

Editorial: Students as Partners

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In April 2017, the University of Exeter, in partnership with Jisc, hosted the fifth Change Agents Network Conference. The event saw around 180 staff and students from institutions across and outside the UK come together to discuss various themes relating to the philosophy and practice of working in partnership with students.

For the host team at Exeter, it was a fantastic opportunity to mark nearly a decade since the creation of our 'Students as Change Agents' programme, which has seen hundreds of student-led projects influence change to the academic and student experience. Projects have focused on a diverse range of themes and student ideas have led to changes to modules and programmes, teaching methods and assessment, the use of learning technologies and even College- or University-wide processes and practices.¹

Whilst to work in partnership within the notion of a 'ladder of participation' is not new (Arnstein, 1969; Bovill and Bulley, 2011; Dunne and Owen, 2013), particularly within areas such as citizen and community engagement, the idea of applying this collaborative style to Higher Education (HE) was quite overlooked until ten years ago. As Exeter's Change Agents programme grew and became embedded in our institution's culture, the values and philosophies of partnership also developed across the sector. To work in partnership with students is no longer seen as a novel or quirky example of student engagement. Instead, this philosophy now underpins a mainstream way of working.

The 2017 conference sought to acknowledge and celebrate this progression through the volume and variety of contributions presented at Exeter. As reflected in our conference theme of 'Effective Partnerships', the conversation, having moved on from how and why student partnership activities are important, now focuses on embedding them and refining their impact.

There is a clear agenda for what 'effective partnerships' means at the University of Exeter and how this will develop in the near future. To us, effective partnerships are accessible by and inclusive of all students; they have enduring impact on both the students who have been 'partners' and the wider student experience. Since early 2016, the support process for Students as Change Agents projects has been overhauled, to allow for much greater alignment with existing provision in employability, skills training and graduate development (Lees *et al.*, 2017). There is now greater emphasis on the quality, rather than the number, of projects taking place.

The widening participation agenda has also helped us to reflect on how accessible and inclusive our practice is. As Change Agents has developed, the process-driven framework of support for projects has become quite intensive and time-consuming – it thus indirectly discriminates against traditionally-disenfranchised student groups. Some groups of students – such as mature and commuter students and those with parental or caring responsibilities –

¹ www.exeter.ac.uk/changeagents

typically struggle to fit the requirements of Change Agents into their studies. In 2017, we began piloting a 'Students as Partners' scheme, parallel to Change Agents, to address our concerns about equal access to opportunities; it is intended to provide a more flexible and less intensive means of facilitating student involvement in partnership and engagement.

We are delighted to be able to guest-edit this 'Students as Partners' issue of the JEIPC, which showcases some of the work of the 2017 conference and other examples of what 'effective student partnerships' means to other colleagues and institutions.

What has become apparent through the editorial process is that there still appears to be little consensus as to a definition of 'students as partners' and a lack of shared narrative concerning what is constituted by the term. Across the sector, the concept is interpreted in a wide variety of ways, as is reflected in this very issue's presentation of a diverse range of examples of how students are and have been engaged. Some institutions are exploring their first forays into partnership work, whereas the approaches of others are mature, with students very obviously in charge of their own learning! This is an exciting, if uncertain, time in HE, but the collective voice, in spite of individual interpretation of what to work in partnership with students may mean, does seem to be unanimous in saying that to do so is enriching and rewarding for both staff and students, however difficult and challenging that may be.

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A summary of the content and scope of this issue of The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change

A novel scheme for encouraging postgraduate researchers (PGRs) to engage with an academic journal has helped to make the publication, previously the exclusive terrain of staff, more inclusive. The Greenwich journal *Compass* offered PGRs the opportunity to apply to act as reviewers, using a review exercise as a selection process. The four successful applicants then undertook a training session to acquire an understanding of the journal's scope and aims before becoming themselves – alongside staff – equal partners in its peer-review process. Thus they not only gained relevant research publication experience but could also clearly evidence their impact within this context, paving the way towards an established personal professional identity. *Compass* itself, as Danielle Tran's fascinating case study here confirms, will be enriched by an empowered student voice, both in peer review and in future submissions by PGRs now fully conversant with the potential of online publishing.

