A partnership approach to scaling up student/staff partnership at a large research-intensive university

Lucy Mercer-Mapstone, Aimee Clarke
The University of Queensland

Introduction

Students as partners (SaP) has become increasingly topical in Higher Education (HE), with growing uptake in universities globally. We understand SaP as a way of thinking and doing in HE that re-positions students and staff as active collaborators in the diverse processes of teaching and learning (Healey *et al.*, 2014; Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014). This process focuses on empowering students to share, actively, the responsibility for the design, delivery, evaluation, decision-making and enhancement of their own education.

The UK and various other western international contexts have rich histories of student engagement, with many institutions fostering sustainable cultures of partnership (Lees *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, Australian institutions are just beginning this journey, having traditionally engaged students by seeking the student voice. Student/staff partnerships, when they do occur in Australia, are typically small-scale, occurring in pockets of isolated innovation within universities (Bell, 2016). Large-scale practices that embrace the 'radical collegiality' (Fielding, 1999) offered by inclusive educational practices such as SaP are rare but emerging. How institutions can 'scale up' to institutionally-embedded partnership is a central focus of many discourses in Australia and elsewhere.

Over the course of a semester, we – a graduate student and a professional staff member – led a large project that aimed, coherently and systematically, to scale up partnership practices at our research-intensive institution, The University of Queensland (UQ). The project drew on the collective innovation and creativity of over eighty students and staff working in partnership to design an institution-wide SaP program. In this case study, we briefly describe our institutional context, factors leading to the project's initiation and the design project itself. The primary focus of the case study is on our own reflections, from which we present our perceptions of the critical factors for driving such institutional change in our context. This case study thus provides a useful example for other practitioners looking to take an inclusive approach to scaling-up partnership practices in a university context.

Institutional context: central factors leading to project initiation

UQ is a large, research-intensive university in Brisbane, Australia, and ranked in the top 100 universities worldwide (Times Higher Education World University Rankings; QS World University Rankings). The University has just over 51,000 students, with approximately 70 per cent undergraduate, 30 per cent postgraduate and 25 per cent international students (The University of Queensland, 2017).

It has a history of collecting student voice data to inform such diverse activities as course evaluations, curriculum reviews and understanding the student experience. Engaging in SaP has been a rarer approach, though small numbers of innovative partnership practices have been established within the University for some time. In recent years, the value of actively engaging students and staff in partnership has received a groundswell of acknowledgement,

alongside a rise in visibility of partnership initiatives through national and local fellowships focused on UQ and Australian practices.

At the same time, the external governmental, regulatory and funding climate has become increasingly unstable, with the Australian Government's proposal to link university funding to performance on student metrics such as satisfaction, retention and employability (Australian Government, 2017). The increased visibility and recognition of partnership, combined with external drivers, led to the inclusion of SaP as a goal in the UQ Student Strategy 2016-2020. The guiding vision of this strategy is to 'offer a signature student experience that will change the way higher education is imagined' (The University of Queensland, 2016). One of four core goals described to enact that vision is '*Dynamic people and partnerships',* a primary initiative of which is SaP; through this, UQ aims to:

> *"develop a University-wide initiative that partners students with teaching staff, researchers and industry, positions student representation throughout all levels of the University's governance structures and creates a culture of shared responsibility."*
> (The University of Queensland, 2016)

A SaP Steering Group was formed in early 2017 to guide the implementation of this initiative. This steering group included over thirty students and staff, co-chaired by a student (the lead author of this paper) and an academic staff member. The equal participation of students and staff was a key aspect in adopting, from the outset, a partnership approach to this process. The steering group's key recommendation was to investigate and design a University-wide SaP program.

It was this series of complex contexts, events and processes that led to the initiation of the project we describe here: The SaP Program Design Project.

The Students as Partners Program Design Project

Project description

Aims

The aim of the SaP Program Design Project ('design project') was to take a partnership approach to designing a University-wide program that facilitates the systematic integration of SaP at all levels of teaching- and learning-related activities at UQ.

The expertise of the students and staff on the SaP Steering Group was harnessed through brainstorming sessions to co-create the vision and values of the program. This vision articulated that the program should be:

- a UQ-wide support framework that helps to connect students and staff to engage in genuine partnership;
- a central structure that connects pockets of isolated innovative partnership practice to promote a coherent culture of partnership;
- a program that is available to all staff and students interested in improving teaching, learning and the student experience at UQ;
- based on an ethos of inclusivity that values expertise and skills extending beyond academic performance;

- supportive of diverse partnership practices that operate at different levels in the University, within and external to the classroom.

