

Reflecting on Partnership Projects, the Impact on Students and Their Development

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Introduction

Hertfordshire's commitment to staff-student partnership has been instrumental in fostering a collaborative and enriching learning environment, as exemplified by the 2023 Jisc Change Agents' Network conference, 10th Anniversary event being held there. Partnerships have played a pivotal role in enhancing student development and preparing graduates for success. This paper shares some of the experiences and perspectives of students and alumni involved in various staff-student partnership projects who contributed to the conference. It highlights the positive impact on their skills, networks and future careers. By examining the benefits and outcomes of these collaborations, we aim to underscore the importance of fostering such partnerships in higher education.

Engagement in partnership projects provided students with opportunities to develop a wide range of essential skills: teamwork, communication and problem-solving were among the most frequently cited benefits. Students appreciated the chance to work alongside staff members and other students, learning from their expertise and perspectives. As one student shared:

"The process of being part of a pair for content creation allowed the development of teamwork skills, especially through collaboration based on the exchange of ideas and mutual support"

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Students participating in partnership projects consistently expressed a strong sense of value and appreciation for the collaborative approach. As one noted:

"Thanks to the close relationship with staff, which was based on open communication and a review process with direct, constructive feedback, we managed to improve our content and ourselves in these terms"

The collaborative nature of these partnerships fostered a sense of mutual respect and understanding, enabling students to contribute meaningfully to the projects. Staff-student partnerships can improve overall relationships within the university community. Any team of staff and students working in partnership must remove barriers to work together in a truly collaborative manner. The different dynamic and emotional elements of working together must be actively addressed (Baptista, 2018). This can positively impact academic achievement and the overall university experience, as one student mentions below:

"By working together through a staff-student partnership, I believe that it helps create better relationships overall within the university community – which in turn, can benefit academic achievement and the experience of attending university. For example, after working with members of staff it helped me, personally, to 'break the stigma' that the only contact a student can have with staff is during academic contact hours and many staff were available to guide students throughout their whole university experience."

Equity within partnership has been a key intent throughout the myriad of staff-student partnerships, and feeling recognised for their lived experience and identity that they brought to projects was hugely significant. This is not without work and is recognised as a substantial challenge by Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill, whose work speaks to the need to "ensure schemes offer equality of opportunity, acknowledging that, given structural inequalities, certain groups have different privileges or disadvantages" (2019, p 2552). Some of the partnership projects featured in the conference were also recognised by their inclusion in an

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Advance HE project on engaging students to enable and support inclusive cultural change (Hughes et al, 2023).

Beyond skill development, partnership projects also played a crucial role in building relationships and expanding students' networks. By working closely with staff members, students gained valuable insights into the university community and established connections that could benefit their future careers:

"My role involved working with university staff members and students that expanded my networking, which might be beneficial in the future when I finish my studies"

Derrick Mensah and Sahar Khajeh, two contributors to the alumni panel at the 2023 Change Agents' Network conference, were invited to offer their insights into the transformative impact of staff-student partnerships. Their experiences, as highlighted in this paper, showcase how these collaborations can significantly enhance student development and open doors to future career opportunities. By sharing their personal journeys, Derrick and Sahar provide compelling evidence of the positive outcomes that can result from active engagement in partnership projects.

Derrick Mensah's Journey

Derrick Mensah, a Senior Student Experience Officer at King's Business School, shared his own experiences and insights into the value of student partnerships. Having participated in several such initiatives during his time at De Montfort University, Mensah emphasised the positive impact on his personal and professional development:

"My name is Derrick Mensah, and I currently work as a Senior Student Experience Officer (Community & Engagement) for King's Business School at King's College London. Responsible for student engagement in our numerous opportunities, social activities and student mentoring programs, it is my mission to help our students connect, develop their skills, and find their ideal pathway to success. I am passionate about student experience and student engagement and have been working in the

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sector for over seven years. My goal is to develop and implement robust and accessible systems that increase student engagement and subsequently maximise student experience.

During my time at De Montfort University, I had the privilege of participating in several student partnership initiatives. One of the most impactful was the DMU Freedom to Achieve project, which focused on addressing the awarding gap. As a student adviser, I also contributed to co-creation projects, collaborating closely with faculty to develop a co-creation toolkit aimed at enhancing student engagement and learning.