The goals of pedagogical inclusivity and responsiveness within classrooms and across campuses are intrinsic to the student/faculty partnerships of the 'Students as Learners and Teachers' (SaLT) programme in Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, Pennsylvania. In a case study covering the programme's context, development, components and assessment, Alison Cook-Sather, director of the programme, reviews a decade-long evolution of SaLT. From an initial hiring of students of colour to act as student consultants, nearly three hundred partnerships have embraced a huge diversity of identity in the consultant role. The

student/faculty pairs, to create mutual trust, focus first on what works well in engendering belonging within the classroom, from which firm foundation the consultants are able to suggest alternative approaches and make faculty more aware of student perspectives and more confident about adopting new, inclusive strategies in their teaching. In spite of evident benefits, the author does recognise that there may still be vulnerability and uncertainty on both sides, but concludes the paper with three valuable lessons learnt that are fundamental to the ultimate fulfilment of the essential objectives of the programme.

In the context of higher education in Australia, where student/staff partnerships are, typically, still small in scale and carried out in isolation, the authors of a case study describing an authentic partnership project (to design a university-wide 'students as partners' programme at the University of Queensland) drew on 'the collective innovation and creativity of over eighty students and staff working in partnership.' Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Aimee Clarke outline the aims and structure of their project before offering – from their respective reflective narratives – critical factors for driving institutional partnership change: distributed leadership in advocacy and change; drawing on diverse expertise and engaging relevant stakeholders; leveraging personal and secondary networks; dealing with – and embracing – uncertainty; balancing partnership values with institutional goals. The authors' own partnership produced significant individual benefits, though it also confirmed the genuine and often stressful challenges of addressing funding limitations and traditional hierarchical structures. Lucy and Aimee hope that their experience as depicted here may serve to inspire others bent on embedding institution-wide student/staff collaborative opportunities.

Another case study offers guidance and encouragement for implementing student/staff partnerships. On the basis of their experience of a University of Northampton research project intended to inform the redesign of a first-year linguistics module incorporating blended learning, the authors – Dave Burnapp, Rob Farmer, Sam Reese and Anthony Stepniak – confirm that, within such a complex organisation as a university, any collaborative research exercise must accommodate all stakeholders' voices. In this paper, they chart the systematic approach taken: the appointment of a postgraduate research assistant to recruit undergraduate volunteers as paid project partners, to hold introductory focus groups with them and to anonymise, for ethical reasons, the data collection from the online discussion. Adopting co-creation, rather than just eliciting feedback, meant: the student partner responses were expansive and frank; the researchers could receive and explore beliefs held by the students about the pilot materials; the students could make suggestions for alternatives and improvements. The outcomes constructively challenged preconceptions held by the researchers before the project; they also left the authors with a strong sense of the need to accommodate, not resolve, the dilemma presented by a conservative expectation of compliance with the rigorous quality assurance standards of *The UK Quality Code* and the powerfully innovatory ethos of reflective practice/continuing professional development as implied by *The UK Professional Standards Framework*.

To raise the profile of digital literacy, a project team at the University of Southampton created the 'Students as Champions' scheme, in which, for the past four years, students have worked in partnership with academic teams on a range of projects in education and some research activities. The scheme has now been re-named 'Innovation and Digital Literacies Champions' or, simply, 'iChamps' and focuses exclusively on educational projects. The students use their project partnership work to develop their e-portfolios and, eventually, by

acquiring a series of 'milestone badges', to gain an iChamps badge. Fiona Harvey, author of the case study which presents this scheme, explains that 'badges are digital images with metadata, providing validated micro-credentials for specific skills, qualities, interests or achievements through a variety of learning environments' and the students evidence their competences by this means. The staff, meanwhile, gain confidence from the partnership and improve their digital skills by applying them practically, and in an authentic environment. The paper describes the structure of the scheme, illustrates the projects undertaken, provides both staff and student feedback and concludes with some thoughts about possible future developments.

In their case study, Nicola Grayson, Jennie Blake and Megan Stock offer a compelling insight into the work of the Library Student Team at the University of Manchester Library. These paid students partner the Library's staff to co-create workshops for the 'My Learning Essentials' (MLE) skills programme, which provides central support for all the University's students to access according to individual need. The authors focus on one new workshop – 'Academic Writing for Exams' – to illustrate how the Library's partnership with student members of staff produces new and relevant learning resources. In the context of a blended-learning support provision, the Student Team assists with research, puts together high-quality slides and creates materials for activities and handouts; it positively influences the inclusive and user-friendly feel of the resources, especially in terms of language and visual presentation. Additionally, the team's members are empowered by having their feedback on pilot workshops valued and used to shape and adjust a workshop before it goes live. This study's participant reflections on the whole process emphasise the potency and measurable impact of well-planned and well-executed co-creation activities.

