Reflections on a student and staff partnership in transforming and shaping pre-induction experiences through the collaborative development of an online MOOC

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Introduction

The University of Hertfordshire (UH) has a diverse student body, and the transition into university life can be an exciting but complex one as students step into a new phase of their lives. Research conducted across a national and international context identified that transition for students into HE is a non-linear process (Gravett and Winstone, 2021; Richardson and Tate 2013) where some student groups outperform others. For example, navigating this journey as a first-generation university student is often intersected with a multitude of equity categories that can be challenging (Leese, 2010). On the other hand, the international cohort must frequently battle not just with being far away from their home country but also with navigating learning in a second language and adjusting to cultural aspects of the UK. The work of Keenan (2012) identifies students' engagement at pre-induction as playing a vital role in helping them to develop the resilience to thrive on their academic journeys in HE. Additionally, early opportunities for activities in which new students can engage with staff and their peers, as discussed in Thomas (2012), can also help foster a sense of community which is central to overall student retention and success.

Getting Ready to Study at Herts (GRSH) was first created in 2018-19 on UH's virtual learning environment (VLE), in recognition of the need for a wider reach for prospective students on

various institutional initiatives – i.e., open days and outreach work. GRSH provided an informative overview of the university experience, including a guided tour of the facilities and learning spaces students may use during their time at university.

Feedback on GRSH was sought from the diverse student body at the university, where students expressed how GRSH can support transition to university life. Students also noted that it may be helpful to include resources around skills, and expectations to help navigate the journey through HE in terms of both the academic and social aspects (Crabtree et al, 2007; Yorke et al, 2008; Worsley et al, 2021). Additionally, a literature review had been undertaken by UH staff to explore existing initiatives in the HE sector to address transition challenges. Nolan et al's (2016) work identified that nearly every UK HEI provider had actively sought ways to develop an effective approach to enhance the transition experience, emphasising ways to build a sense of belonging and engagement through scaffolded online pre-induction activities with peers, to better prepare students before their arrival (Watling, 2009; Future Learn, 2014).

The Collaboration Context

In 2019-20, staff continued to develop GRSH, adapting the resources, responding to student feedback, and discerning the additional challenges posed by the pandemic's sudden change in the HE learning and teaching landscape. Recognising how crucial these aspects were for the incoming diverse student body and the lack of student voice, staff decided to engage students as partners to work collaboratively on the GRSH as they would have greater insights, ideas, and lived experiences (Dollinger and Mercer-Mapstone, 2019).

The Student-Staff Partnership (SSP) approach offered by Cook-Sather et al (2014) was adopted, in which students and staff collaborated in a reciprocal process and had the opportunity to contribute equally to the pedagogical approaches, decision making and enhancement of GRSH. Previous research around partnership working at UH (Bamwo et al, 2023; Jarvis et al, 2016) suggested that from the outset, partnership working can be messy i.e., from how relationships are built among partners to the involvement and engagement, as outlined in Healey and Healey (2018). Therefore, it was crucial to focus on the values

underpinning the purpose of the GRSH partnership, while ensuring a good balance was achieved for the collaborative process and the planned outcomes.

Methodology

Ways of Working on GRSH

To foster a positive partnership relationship, partners identified several approaches for collaboration, as well as how to engage with other stakeholders at UH. Effective communication was crucial within the partnership. A mix-modal approach which included face-to-face meetings, emails, and the use of Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) software was employed to accommodate the diverse circumstances of student partners, offering flexibility for their active involvement throughout the development of GRSH. This was especially important as the student partners were from different schools within UH and had limited time availability.

The GRSH MS Teams channel became the main platform to provide an overview of the project and list the various active initiatives, including workflow, partners involved, as well as the organisation of when each initiative would start and complete. Using MS Teams as the main communication platform was crucial, enabling regular updates – especially for those on the move. Updates and plans were shared among student partners, including the availability to work on specific activities. This was also interspersed with in-person sessions, often open and informal, which were scheduled on the days when student partners were on campus. These sessions often featured brainstorming, ad-hoc focus group discussions, and the creation of video content. As the partnership evolved, student partners developed independence and autonomy and began establishing efficient ways to manage the workflow among peers by beginning to outline future tasks, enhance overall task management and increase the transparency of shared activities. Additionally, they introduced impromptu peer review sessions whenever the need arose to further demonstrate their proactive approach to collaborative working within GRSH.