These experiences were pivotal in nurturing my passion for the higher education sector. They allowed me to witness firsthand the positive changes I could help bring about in educational environments, fostering my commitment to improving education for future generations. Engaging in student partnership work developed my skills in teamwork, leadership, innovation, problem-solving and project management. These have been invaluable as I transitioned into the workforce.

Since graduating, I have continued to work in higher education, starting as the Vice President of Student Activities at DMU Students' Union. I then served as a Special Projects Officer for Student Engagement at DMU, and I am currently a Senior Student Experience Officer for Community & Engagement at King's College London. In each of these roles, establishing a student partnership model has been key to my success and has also helped inspire other students, encouraging their development in a manner similar to mine.

Each role has allowed me to apply the insights and skills gained from my student partnership experiences, furthering my dedication to enhancing student experiences and engagement in higher education.”

Sahar Khajeh's Journey

Sahar Khajeh, another student who participated in partnership projects, also shared her experiences and the positive impact they had on her career path. As a Student Technology Mentor, Sahar gained valuable networking opportunities and developed essential skills that led to her current position as a Programme Co-ordinator and Senior Lecturer. Her journey demonstrates how involvement in partnership projects can open doors to future career opportunities and professional growth:

“The experience of being a student mentor in the early years of my Doctoral journey improved my networking. My network expands not just with the staff members at different schools and campuses of the UH but, more importantly, with the teaching and leading staff at consortium colleges. It aids in gaining a better understanding of the university's culture and structure and the interrelationships between different schools and fields.

As part of the networking, I strongly presented my interest in teaching to the CPL of consortium colleges at one of the Canvas training sessions and she instantly emailed my details to the relevant course leader at the college. Three days later, I received an email from the college asking for my CV and consequently inviting me to an interview for three hours teaching per week. After a year contributing to their teaching, I got a promotion and was appointed as a Programme Manager for the foundation degree course based on a permanent contract at the college. The role let me learn skills and gain experience in both teaching and leadership. It made me eligible for SFHEA. After three years on the job towards completion of my Doctorate, I had enough experience to start teaching on a Master's degree at GDI at UH and become the Programme Co-ordinator for the Online courses and School continuation lead at the School of Creative Arts and Design.

If it was not for the networking on the Canvas training session, I would not be where I am today. It seems everyone at the School of Creative Arts has known me for a long time since they have known me from when I was a Student Technology Mentor.”

Conclusion

The reflections of students involved in staff-student partnership projects at Hertfordshire, along with the insights shared by Derrick Mensah and Sahar Khajeh, offer compelling evidence of the positive impact these collaborations can have on student development. From enhancing their academic skills to improving their employability, these projects provided students with invaluable opportunities for growth. As one student reflected:

"[It] has enabled me to gain valuable experience that will help me in my future career... to learn from a staff perspective was the aspect that allowed me to broaden my horizons and develop greater respect for others."

As Gravett, Kinchin and Winstone (2019, p 2585) discuss, staff-student partnership work can be utterly transformative in terms of students developing and recognising their voice, and their authorship of ideas and actions which is an essential part of identity development. Partnerships can also empower students to contribute their own perspectives and ideas, as the student below explains:

"The first few sessions used to be conducted mainly by the staff partner, encouraging me at every step to provide my thoughts by asking specific questions about certain issues."

By fostering a collaborative and supportive environment, partnerships empower students to develop essential skills, build relationships, and enhance their overall university experience. That impact also then ripples through and beyond their university experience as 'their views of knowledge, their identity, and their relations with others' (Baxter-Magolda, 2007, p 69) shape their lives as graduates, as our alumni stories show. The benefits of staff-student partnerships extend beyond individual student development. These collaborations can also contribute to broader institutional goals such as improving student retention, enhancing teaching and learning practices, and fostering a more inclusive and equitable campus environment. By working together, students and staff can identify areas for improvement and implement innovative solutions that benefit the entire university community.

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As the University of Hertfordshire continues to prioritise staff-student partnerships, it is essential to explore ways of further enhancing these collaborations and maximising their impact. By taking a proactive approach to partnership development, Hertfordshire can ensure that these collaborations remain a valuable and integral part of the university's learning and teaching experience and the organisational culture.

We want to finish with a recognition of all the students and alumni who were kind enough to be a part of panels at the conference, sharing their stories and experiences: Mohamad Khir Allah, Temitope Akinsoto, Anahita Aman, Cage Boons, Milo Edwards, Sam Jenkins and Adedeji Sodeinde. Our particular thanks go to Sahar Khajeh and Derrick Mensah who contributed both to the conference and to this piece.

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