

# Reimagining Partnerships to Generate New Learning Opportunities: how student partnership supports staff development at Hertfordshire

**Lucy Bamwo (Office for Learning and Teaching, Coventry University<sup>1</sup>) and Sarah Flynn (Centre for Learning, Access and Student Success, University of Hertfordshire)**

Staff-student partnerships have a long tradition at Hertfordshire. Our Strategic Plan makes clear that staff will work in partnership with students to deliver high-quality and distinctive education that transforms lives. Our partnerships offer reciprocal benefits, providing opportunities to develop students' skills for life and for the university's offer to be shaped by our students' perspectives. It is how we work, and how we frame learning, teaching, and assessment.

The university has seven academic schools and a community of over 33,000 students in the UK and overseas. Delivery of courses ranges from blended on-campus to purely online. Students-as-partners has been part of our university culture for almost two decades and our Student Technology Mentors (STMs) were one of our very first institution-wide partnership projects, designed to support an area of strategic development. 2005-2010 saw us employ students to work with staff and support them in using technologies to embed sustained cultural change in relation to blended learning. When the university implemented a new online learning environment in 2017, STMs were reinstated and employed to help staff in the introduction and management of new module sites, ensuring that a partnership approach to co-creation was adopted. Currently a team of 16 mentors from across the institution, from Levels 4 to 7, also supports the implementation of our Herts Learning

---

<sup>1</sup> Formerly University of Hertfordshire

## Editors' introduction

curriculum design principles, with a large-scale curriculum review programme covering all our provision with goals around blended and flexible learning.

Our STMs have evolved to work closely with academic staff and other students in a partnership-led approach to ensure that we are supporting the development of digital skills and the creation of technology-enhanced learning tools training. STMs are critical to the process of reviewing module design, with a focus on inclusivity and accessibility, and the team goes from strength to strength. They have become ever more essential, as our reliance on technology and digital skills is central all our learning, teaching, and assessment experiences.

As a mixed team of staff and students, working in partnership, there are barriers to overcome before everyone can work together in a truly collaborative manner. The different dynamic and emotional elements of working together are actively addressed (Baptista, 2018). To overcome some of these barriers, staff, who work in professional roles with central teams, invested hugely in training and support for students. This collaboration has proved to be extremely positive, with benefits for staff (gaining insight and expertise from students) and for students (gaining an understanding from staff of what happens behind the scenes).

This has had a profound impact on the way in which the institution thinks about staff-student partnership, beyond the work of this team. Understanding the need to make a significant investment of time and effort into our partnerships has been important in delivering the excellent outcomes, sense of reward, and learning experiences for all. It has enlightened our practice and approach where we are actively promoting engaging students-as-partners with all university projects. We are keen to emphasise the need to facilitate and offer advice and guidance in the form of “cooperative enterprise” (McCulloch, 2009, p 181) with a partnership of co-production where all partners are focussed on production, dissemination, application of knowledge and on the development of learners.

One key factor for the success and the sustained effectiveness of our approach is the passion for partnership. It takes personal investment and time from all to make it successful. We use open and regular communication about what is working and what is not, and what ideas everyone has. We always consider everything each team member contributes, to build

## Editors' introduction

confidence in the partnership. Effort and reward are driven both ways, including STMs successfully applying for recognition at D1 as Associate Fellows of the HEA from Advance HE.

The team has a strong focus on supporting academics to make their teaching more inclusive and accessible to all. Module reviews have been offered at the university for the last few years, in which academics have conversations about their teaching and module sites with both staff and students in a safe environment. Reviews are offered throughout the year, to guide online module design and to look at how tutors can create an inclusive curriculum and help their students through Canvas design. The STMs are trained in understanding the meaning of inclusivity and accessibility, looking beyond varied requirements of students with disabilities, to connect to other institutional work on race equity and representation. The co-leadership for the reviews between students and staff is agreed and clearly communicated before the STM performs a review. STMs are given training/guidance and confidence building, so that they are empowered to give their perspective and feedback to module leaders. They are guided in early reviews and supported into a position of co-leading sessions. Partnerships formed with module leaders can often continue post-review, as tutors often return for further reviews as they develop their sites.

