

## **No person is an island: a staff-student collaborative research project in relation to group assessment as a mode of assessment**

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### **Introduction**

Staff-student collaboration is an area of higher education (HE) research and practice which has witnessed dramatic change over recent years. With the increasing commercialisation of university education in general, the levels of engagement and collaboration between staff and students has never been more varied between different institutions (Allin, 2014; Dickerson *et al.*, 2016). Within many United Kingdom (UK) universities, there has been a conscious drive to implement staff-student collaboration programmes or 'students as partners' projects. The University of Sheffield is one such institution where the staff and students have come together to work towards a common goal.

The University of Sheffield is a world-leading, research-intensive Russell Group university located in the Yorkshire and Humberside region of the UK. It possesses a student body of approximately 29,000 students, alongside 4000 academic research and teaching staff. The University spans a wide range of academic disciplines and offers subjects from Medicine and Engineering to the Humanities and Visual Arts. The student body comprises a diverse and international cohort and the University prides itself on its slogan "*We are international*", signifying the diversity of the student body seen around campus (University of Sheffield, 2018b).

Over the past three academic years at the University, a scheme known as 'Student Associates in Learning and Teaching' (SALT) has been in effect. SALTs are students selected by the University to work, in collaboration with an academic staff member, on a year-long project to support the development of some aspect of the learning and teaching process. The aim of the SALT project is not only to improve learning and teaching within the institution, but also to encourage the development of staff-student collaboration moving forward. The SALT scheme was started and run by the University's Student Partnerships Manager.

This paper will present an overview of the SALT scheme – what it entails, how it was implemented – and an evaluation of the scheme to date. In addition, a case study example of a SALT project will be provided in the form of the Social Science B faculty team tasked with investigating, analysing and then disseminating the findings of the effects of group assessment as a mode of assessment within the faculty of Social Sciences.

### **Specifications of the SALT scheme** (University of Sheffield, 2018a):

- SALTs must work in partnership with a staff member on projects which aim to develop and improve the learning and teaching experience for students;
- SALTs will work on projects relevant to their faculty, or the institution, in a flexible way that can fit around their timetable;
- Each SALT team is given a project brief - they then work together, in partnership with staff, to shape and deliver their project;

## Case Studies

- SALTs will be financially recompensed for the time they spend on SALT-related activities;
- Each SALT project shall last for the period of one academic year only.

### Implementation – case study

The first stage of the SALT process was competitive entry onto the SALT scheme. There were essential and desired criteria for prospective applicants and an online application with competency questions allowing for demonstration of these attributes. Academic attainment was not a factor in selection (University of Sheffield, 2018c). Both students and staff were interviewed to gain a place on this scheme and, as the numbers of applications were usually very high, students attended a group interview, the further to demonstrate their aptitude. Interviews were conducted by the Student Partnerships Manager and her professional services staff. Projects were pre-determined and based on consultation with the different faculties within the University prior to the commencement of the academic year and SALT scheme.

SALT teams at the time of the case study described here were decided; each faculty had its own team and other teams were institutionally based (such as within the library). The exception to this was the faculty of Social Sciences, which, owing to its considerable size, possessed two SALT teams. A training day was organised at the start of the year, giving the teams a chance to get to know each other while also outlining the institution's expectations for the project and highlighting how other projects in previous years had been successfully approached and executed. Project expectations were realistic and the teams were provided with key dates and directions to advice and support services should they be required.

Within the case study SALT team – Social Science B – there were seven SALT members from six different degree programmes (including East Asian Studies, Education, Law, Journalism, Methods and Sociology) and a Lead SALT. A Lead SALT within each team possessed additional responsibilities and, alongside the Academic Lead, oversaw the team's progress throughout the year. In the majority of instances, this person possessed previous experience of the SALT scheme (University of Sheffield, 2018a). The Academic Lead for this project was a University teacher from the School of Law and was also invited to attend the training day to ensure integration into the team to achieve efficient communication and collaboration.

The focal area of learning and teaching that the Social Science B SALT team was tasked with investigating was the use of group assessments as a method of assessment within the faculty of Social Sciences. This was in response to comments and feedback received on the student experience questionnaires that students are asked to complete at the end of every module.

The students and staff members were then given total control as to how they wished to approach the project. The final deadline for any output to be produced was the only condition set by the University.

One final point of note is that the university committed to, and followed through with, running workshops to assist students with areas where the typical student might require more guidance. This guidance took the form of workshops, addressing such matters as data

## Case Studies

analysis (with an emphasis on qualitative data), ethics and focus group training. There was also a series of mandatory online training courses to be completed and these included information and education on data protection.