Finding Student Partners for the GRSH project

Staff working on the GRSH project were keen for the partnership opportunity to extend to the wide and diverse student population at UH. The staff approached various student networks to encourage students' involvement, with a view that their lived experiences can support the university in all aspects of enhancing the overall transition experiences for themselves and their prospective peers. This led to a positive response and student partners were carefully selected to ensure diverse representation and voice reflecting the UH student body. This included students from Widening Access and Student Success (WASS), Student Ambassadors, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Student Advocates, Student Technology Mentors (STMs) and UH Placement Students. Additionally, the selection also ensured a mix of home and international students studying different subject disciplines, in different stages of their programmes of study; both undergraduates and postgraduates were part of the selection process. This intersectionality across the student partners was important as it would be able to provide rich insights into the different perspectives and experiences that can be represented within GRSH. From the outset, student partners were made aware by the staff partner that they could be involved in different ways, recognising how partnership can be messy (Healey and Healey, 2018) when some of the partnership roles are well-defined whilst in other aspects they are more organic, relating to issues being highlighted and enhancement ideas developed. This led to the formation of a smaller, more defined core partnership team of student partners and staff: one WASS Ambassador, two BAME Student Advocates, three STMs and one Placement Student.

The student partners' motivation to engage with GRSH was multifaceted, recognising that participation in a SSP offered a unique opportunity for personal development, namely collaboration skills, communication and project management. Additionally, they aspired to contribute to the broader academic community by equipping current and incoming students with the essential resources and knowledge required to excel on their university journey. The desire to empower fellow students by enabling them to access the information necessary for their educational success served as a powerful catalyst for their active involvement in the project.

Evolution of our Partnership Relationship

Most of the student partners had been actively involved in other university-wide partnership projects, including creating educational content. These engagements provided them with invaluable experiential insights into what effective SSP entails. They had acquired foundational knowledge of partnership models and practices, thereby reinforcing their capacity to engage in productive and reciprocal collaborations with staff. Notwithstanding, one of the main challenges that the experienced student partners encountered was the diversity of approaches and management styles utilised across their prior engagement projects. Each of these projects presented distinct structures, roles, and expectations for student involvement, making it difficult for the students to establish a uniform understanding of their responsibilities and the dynamics of their participation. Consequently, as they embarked on the GRSH project with new staff members, the students found themselves in a situation where they lacked clear expectations and were uncertain about what was anticipated of them. This initial lack of clarity and the need to adapt to varying working approaches left the students feeling less confident at the outset. It necessitated a period of adjustment and orientation to understand the specific requirements and dynamics of the GRSH partnership, reinforcing the importance of streamlined guidance and structured onboarding processes to facilitate a smoother transition for student partners in such multifaceted collaborations:

> *"Although initially, I felt less confident in proposing ideas and making independent contributions to the project, the support and guidance received from the staff partners proved to be invaluable in the evolution of the partnership dynamics, which resulted in overcoming the initial challenges, leading to my increasing participation in the project."*

(Student Technology Mentor 1)

For students who were entirely new to the concept of SSP and accustomed to the traditional, unidirectional educational model, transitioning to a more dynamic approach presented significant challenges too. Their prior experiences had conditioned them to perceive themselves as passive recipients of instruction, and as they took this novel approach, they grappled with the unfamiliarity of having a more active role in shaping their educational experiences.

However, as time progressed, a notable transformation became evident in the partnership. The initial uncertainty gave way to a growing sense of empowerment. Through exposure to the new approach, they began to appreciate the value of active collaboration and the co-creation of knowledge. Over time, they found themselves contributing their unique perspectives and experiences through open communication and shared decision making, thus reshaping the educational landscape they had known.