A case study from the University of Reading presents a student/staff collaborative project – in a school of English language and literature – which redesigned a module 'aimed at developing students' understanding of the demands of university-level study and writing and supporting them in their transition from sixth form to higher education.' The authors, Lucinda Becker, Joy Collier and Jane Setter, describe the steps followed to explore the student voice (in a critical appraisal of the existing module) and the subsequent partnership activity in which the student partners, supported by their staff colleagues, redrafted the entire module and collaborated in a re-scheduling of its lectures and seminars. The outcomes of the project, measured by student partner levels of satisfaction with the changes and by the reactions of the following year's incoming cohort to the provision, were extremely positive. From the project, the student partners acquired a much better understanding of the opportunities, requirements and constraints of working in an academic environment and clearly articulated their appreciation of the personal benefits the exercise had provided.

A successful example of 'students as researchers' is offered by a case study of a University of Exeter (Penryn Campus) project. The paper, written from a student perspective, explains how students were given resources and staff support to conduct their research, before analysing and evaluating it themselves. Provided with the research question 'What futures would residents like to see for Penryn?', groups of students from Exeter's Politics Department were invited to collect data using radical democratic ideas or methods, in an attempt to apply radical democratic theory to a practical neighbourhood-planning activity. This study's authors, Kieran Cutting, Natasha Evans and Dean Pomeroy, designed the 'Penrynopoly Project'. Their participatory mapping of the local area and a series of semi-

structured interviews led to the construction of a board game, 'Penrynopoly', which transformed their gathered data 'into a playable form that would challenge residents' preconceptions about the town.' The paper engagingly presents the continuing development of the game, assesses the project's impacts on the group, the community and the institution and, finally, makes some very clear and helpful recommendations for the launching of student research projects.

A 'students as change agents' (SACA) partnership project to encourage extensive reading in English at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China is the substance of a case study by Peter Sturman, Yangyang Zheng, Lexiao Peng and Doran Lamb. This paper illustrates a challenge to traditional staff authority over learning processes and to traditional reflective passive student acceptance. A collaborative team of two staff and five student partners set out to transform a flawed and staff-led reading programme in the context of the institution's promotion of 'students as change agents': the 'Reading Circle' programme would be redesigned, led and managed by students. The specifically Chinese 'English learning trap', demotivating learners of English, was a particular reason for setting up this project, which would create a new Nottingham Advantage Award of Extensive Reading. The whole process constituted a profound cultural shock to the student partners, who were utterly unused to taking responsibility and authority; many barriers faced them but, gradually, with staff guidance and the particular support of the UK SACA team's programme and materials, they gained in self-belief, autonomy and understanding of their potential within an academic community.

'Reflecting on reflections' might well sum up the purpose of a case study by Nicole Brown, Aly Jafferani and Vanessa Pattharwala at UCL Institute of Education, for the student/staff partnership described here lies within a community of practice of trainee teachers, who collaborate to deepen their own students' reflective capabilities while they are themselves reflecting on their own practice. The paper focuses on the early difficulty trainee teachers experience in understanding and applying deep reflection; they understandably struggle with teaching reflection themselves. The tutors' consequent modelling of appropriate ways of teaching reflective practice embraced an engaging series of playful activities, each followed by participant discussion, from drawing and annotating a pictorial 'river of learning', to creating a Lego model of the learning journey, to metaphorical representations using an object. This process demanded participant contemplation of their experiences as a whole, narrowing them down to a specific element and then verbalising and elaborating on that element, thus deepening their understanding of their experiences. The paper goes on to provide, as outcomes, qualitative data in the form of staff and student thoughts; it explores lessons learnt and concludes with consideration of the nature of student/staff collaborations in the teacher-training context.

A student/staff partnership to redesign an existing paper-based classroom response system, the One-Minute Paper (OMP) into a 'DOMP' – a digital version – aimed to capture qualitative feedback from students and facilitate quick analysis of these responses, so that lecturers would rapidly be able to rectify any apparent lack of clarity in their own teaching or any identified student failure to grasp aspects of a topic. In their case study, Paula Karlsson, Alison Gibb and Paul Ferri describe a University of Glasgow project which partnered three Management lecturers with ten third-year Computing Science students. The process involved harnessing the students' existing familiarity with appropriate software to make it

more user-friendly and adapt its functionality to suit the context. The students carried out the work as part of their own course, an approved 'live' project with 'external' customers, and discovered the fundamental importance of meeting the demands of the brief; the staff became aware of practical challenges (ethical issues and the need for an institution-wide WiFi network). Essentially, a potent feature of this partnership was the fact that the staff were **not** the direct teachers of the students – traditional hierarchy was replaced by the real-world interaction of customer and supplier.