With this vision in mind, the design project was initiated in June 2017 with an explicit partnership approach.

Structure

We were selected by the University to co-lead this project on the basis of our expertise in SaP and project management, our knowledge of the university environment and our networks in the SaP community and beyond.

We adopted a collaborative approach, establishing eleven pilots with thirty students and twenty-two staff partners to design aspects of the program and trial different partnership approaches. These pilots are outlined in Table 1.

Approximately 800 students who had shown interest in working with UQ staff – through, for example, research programs – were invited to apply. The response showed strong enthusiasm from students, with approximately ten applicants for each available role. Students were selected on the basis of their enthusiasm for working in partnership and of the specific skills they would bring as required by the scope of each pilot. Staff partners were selected, through expressions of interest and invitations to participate in specific projects, on the basis of their interests and expertise.

Student and staff partners came from a range of disciplines, backgrounds, levels of study (including undergraduate and postgraduate) and staff roles (including academic and professional), with the aim of including diverse perspectives in the project. Students were engaged to contribute either fifty or 100 hours over the course of the semester, receiving scholarships of $900 or $1800 respectively to support their involvement. As we believe that financial support for students encourages participation across socio-economic circumstances, we advocated strongly for this.

Students and staff attended two workshops to scaffold their pilots: one at the beginning of the semester to introduce SaP and outline the design project; the other a connectivity workshop in the middle of the semester, both to encourage reflection and connection between pilot teams and to situate each pilot team's work within the broader context of the design project. Student partners attended an employability workshop at the conclusion of the pilots to assist them in translating their partnership experiences into explicit learning and skills that could be communicated to future employers. We encouraged partners to seek support from either of us throughout the project, which both students and staff did, informally and at various points.

Each team produced outputs specific to its own pilot. Some guidance and resources were given at the start of the project as to what these might be, but ultimately it was the team members who shaped the final outputs. See the UQ [2017 Students as Partners Pilots website](#)[1] for more information on each of the pilots.

---

[1] https://student-strategy.uq.edu.au/students-as-partners/2017-pilots

Table 1. Details on the eleven SaP pilots that contributed to designing and informing the design of the UQ SaP Program

Pilot Project Focus	Number of student partners	Number of staff partners
Mechanisms for incentivising and rewarding student-staff partnership at UQ	2	4
Audit of student engagement on UQ teaching and learning-related committees	5	4
Designing students as teaching and learning consultants	2	3
Developing and implementing the SaP Community of Practice	2	2
Designing students as learning and teaching fellows	1	1
Evaluation of 2017 SaP pilots	2	3
Designing Student Representative training resources	4	3
Developing a communication strategy for the SaP program	4	2
Communicating the UQ Student Strategy	1	1
Co-creation and evaluation of digitalising materials in a communication course	6	2
Explicitly embedding communication skills in a compulsory 1st year science course	1	1

Whilst we cannot speak on behalf of the other students and staff who took part in pilots, we believe that this was a complex but successful process. The aim of the design project was achieved and, at the end of 2017, we handed over a comprehensive report outlining a well-developed, scalable, SaP program with extensive resources to support implementation. The program will move into the implementation phase in early 2018, managed by a newly-formed team. Implementing such a large and complex program will require extensive work, but the design project has provided a diversity of voices and expertise to ensure that the program will meet the needs and expectations of the University community.

In the following sections, we reflect on our own experiences throughout the semester to capture and share some of our extensive learnings.

Reflections on practice

Who we are

In the following section, we outline a process of reflection to capture our 'lessons learnt' throughout this project. It is important to provide more detail on who we are as individuals with different roles, backgrounds, and expertise to contextualise these learnings.

Lucy came to the role of design project co-lead through her position as co-chair of the UQ SaP Steering Group. She is a PhD student and was employed as project co-lead on account of her expertise in partnership, her networks and her familiarity with partnership in the UQ context. Lucy has been working as a student in partnership for four years, with activities involving co-creation of curricular resources, co-teaching, co-researching, co-authorship and co-facilitation.

Aimee came to this role through her employment as a Program Coordinator at UQ. She had prior experience in designing and managing institution-wide programs that engage students and staff in research projects. Aimee had not previously worked in partnership and found that her level of comfort with this approach increased during this project. She now sees the opportunities and benefits of partnership in many aspects of her work.

