

What does partnership produce?

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The Student Engagement Partnership

Of the interconnected concepts explored in this journal, partnership is arguably the driving force behind the others: it is partnership that fosters innovation and helps to bring about meaningful change in Higher Education.

The notion of 'students as partners' is derived from the insight that learning has to be a partnership. Whilst Higher Education providers might deliver high-quality and stimulating teaching, a fantastic learning environment with plenty of up-to-date resources and a thriving and involved student community, what ultimately generates learning success is the engaged effort of students.

Taking it a step further, adopting a partnership approach in student engagement and student voice means giving students greater or equal responsibility in the decisions, policies and activities that make up the wider learning environment or the institution as a whole. Traditional student voice seeks student views on their learning experience and makes changes in response to their feedback. *Partnership* asks students to co-design, co-produce and co-evaluate their environment, moving beyond learning and teaching to encompass the whole institution.

As the NUS 'A Manifesto For Partnership' (2012) suggests, "Although the practices around student engagement may be long-standing in some cases, student engagement as a policy priority is relatively recent... We are now moving beyond a narrow focus on the validity of various systems of student influence and representation and instead describing concepts linked to student identities and the potential of individuals to influence their environment." As a result, new ideas and approaches are being applied to existing student engagement practices, such as course representation systems, whilst new practices are emerging that support the concept of students as partners. Causing effective partnership working to happen has often required innovative practices to be developed, so that students and staff may be brought together in a variety of ways wherein enhancements are identified, thus prompting further innovations in the process of designing and implementing new interventions and producing changes that build dynamic and inclusive learning communities.

The skills and mind-set of exchanging constructive feedback in support of reflection and improvement can have a professional value to both students and staff, but it is the outcomes of these exchanges that are truly exciting and valuable: enhanced learning, improved curriculum, more cohesive academic communities and institutions. Partnership working between students and staff should be purposeful; as Healey *et al* (2014) describe, partnership is "a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself". If partnership isn't simply an end in itself, then we should expect it to produce something, and amongst the things that a partnership approach should produce is the understanding of students and academics as individuals. Students, academics and professional staff should all have an explicit role to play in enhancing students' understanding and students and academics should also gain understanding of each other's perspectives through working together in ways that foster dialogue about knowledge and learning. The learning/teaching infrastructure within which students and staff are operating does not stand still, so partnership should also

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produce such changes to curriculum, quality and learning environments that students and staff may thrive. As institutions seek different ways to fulfil their missions, there should be student partnership in activities like policy development, student service delivery, widening participation and community and employer engagement, which will usually be achieved primarily through students' unions or similar student representative bodies and institutions working together.

This journal and other opportunities to explore the conceptual and practical aspects of partnership, innovation and change in Higher Education are important because, though engaging students as partners is a very popular concept, there is significant challenge in making it a reality. Partnership thus may easily become a buzzword – something everyone agrees with without really knowing what it looks like in practice. Partnership can be between individual staff and students, between collections of students and fewer staff, as in an academic course, between collections of staff and students, as in project teams, or between the students' union and the institutional leadership. It is therefore likely that a whole-institution approach to partnership will involve multiple kinds of activities at different levels, tailored to the intended outcomes of the partnership. Developing and sharing - at all levels in institutions - authentic activities which students and staff recognise as 'partnership' are how we shall ensure that the notion of 'students as partners' has meaning and creates innovation and change.

Reference list

Healey, M., Flint, A. and Harrington, K. (2014) *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. York: Higher Education Academy, page 12. Available at: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/engagement-through-partnership-students-partners-learning-and-teaching-higher-education> (Accessed: 23 August 2015).

NUS (2012) *A Manifesto For Partnership*. London: National Union of Students, page 2. Available at: <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/a-manifesto-for-partnership> (Accessed: 23 August 2015).