

Editorial: The strategic significance of working in partnership with our students

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This latest issue of *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change* epitomises the current range and depth of UK Higher and Further Education staff/student partnerships to bring about sustainable and meaningful change to courses and methodology in the best interests of students, who, increasingly, are becoming aware of the possibilities of roles as co-producers and change agents as opposed to their being passive recipients in a consumer-orientated ethos.

The preface by Liz Dunne provides a personal critique of the way we discuss student engagement. She suggests that a 'design thinking' approach may help us to reconceptualise and broaden our understanding of students as change agents. Her framework, as four quadrants of Student Engagement, helps us to explore a more realistic continuum of student engagement that may take place over the student life cycle, in which students may play greater or lesser roles as change agents.

The single opinion piece included here perhaps succinctly captures the spirit of this issue, because it advocates that Higher Education institutions should challenge strongly the notion of students as consumers and engage them instead as partners and co-producers, by enabling their genuine contribution to change-making decisions about curriculum and pedagogy. In this paper, the authors focus upon the undeniable capability of students to teach staff about new technologies and how online resources may best be tailored to meet student needs, beginning with the cultivation of a dialogue of equals. Though brief, this message has much to say about the way innovative and creative application of technology can have huge impact upon the development of deeper learning and higher-order thinking skills.

This issue also provides, in two research articles, an opportunity to view the same student engagement initiative, a 'Student Fellows Scheme', from both staff and student perspectives at the University of Winchester: one systematically reviews the outputs of the whole range of sixty staff-student partnerships in educational development and assesses their impact on student learning, whilst the other evaluates one particular project, which explores students' perceptions of student voice and, by engaging more students in student voice activities, aims to raise their awareness of opportunities available. The former paper highlights the fundamental partnership between the Student Union and University's Learning and Teaching Development in instituting the scheme and emphasises the empowering of staff/student partnerships through distributed leadership of projects. The latter illustrates the potency of having students take control of a process designed to achieve beneficial change for all the student body: there are some telling recommendations for the institution to consider in this case, with the potential for realising some significant gains from a new approach to harnessing student voice.

There are also five fascinating case studies here, each with a focus on a project with significant beneficial impact on the way students learn and with concomitant acquisition of key employability skills.

A lucid account, written by staff and students at Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, of an archetypal case of 'students as change agents' provides a clear rationale for the integration of a sustainable and carefully-constructed leadership and management course on the undergraduate medical curriculum and demonstrates just how valuable self-directed action learning can be. Not only did these medics acquire the skills to lead and manage for their own more self-assured entry into health service roles, but they also provided the means to engender a sense of the importance of these same skills in many others, ultimately to the benefit of patients, through improvements to their care and safety.

The theme of active, faculty-level student participation in the learning process is strongly illustrated by a study of the Student Engagement Officer (SEO) project at the University of Chester; four SEO projects are presented, together with their outcomes and the personal reflections of the students involved, offering a clear testimony to the positive impact of staff/student partnership. This paper concludes with some very interesting 'lessons learned', of tremendous value to Higher Education establishments everywhere.

The Further Education dimension is splendidly represented in this issue by a report on the Abingdon and Witney College 'Students for Webinar and Employability Skills' project, in which students learned to use video-conferencing and to run a webinar. This paper highlights some of the benefits of a staff/student partnership, during which students produced a webinar guide, led a conference and participated in dissemination events, all of which enhanced their employability skills in terms of digital expertise, team-work and leadership. The paper also offers some interesting contrasts between the project contexts of Higher and Further Education partnership.

One of the issue's case studies charts the collaboration between staff and Typography and Graphic Communication students at the University of Reading; they produced a hub of online resources, designed to develop key skills to enhance graduate employability. This project responded to student need for the acquisition of high-level competency in a range of specialised software programs, production method and crafting; it was student-led and, by providing practical and technical resources, aimed to encourage independent learning and peer scrutiny via the online interface. Essential to the continuing development and success of the prototype is its interactive capability, enabling both staff and student user feedback to be channelled into subsequent refinements.

Another study similarly presents collaboration, between Edinburgh University's Students' Association and the institution's Information Services division, to implement an Open Badge scheme to recognise the work of student Class Representatives. This paper provides insights into the reflections of the representatives about their role and their skill gains in negotiation, problem-solving, diplomacy, leadership and change management. One representative's words sum up brilliantly the way in which genuine staff/student dialogue and collaboration can bring about change to curriculum and pedagogy to the benefit of the students: "*greater reciprocity between myself and staff leading to instantaneous improvements in the course structure*".

The articles in this issue provide further evidence of the importance of engaging students in the design and delivery of their educational experiences, and of the role that technology plays in helping to transform their and our learning. In the context of the implementation of

the November 2015 Green Paper, the forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in Higher Education and the continuing work of the Learning Technology Action Group in Further Education (FELTAG), the strategic significance of working in partnership with our students is unquestionable.