Thus, we have two very distinct types of expertise, both of which have been integral to this project.

Reflective narratives

To capture what we have learnt through this process, we each wrote reflective narratives of approximately 1000 words in response to the following four questions:

- What have been the critical factors facilitating the success of this project?
- What have been some of the challenges faced in this project? How were challenges overcome?
- What would you do differently if you could do the project again?
- How has this project developed or changed your understanding of partnership?

This approach embraces facets of collaborative autoethnography, a qualitative approach that positions researchers' own experiences as the focus of study. Reflective narrative is a data source typical of this method and allows researchers to reveal similarities, differences and meaning in their shared experiences (Chang *et al.*, 2013). We conducted a simple form of thematic analysis on these reflections to highlight emergent themes. These themes now form the lessons learnt in the section below – reflecting both our voices in the process.

Lessons learnt: critical factors for driving institutional partnership change

1. Distributed leadership in advocacy and change

A distributed leadership model with champions at multiple levels of the institution was essential to gaining the momentum to scale up partnership practices. The dedication of a core group of student and staff partnership practitioners who were committed to creating change at UQ was critical, both in getting partnership on the institutional agenda and to the success of the design project. Students managed these projects around full-time study loads

and staff fitted this work in around heavy teaching and research commitments – often as additional work beyond the scope of their role. Without this dedication, the project could not have been initiated. In combination, attitudinal and financial support from senior administrators was central to moving partnership at the University from something done by individuals to an institution-wide priority.

2. Drawing on diverse expertise and engaging relevant stakeholders

The program design was a large and complex project that engaged stakeholders and contributors from multiple levels and areas of the institution. Relevant stakeholders were identified as:

- members of the steering group;
- staff and students involved in the UQ Student Strategy;
- senior administrative staff;
- staff and students from across the University who were identified through our networks as active in partnership;
- students who had expressed interest in working with UQ staff by applying for other programs;
- Associate Deans Academic from each of UQ's faculties;
- teaching and learning-related committees;
- Student and Academic Administration teams.

Engaging these stakeholders throughout the process (through meetings and email communication) was essential to ensuring that the outputs fitted the needs of the community and that they would be embraced across the University. The SaP Steering Group combined the expertise of over thirty staff and students and outlined a structure for the program. The fifty-two participants in the pilot projects combined their diverse expertise to design and trial various aspects of the program. As project co-leads, we used our distinct but complementary expertise to facilitate the pilot projects and draw everything together into a cohesive program design and implementation plan. This inclusive process ultimately shaped the design of a program that is intended to meet, meaningfully, the values and needs of the diverse UQ community.

3. Leveraging personal and secondary networks

Leveraging local, national, and international networks – both our own and those of our colleagues – was critical at every stage of the project. Getting enough staff partners involved in the pilots to create solid partnership teams was challenging, primarily because many staff felt they did not have enough time to spare or because the pilot work was outside of their role. Whilst broad invitations to participate were disseminated, engaging staff relied primarily upon either reaching out personally to individuals to invite engagement or upon asking others to do so on our behalf. Seeking support and advice from colleagues around the world who run established partnership programs was vital for negotiating the more challenging aspects of the design process.

4. Dealing with – and embracing – uncertainty

The uncertainty of SaP is both wonderful and challenging. Uncertainty, particularly around outcomes and outputs, is inherent to authentic partnership: there needs to be space for partners to create and shape the outcomes themselves – without directive managerial oversight. However, we found this uncertainty to be a challenge in the institutional, risk-averse environment. Addressing the need to achieve positive outcomes within a defined timeframe and budget and creating the space and flexibility required for authentic relationships to evolve demanded fine balance. Where funding had been invested, such freedom and uncertainty caused unease or discomfort for those who were ultimately held accountable. Equally, creating that freedom required less direction to be provided for pilot teams – in turn leading to uncertainty for those participants used to working in the structured University environment.

Managing this balance involved honest conversations with managerial staff, acknowledging the uncertainty and potential of SaP and explicating the value gained from this process in addition to the outcomes. This was combined with trying to ensure that the pilot teams were provided with enough structure and support to make broad expectations and contexts clear, while leaving enough flexibility for teams themselves to shape meaningfully the process and outcomes. Ultimately, this required managerial staff and partners to place trust in each other and in the process.