A brief timeline and overview of the Social Sciences B team's project can be seen below:

September 2017	Introductions/Training day
October 2017	Deciding upon format and outputs for the project
November 2017	Literature review
December 2017	Literature review
January 2018	Winter university examinations/Seeking ethical approval
February 2018	Online focus groups
March 2018	Online focus groups
April 2018	Data analysis
May 2018	Presenting to faculty/Finalising report/SALT showcase
June 2018	End of SALT project

Team members decided to approach the project methodologically and with a focus on the student experience of group assessments. After obtaining ethical approval, they conducted primary and secondary research – a literature review, obtaining data via online focus groups (using Adobe Connect software) and thematic analysis of the qualitative data gathered. The results were disseminated through a faculty learning and teaching event, the SALT showcase (where all SALT teams presented their findings to a distinguished guest audience including Sheffield University's Vice President for Education) and through a report sent to all Directors for Learning and Teaching. The findings of the Social Science B team's research can be summarised briefly:

- Students tend to dislike group assessment as a mode of assessment because of varying previous personal experiences.
- Grades vary wildly and are often not indicative of or in line with other modes of assessment.
- The group composition ultimately decides how much, if anything, students get out of the 'group assessment experience'.

These findings were of a similar nature to some already found within relevant literature, with the importance of grades in the overall experience of group assessments only further reinforced (Sweeney, Weaven and Herington, 2008; Witney and Smallbone, 2011). There is support and research suggesting that group assessments are best placed as a tool to build skills and not necessarily to inform overall grades (Almond, 2009).

While the Social Science B team investigated group assessments, there were several other teams investigating different and unrelated projects. Examples of other projects include:

## Case Studies

Arts & Humanities: How can we better prepare students for the future beyond university?

Social Science A: What personal information should staff know about their students?

The funding for this project was provided by the University itself, allowing for three hundred and fifty hours of research time for each project (intended to be split equally between the six regular SALTs, but with a greater number of hours allocated to the Lead SALT on account of her/his additional leadership responsibilities). This equated to approximately fifty hours of research time per SALT and to approximately two hours per week during term time. The University also provided a £1000 budget per team for any other additional costs incurred during the execution of the projects.

### **Evaluation / lessons learnt**

In terms of success, this SALT project overall proved engaging and all parties felt that it had been a worthwhile activity. The positive feedback here may well reflect the fact that the SALT scheme overall was run effectively, efficiently and in the best possible way possible in accordance with pre-existing evidence (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011).

Additionally, the case study project was also successfully and carefully planned – see timeline above – to further its effectiveness (Krueger and Casey, 2009). The project's output (the written report and recommendations to faculty) has also been very well received. The SALT scheme is another innovative way for students to become active participants and for the influential student voice to be heard, as should always be the case (Ngussa and Makewa, 2014; Canning, 2017).

As discussed above, the team's findings were disseminated through a learning and teaching event hosted by the SALT team. There was an impressive turnout, with key members of faculty staff present. Feedback received here made it clear that the University felt the research completed was insightful at the programme level stage when setting, deciding or changing degree programmes. However, the practical effect of this on group assessment practice and the success of the written report itself are harder to gauge. It has been distributed to all Directors for Learning and Teaching, but it will be possible to assess fully its true effectiveness only in the next academic year, when it becomes clear whether the staff have distributed the report more widely within their departments and whether the recommendations made can be seen within respective degree programmes.

A key point to note is that, for members of the SALT team, the staff-student relationship feels renewed. Furthermore, for those staff members who go 'above and beyond' in their quest to improve teaching and learning within the University, respect – always present – has most certainly increased (Robertson and Blackler, 2006). Students are rarely afforded the opportunity to see what goes on 'behind the scenes' within universities and it has been a real privilege for the SALT team to have been able to do so.

A further interesting point relates to discussions about the project and scheme by academics and students alike. Students, particularly, question the viability of undergraduates' working with staff members, because that shakes their sense of equilibrium and their belief that staff are separate entities. Their frequent questions – such as 'How does it work?' and 'Why does it work?' – often lead to an engaging dialogue about how it is that so many staff members are committed to the continued development of learning and teaching, something that

## Case Studies

students may not believe or cannot see. Staff interested in the SALT project, even after understanding how it works, are also – just like the students – inclined to ask why it does.