A case study by Ruth Ayres and Christopher Wilson focuses on a University of Derby 'student as researcher' initiative – the 'Undergraduate Research Scholarship Scheme' – which, since 2013/14, has provided 'funded opportunities for students completing Level 5 studies to undertake a real, live research brief in collaboration with a member of academic staff.' Its key aims were for students to gain academic research experience, to participate as a member of a research team, to develop disciplinary knowledge and subject-specific research skills, to acquire generic research and employability skills and, in consequence of these, to improve their prospects of employment. The authors outline the scheme's key features and offer both student and staff reflections on its value. Finally, and most helpfully, the paper offers four reflections of interest to others who may wish to establish a similar scheme.

To listen to the student voice in order to improve technology-enhanced learning at Aberystwyth University was the aim of the E-learning Group: it wanted to make the Blackboard site easier to use and to help staff understand better their students' needs in relation to technology. Mary Jacob outlines in her case study the process of hiring four current students to work alongside staff to explore students' patterns of behaviour, attitudes to and preferences for the use of Blackboard and the Blackboard mobile app; with full control over choice of activities, carrying them out and producing written reports and recommendations, these student partners ran focus groups, promoted and conducted an online survey and created video blogs, thus directly contributing their data to the redesign. The paper confirms the success of the project in overcoming challenges and achieving the original aims; significantly, there were huge student-partner gains in skills, confidence and experience – and they also had fun!

Anastasia Vikhanova and Vanessa Wedi report in their detailed case study on an investigation into the image of 'UCL ChangeMakers' – an existing collaborative initiative, in University College London (UCL), for enhancing the student learning experience – amongst the postgraduate student population. Since the scheme's inception in 2014, it has seen significant expansion; however, perceived difficulty in encouraging postgraduates, both from home and overseas, to participate in projects suggested that 'ChangeMakers' should be better promoted to these students. Qualitative data from focus groups identified the need for more staff support, greater emphasis on long-term personal benefits and increased use of social networks as a promotional tool. The UCL international postgraduates who took part also felt that more networking opportunities would lead to greater levels of satisfaction amongst the overseas students at the institution. The authors conclude the paper with a trenchant comment: 'UCL ChangeMakers or similar student initiatives can be used to promote the sense of partnership between students and members of staff. For that to be achieved, staff should be more involved with student initiatives to allow for students to feel truly involved in shaping their own education process.'

A thoughtful critical appraisal of the contemporary drive in the higher education sector towards co-creating partnerships for curriculum design appears in a compelling case study by Raphael Hallett, Charlotte Tomlinson and Tim Procter: 'Students are surveyed and *listened to* endlessly, but their active influence over curriculum design is usually less obvious. Student-led change is still frustrated by conventions and hierarchies that reduce students to *commentators on or protesters about* the curriculum.' As an illustration of how a student may truly be positioned as a co-creator, the authors explore the emerging co-operation between the University of Leeds Library, a team of Special Collections interns and the academic and student communities they reach out to. The paper focuses on a 'bridging internship', piloted in the School of History, to increase student use of Special Collections, raise the profile of Special Collections within History and to match specific resources to special subject modules. In this internship, the student partner becomes not only a co-creator, but also a mediator, tutor mentor and communicator – 'a hybrid identity... within the contested territory of university-wide curriculum design.'

Traditionally, ethnography is seen as the pursuit of a lone anthropologist. However, the case study of Gavin Weston and Natalie Djohari reports and reflects upon a Goldsmiths project that enabled a large group of students to learn about and conduct fieldwork in close proximity to staff: a student/staff team research exercise using 'Collaborative Event Ethnography' (CEE) – a methodological approach designed to capture a comprehensive overview of large-scale meetings – this time at the Antiques Roadshow, on location in Kent. The paper follows the process from initial recruitment (of staff and students from all career and education levels), to democratic choice of event, research-design and pre-event workshops and the Roadshow itself, where ethnographic data were collected through the team's observations and through interviews with the full range of people there – the Roadshow production team and crew, the antiques specialists, location volunteers and the visiting public; finally, the study describes the training for and the carrying out of coding and collation of the data. Authorial reflections provided here are particularly penetrating and dispassionate. From the whole project, there were lessons to be learnt by both students and staff, but it is clear that the experience was extremely productive of data and profoundly beneficial to all who took part.