5. Balancing partnership values with institutional goals

It was essential that the program design had the potential to fulfil strategic institutional goals –such as increased student employability, retention and satisfaction – while also supporting authentic partnerships. SaP presents a radical way of thinking and doing and it was not always easy to 'fit' that discourse within the traditional norms of the institution. This caused discomfort for some of the partnership practitioners when SaP values were reframed to emphasise institutional goals. A careful balance was needed between communicating the core values of SaP and aligning with broader institutional goals – while trying not to adopt the 'neoliberal' or 'consumerist' agenda against which partnership is often positioned (Kay *et al.*, 2012; Bryson, 2016). We learnt that managing a partnership program does require a different administrative approach from other University programs—primarily because it is challenging to balance the flexibility and freedom needed for creativity and ownership within individual partnerships with the accountability and structure required by the University.

Conclusion

We have presented a case study outlining the process and our learnings from a project that aimed to scale up student/staff partnership at this large, Australian, research-intensive institution by designing a University-wide SaP program. Working in partnership ourselves, we found this to be a steep learning curve as we developed our own relationships while navigating the complex and challenging social and political context of our University.

Within the growth of our own partnership, we each found value and personal transformation in how we perceive the University landscape. For example, Lucy came to see and understand the behind-the-scenes workings of University strategy implementation – a space that is traditionally reserved for staff and remains hidden from the vast majority of students.

This was an invaluable experience in preparing her to transition into HE staff roles following her graduate studies. Aimee began to see opportunities to engage students more meaningfully in projects managed by herself and colleagues, recognising the value this would bring for students, staff and the institution. Our relationship has been so fruitful because of our explicit recognition and appreciation of our distinct but complementary areas of expertise. We moved from seeing one another as the 'other' to valuing each other as colleagues.

This journey was not without challenges and tensions. For example, many students who applied to participate in the project had to be declined on account of limited funding and available positions. This is likely to be a demotivating experience for students seeking greater engagement with the University. This highlights the need to scale up SaP so that multiple opportunities are available to students throughout their studies and partnership becomes an embedded part of the UQ student experience. Similarly, we faced tensions in trying to overcome the power hierarchies that are inherent within the traditional conception of higher education – amongst students and staff and built into governance, structures and processes. It was a constant conscious effort to redress those hierarchies both at the individual level and in the design of the program. The discourse of scaling up – What can it look like? How is it done? – is prevalent in SaP spaces internationally for good reason: there's no simple answer. We hope that by sharing our processes and learning we may inspire and inform the practices of others wishing to embed institution-wide partnership at their own institutions.

Acknowledgements

Reference list

Australian Government. (2017) *The Higher Education Reform Package*. Available at: https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/ed17-0138_-_he_-_glossy_budget_report_acc.pdf (Accessed: 29 September 2017).

Bell, A. (2016) 'Students as Co-Inquirers in Australian Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges.' *Teaching and Learning Inquiry,* 4(2). Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.4.2.8 (Accessed: 7 February 2018).

Bryson, C. (2016) 'Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education.' *International Journal for Academic Development,* 21**,** 84-86. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2016.1124966 (Accessed: 7 February 2018).

Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F. and Hernandez, W. (2013) *Collaborative autoethnography*. London: Routledge.

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C. and Felten, P. (2014) *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*. Wiley: San Francisco.

Fielding, M. (1999) 'Radical collegiality: Affirming teaching as an inclusive professional practice.' *Australian Educational Researcher,* 26(2). Available at: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF03219692 (Accessed: 7 February 2018).

Healey, M., Flint, A. and Harrington, K. (2014) *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education.* Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/engagement_through_partnership.pdf (Accessed: 28 September 2017).

Kay, J., Owen, D. and Dunne, E. (2012) 'Students as change agents: Student engagement with quality enhancement of learning and teaching.' In: Solomonides, I. and Petocz, P. (eds.), *Engaging with learning in higher education*, 358-380. Faringdon, UK: Libri Publishing.

Lees, B., Garner, W., Flectcher, M., Gradwell, N., Harris, M., Heathcote, Lawrence, K., Medlock, B. and Wright, E. (2016) 'A creative approach to engaging students as partners at Faculty level of the institution.' *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change, 2*(1). Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.21100/jeipc.v2i1.248 (Accessed: 7 February 2018).

The University of Queensland. (2016) *Student Strategy 2016-2020 White Paper*. Available at: https://student-strategy.uq.edu.au/files/453/Student-Strategy_White-Paper.pdf (Accessed: 17 May 2017).

The University of Queensland. (2017). *About UQ: UQ fast facts.* Available at: http://www.uq.edu.au/about/fast-facts (Accessed: 20 September 2017).