According to the collective reflection of student partners, at the beginning of the partnership, there was a significant communication barrier between students and staff partners. The perceived main reason was students lacking the experience in taking part in similar projects and being assigned with decision-making power over content creation for institutional purposes. The new setting was overwhelming, and students' work relied mostly on approaches and feedback provided by staff partners. The other important reason was a huge gap in the level of expertise and professional experience. This resulted in students being highly hesitant to share their ideas and provide feedback, as they were not sure whether their critical views and thoughts about improvement were valid. However, due to the regular catch-up sessions with staff partners and other modes of interaction, the communication barrier gradually lowered. During these sessions, staff partners ensured a friendly and informal setting to encourage students to share their opinions and ideas. As students gained more confidence, they started providing constructive feedback, which was always considered by others. Staff partners had also encouraged students to elaborate on criticism to better understand the cause of potential concerns and how they could be resolved. Over time, communication between student and staff partners became a two-way conversation, where everyone's opinions were highly valued:

"My most memorable experience was meeting new people and being able to bounce ideas off each other during the execution of this project. I also got to present a part of the project at a conference, which, now that I think of it, was my greatest highlight of the entire project – knowing that we had done something so important that needed to be shared with colleagues from other universities. There was also the fact that everyone – students and staff – could contribute their thoughts about the project topics, and they were well received. I at no point felt that my opinions were inconsequential to the project."

(BAME Student Advocate)

Student partners reflected that participation in this project had a significant impact on their personal development, as they learnt to have a greater respect for others. Through a boost in confidence, they became more proactive and supportive of others within the partnership.

Examples of Practice with Student Partner Reflections

Creating and Reviewing Content

One of the initiatives that student partners engaged in was digital content creation, which involved the development and design of materials, as well as assessment and feedback. This initiative had a central objective of enhancing the overall quality, readability, and interactivity of GRSH; a representative sample of pages from various units was meticulously reviewed, and comprehensive notes were taken to outline potential enhancements. As the dialogue between staff and students progressed, a pivotal moment was reached when students were offered the opportunity to take the lead in implementing the proposed changes, not only on the sampled pages, but also on other relevant sections of the platform. This empowerment translated into a degree of autonomy, allowing them to modify existing content, optimize formatting, include supplementary resources, and manage their workflow effectively.

It is worth noting that growth in the diversity of the student body stimulated the need to address the inclusivity element within GRSH – i.e., to ensure content was relevant and representative of the diverse audience. Although students could be considered as experts in the areas around their lived experiences, most do not possess practical knowledge in accessible content creation and delivery. Therefore, there was a need to provide relevant training in this area in order to enable student partners to develop their skills and elevate credibility of their expertise to create high-quality content. Although the training aimed to present students with some of the best practices in creating accessible digital content, the focus was on granting them freedom of choice regarding the content delivery methods. In this partnership, training was an essential element as it played a crucial role in introducing new concepts and making partners familiar with different techniques and possibilities. This could also be the groundwork for soft skills development and an essential building block for the evolution of partnership:

At the beginning of the project, training about the ways of developing inclusive Canvas content was provided. This was important, as from my student perspective, I was not aware of some of the methods that might be essential in developing content that needed to be fully inclusive and accessible. However, during the project, we were able to create the content as we preferred. At every step, staff supported us and provided us with feedback about the content that I developed.

(Student Technology Mentor 2)

According to Johnson et al (2020), it is important that consistent content design fosters a sense of guidance for the audience, which helps individuals anticipate the content structure, making it easier to find information or areas of interest and navigate effectively. There had been several catch-up meetings to discuss and decide upon GRSH structure to ensure consistency i.e., appropriately ordering and dividing units to create a sense of a learner journey. This has proved to be a significant stimulator of engagement in proposing ideas and exchanging critical views (Bamwo et al, 2023).

