addressing the inherent challenges and uncertainties of student-staff partnerships, the students involved in this project discovered the possibility of establishing and maintaining a partnership that not only promoted equality but also effectively amplified their peers' digital needs and desires. This approach led to significant positive impacts for both the students and the institution. Consequently, this case study suggests that student-staff partnership approaches to exploring students' digital experiences can successfully centre students in their efforts to create educational environments that empower and prepare the next generation of digitally-supported learners and leaders.

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