It was always planned that STMs should be involved with module reviews because students are the end users of module design, and it is unthinkable that their experience would be shaped without their input. Points raised during sessions are far more powerful coming from student partners than from staff. STMs bring their lived student experience, expressing what works for them, and sharing successful examples that they have experienced on their own programmes of study. The students have played a crucial role in revealing to a key group of staff the value of partnership. Sessions are often enlightening for module leaders, not only in respect of their module design but also because, for many, they are where they experience student partnership for the first time. Continued engagement beyond the review is one of the success factors of the partnership. Importantly, the value of the student perspective on staff implementation of curriculum design has been shown as valuable. The approach not only impacts on academics having a module review but develops a strong sense of collegiality between staff and student members of the team.

STMs have worked directly alongside academics sharing on-the-ground insight into what digital skills are wanted and needed by staff and students. As we move into the next

## Editors' introduction

strategic phase of supporting staff to develop digital skills, it has been hugely beneficial having different perspectives. Academics who work with STMs commented positively, particularly about one-to-one support in their own office environment. They reported this personalised and tailored support was difficult to achieve in group training. Some found it hard to get peer support from colleagues for several reasons, including embarrassment or the attitude/competency of peers.

Opportunities to learn with, and from, STMs and staff is central to the project philosophy. For much of its day-to-day work the team often works in pairs or groups, enabling mutual support and critical feedback loops. Where content is created, it is subject to a student and staff joint review process. This significantly benefits the team due to the opportunity to share a critical view, exchange ideas, and support each other with challenging tasks. Work of a content creation nature is followed by the staff and student peer-review process to provide another layer of critical evaluation and support.

The impact of the team's work has been recognised internally, being a highly commended team of the year at the Vice-Chancellor's Awards and their practice has been shared to the sector. The team has been a stimulus for cultural partnership change across the institution. Our work allows academics to clearly see the student contribution in partnership and the mutual benefits this can bring. It demonstrates to the institution the benefits of partnership and plants the seeds for future partnership projects to grow by academics experiencing this first hand through our work. The enduring nature of this project means that we will continue to build and evolve our partnership relationships to drive digital transformation for both the institution and the individual. Based on the success of our STMs, the team was invited to present our work at the Student-Staff Partnerships Symposium in 2019, and at sector-leading partnership events, including the Jisc Change Agent's Network conferences in 2018, 2019 and 2022.

The STM programme highlights the significant value of student expertise. STMs' lived experiences as learners provide invaluable insights into student needs and preferences. Their participation in curriculum reviews and module design ensures a focus on inclusivity and accessibility, meeting the diverse needs of the student body. Furthermore, the partnership builds mutual learning. Staff gain valuable insights into students' perspectives, while students develop their digital skills and confidence in providing feedback. This

## Editors' introduction

collaborative approach strengthens the learning environment for all participants. Moving forward, the continued commitment to collaborative practices will remain instrumental in ensuring an enriching learning environment for both staff and students at University of Hertfordshire.

### References

Baptista, A. (2018) 'Navigating the emotions of partnerships: Reflections on challenges for staff and students.' Paper presented at *Jisc Change Agent Network Conference*, Winchester, 19-20 April 2018, Available at: <https://www.slideshare.net/lessner/43-navigating-the-emotions-in-partnershipspdf> (Accessed April 15)

Dollinger, M., & Mercer-Mapstone, L. (2019). What's in a name? Unpacking students' roles in higher education through neoliberal and social justice lenses. *Teaching and learning inquiry*, 7(2), 73–89. <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/TLI/article/view/61620/53296>

McCulloch, A. (2009). 'The student as co-producer: Learning from public administration about the student-university relationship', *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(2), 171–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802562857>