One answer lies deep in the heart of the composition of the SALT team. The full recruitment process undertaken by each SALT student and Academic Lead ensures that those who apply are only those committed to, and possessing a genuine interest in, the continued improvement of learning and teaching within the University. This results in a passionate and focused team, already in possession of the necessary skills to work effectively together. However, there is a possible risk of lack of diversity within each SALT team. Since students self-select into the SALT role, can a university operating such a scheme as SALT say that it is truly embracing staff-student collaboration in relation to its whole student body? That the case study team certainly bonded very quickly as a unit allowed the project to have very positive and wide-reaching benefits, but this can be attributed to the like-mindedness of the students and staff member (Duah, 2017). Would a random selection of university students formed into a SALT team yield the same results? There is a continuing challenge in ensuring that the whole student body remains engaged and included within staff-student collaboration efforts and maintaining an excellent group composition, as achieved in the case study.

The SALT scheme did not suffer from the inhibiting factors – the power dynamic and relationships – that Mann in her commentary on staff-student collaboration (2001) argues make it harder for students and staff to collaborate. The Academic Leads throughout the SALT scheme – and especially the one within the Social Science B team – were willing to listen to and embrace the thoughts and opinions of the SALTs. This led to the forging of excellent working relationships, prevented the traditional university top-down power dynamic and yielded impressive results, not just in terms of project output, but also in staff-student relationships.

Evaluation of this project and discussions with other SALT teams have identified another interesting outcome: students were found to be far more open and honest when discussing a given topic with SALTs. This was partly because the training provided on the scheme enhanced the requisite skills for running a focus group effectively and partly because SALTs were students themselves (Krueger and Casey, 2002). This homogeneity and ability to relate directly to other students nurtured engagement and consequently led to more interesting results (Krueger and Casey, 2015). For example, in the case study, one student openly commented that a higher grade obtained in a group assessment was not an accurate representation of the skills and abilities of individuals within the group. Such a comment, it was felt, would never be relayed to a staff member; the Academic Lead, in particular, was surprised by the honesty shown. This is an overall positive feature of the scheme – it was the partnership of the staff *alongside* the students which created a more receptive environment for the voicing by the student body of honest opinions. This aspect of peer collaboration and commonality, both within the SALT group themselves, structuring the focus groups, and between the interviewees and SALT members, aided the findings which could then be disseminated to the wider learning and teaching body (Stoll *et al.*, 2012).

As with the vast majority of such projects as the SALT scheme, not everything is perfect and there are always things that could be altered or improved. One of the main challenges throughout the SALT scheme was the time constraints placed on the teams. Projects that were meant to last a year often ended up with only seven or eight months of time devoted to them, largely on account of the structuring of the academic year, with such a long summer

## Case Studies

combined with lengthy examination periods in January and May. Two-year SALT projects would definitely be a worthwhile recommendation for any university looking to operate a scheme like this one. This would enhance the overall quality and analysis of the data by allowing more time to be devoted to these and by obtaining a larger dataset from the wider student population to incorporate its growing diversity (Tyrrell and Varnham, 2015). The length of engagement seen within the case study was felt not to be enough to reach the saturation level of the data available in this field (Kielhofner, 2006). This would therefore allow teams to bring about more effective and more sustained change from longer time periods devoted to projects. The longer timescale could also see some of the recommendations put into practice and real feedback gained about any prospective changes.

Another recommendation would be more than one staff member working on each project. To have more staff working with more students would both improve project output quality and staff-student collaboration and also reduce the workload of the Academic Lead. This recommendation can be made because, within the Social Sciences B team, this is exactly what happened. Informally, other staff members came on board and helped with the various elements of the project. A Learning Technologist assisted greatly in the execution of the online chatroom research, while two academics whose research speciality is group assessment were invaluable when conducting the literature review.

A further point to note is that, whilst the SALT scheme has been deemed a success, it will – from the beginning of the 2018-2019 academic year – cease to exist, owing to a restructuring of the University's student partnerships programme. Alternatives to the SALT scheme in its current format are presently being considered on an individual faculty level basis. It remains to be seen, however, whether these smaller, less well-resourced and more niche projects will yield the same results.

### Conclusion

In summary, the SALT scheme has been a worthwhile undertaking for all stakeholders involved in the process and has proved itself as a powerful and dynamic force for change. Impactful and sustained improvement in learning and teaching has been brought about from the projects completed. Staff-student collaboration has also been improved and a cost-benefit analysis confirms that the strengths of the scheme outweigh any drawbacks, with everyone participating in agreement.

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