In a Glasgow Caledonian University initiative to encourage healthcare students to see themselves as agents of health promotion, triple partnerships between students, academic staff and community partners have proved very worthwhile for all participants and the community. A case study by Larissa Kempenaar and Sivaramkumar Shanmugam provides a stimulating insight into the process of transforming a previously theoretical health promotion module with quite poor student engagement into one rooted in real practice that has succeeded in wooing students away from their desire to adopt a biomedical approach to healthcare. Some improvement in their class-time engagement was achieved with the introduction of peer-teaching, but it was a collaborative approach to 'service learning' (learning in community settings) which really helped students to see themselves as health promotion agents intent on improving people's health literacy. The summative assessment now involves all parties: it is based on an interactive health-promotion activity, marked equally by the module team and the community partners, with the total moderated by student peer-marking. The paper concludes: 'Successful partnership depends upon being authentic and honest, showing mutual respect and communicating well.'

A video case study by Jeanne-Louise Moys, Joy Collier and Diane Joyce focuses on a University of Reading (Department of Typography & Graphic Communication) initiative to introduce a new optional module supportive of first-year students' technical learning. The study highlights how the Department's students, from different year groups, collaborated with staff: they were invited to participate in a focus group to share their ideas about both the module's content and assessment; their contributions were adopted and built into its design or applied to other modules as appropriate. The authors confirm that working with the students provided a wealth of relevant detail and enabled the design team to embed time-management and personal-development activities and adopt incremental reflection instead of an end-of-module blog or reflection report. Additionally, the exercise provided helpful guidance to those early-career colleagues who were involved in developing learning resources and assessment tasks for the module. This case study is now being used to encourage colleagues across different disciplines to embed student engagement initiatives within the curriculum-design process.

A research article by Susan Smith of Leeds Beckett University, in the context of the institution's research into its black and minority ethnic (BME) student attainment gap, outlines the findings from a small, qualitative project focusing on **commuting** BME undergraduates and explores how their issues and needs have been addressed through a range of cultural, infrastructural and curricular interventions. As Leeds Beckett has a significant proportion of living-at-home BME students, the investigation's findings provide a perceptive insight into such key issues of concern as: such students prioritise academic engagement, but don't always appreciate the social and cultural capital to be gained from extra-curricular participation; commuting itself can be tiring and stressful; unhelpful timetabling and lack of space and facilities for on-site study, group activities and social interactions with peers can all be disadvantageous. The author makes it clear that BME students do develop personal strategies to ameliorate these problems and do also value what their home circumstances provide; she goes on to summarise what her institution has done to help and finally offers four broad recommendations that universities should consider for preventing disadvantage to **any** commuting student, whether BME or not.

Data collected from two universities in Catalunya constitute the basis of a research investigation into student/staff co-design of two kinds of learning scenario: inquiry-based (IBL) and technology-enhanced (TEL). The authors, Iolanda Garcia, Ingrid Noguera and Meritxell Cortada-Pujol, analyse the students' contribution to the co-design process and explore the impact it had upon them. The results were obtained by means of prior structured interviews and a post-process questionnaire. The aim of the study was for students to appraise the prototypes of the learning scenarios in the final phase of the co-design process ('assessment and reflection'), adding their own ideas and perspectives and thus validating the final designs. The results, they say, 'show that the students' main contribution has a relationship with methodological and organisational aspects, and that the main benefit they perceive is gaining a better understanding of the teacher's role and the complexity of designing learning scenarios.' The paper adds a very balanced assessment of the drawbacks and challenges of a co-design process.

Tom Lowe and Owen Humphrey of the University of Winchester provide the only technology review in this issue. They used the online platform 'Padlet' as the collaborative medium for a student/staff partnership research project, 'in order to replicate such principles of partnership

as inclusivity, reciprocity, trust and community.’ The paper provides a summary of Padlet’s features and capabilities and the researchers say that it allowed them, since Padlet is a visual form of wiki (an accessible information repository), to establish a forum for the duration of the eight-month partnership, enabling stakeholders both to access information visually and to create an information board. Their review is largely favourable and they find that Padlet: is especially useful for the ‘idea-gathering’ stage of a project; is good for sharing ideas and ‘bombarding’ resources into a shared space; offers a ‘pin board’ facility for reviewing content and ideas; has visual and colourful presentation; is free! On the negative side, it doesn’t offer the space for co-writing ‘dynamic’ resources, as Google Docs does.

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