The collective sentiment among student partners resonated with a profound sense of enthusiasm and purpose as they commenced the task of content creation and moderation for GRSH. They found the autonomy granted to them particularly empowering. This experience served as a platform for personal growth, fostering the development of problem-solving skills and the ability to seek assistance when encountering challenges.

Recording Assessment Literacy and Learning Spaces

Collaboration between staff and student partners during the filming materials for GRSH was marked by a rich exchange of ideas. Initially, student partners sought support to ensure a high quality. In response, staff partners had some creative insights regarding ideal filming locations and the specific language and terminology to be included. The positive encouragement that was offered to student partners played a crucial role in the growth of their confidence when working on this initiative. From this foundation, the student partners collectively strategized, allocating roles for specific shots and locations. They also explored opportunities for alternative settings to enhance video content. For example, student

partners found that it was important to include a resource for how new prospective students can familiarise themselves with assessment practices and the literacy around assessment.

Throughout the filming process, the partnership between staff and students thrived on open communication and active engagement. Staff continually solicited the students' input, encouraging them to play an integral part in shaping the project. This collaborative synergy encouraged experimentation with various approaches, culminating in the selection of the most effective options to convey a clear and engaging message, aligning with the GRSH character and objectives.

Staff Partners' Reflections

Staff overseeing the development of GRSH initially felt that students may not be interested in participating in this partnership due to their individual study and professional commitments. This also meant that diversity might not have been achieved if there was not a good uptake. Additionally, they were also concerned whether Learning Technologists (LA) would be able to engage in the partnership due to the competing priorities of their role and their lack of experience working on a SSP. The LA staff partner felt that irrespective of the success of the video products themselves, it was valuable to reflect on the actual process of video production and how it could be used to cultivate and grow collaboration in SSP. Additionally, they regarded the fluidity of hierarchy and openness of the creative discussion to be extremely beneficial to the process. They felt that their expertise in video production was well utilised and appreciated, but they also recognised students' thorough understanding of short form media, which allowed for authentic and relatable content being produced:

"As a Learning Technologist in a non-academic role, I'm proud to be part of this collaborative project focused on equitable engagement and SSP. My primary role is to offer videography support while co-curating with student partners. Beyond the value of the videos themselves as products, the collaborative process of video production fosters teamwork and discussions, making it a rewarding endeavour that breaks down barriers and promotes co-creation."

(Learning Technologist)

To this end, staff partners saw many positives and benefits in the partnership through which all partners were able to take full control and agency to bring in their expertise, and saw how it laid great foundations for further partnership development for GRSH.

Broader implications of this Partnership

There are broader implications of this partnership as a process model for the development of institution-wide content for both UH and the wider HE sector. It is key that this co-created content provides clear communication between the university and its diverse student audience, and is inclusive and contemporary to meet student needs. This partnership had also created some experiences that have been distilled into top tips to support others within HE who may be considering institution-wide partnership working.

Tips for students

a) Get involved; your view matters and you are influential in affecting change in student experiences

b) Ask if you are uncertain about anything related to project or tasks

c) You are here to work on the same goal – there is no need to feel intimidated by the more experienced staff

d) Being part of a SSP is a great personal and professional development opportunity.

Tips for staff

a) Consider ways in which students can be rewarded financially when working in partnership, provide opportunities for more diverse students to get involved and recognise the value of work being carried out

b) Get students involved from the outset and reassure them of their expertise early on

c) Respect and treat student partners as equal and ensure they are well supported

d) Set clear expectations and boundaries for students to work on from the outset

e) Maintain flexibility in ways of working with students to allow for their complex lives

f) Be aware of the struggles faced by students to avoid negative assumptions

Conclusion

GRSH taking the partnership approach has helped all partners to learn from the experience and has developed a great sense of community. It broke the traditional approach of having students in a consultative role, instead their commitment and involvement has supported a more positive and student-informed pre-induction experience for prospective students at the university. This evolution transforms the educational landscape, fosters open dialogue, shares responsibilities, and promotes genuine collaboration between staff and students in HE.

Acknowledgement

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