

## Final Report for the IATL funded project:

A pilot scheme for student-staff partnership projects (19/20 – SP – Thonnes/Lazic)

Enhancement activities in which students and staff work collaboratively in so called student-staff partnerships or students-as-partners schemes are rapidly establishing themselves as a core approach for the enhancement of teaching, learning and the wider student experience, see for example Little (2010), Healy et al (2014), Mercer-Mapstone et al (2017) and Bovill (2019).

Cook-Sather et al (2014, p. 6-7) define student-staff partnership as a “collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation or analysis”.

In the paper that provides the basis for the HEA framework of student engagement through partnership, Healy et al (2014) define the approach as “a relationship in which all participants are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together.”

The approach is not without its challenges as it requires “rethinking of assumptions about teaching, learning, power and knowledge” (Bovill et al 2016, p.199, citing King and Felten, 2012) and a shift in the traditional roles taken by both students and staff. For students a shift may be needed from “being passive recipients” to becoming “active agents” while for staff there is a move from being “disciplinary content experts” to “facilitators” (Bovill et al. 2016, p. 197). A key opportunity provided by a partnership approach is that it brings together staff and students’ perspectives and thus an opportunity to not only learn together but also to learn from each other. At the same time, differences in motivation, identity and perspectives will create various tensions that need to be navigated.

The aim of this IATL project, as planned for the academic year 19/20, was to develop training for students and staff to facilitate partnership schemes for projects in enhancement of teaching, learning and the wider student experience. The original plan of the project was to offer three workshops, two for students and another one for staff, as a preparation for a small number of student-staff partnership projects, with the latter being an opportunity to evaluate the impact of the workshops.

The staff-focussed workshop introduced key ideas and conceptual models of student-staff partnership. Workshop participants were invited to reflect on their own viewpoints and experience as well as to explore the values that underpin a partnership approach. We also discussed potential obstacles and barriers to working in partnership. A common concern which was identified as a major barrier to partnership was whether students would be interested and willing to engage in the partnership process.

The concern by staff was a very valid one as the two student-focussed workshops that we organised demonstrated. The aim of the first workshop was to explore students' perspectives and ideas related to students as partners in enhancement schemes and activities. The second workshop was offered as an opportunity for students to discuss their enhancement ideas with staff and peers and so provide students with the support for developing a project proposal. Unfortunately, both of these workshops suffered from a very low uptake by students. The workshops were followed by a call to students for project proposals. As with the workshops, there was very little response from students.

We can only speculate why there was so little take-up of the workshops and the call for project proposals. As often referred to in the literature on student-staff partnership (eg Bovill et al. 2016, p. 197), moving students towards a more participatory engagement requires a shift in their identity and perceived role which can be a significant hurdle. In our case, additional potential barriers to participation might have been the lack of an established culture of student-staff partnership and thus a perceived lack of relevance to the students. It might also have been due to the substantial term-time contact hours and workload for students that is common in our degree courses and means that students tend to be very selective as to which extracurricular activities they engage in.

Naturally, the lack of interest from students was rather disappointing. Healy et al (2014), citing Taylor and Robinson (2009), refer to this as "the tension between the normative ideal of student engagement and the realities of practice". In the literature the emphasis is on case studies of successful partnership schemes and projects. However, as Healy et al (2014) point out, unsuccessful approaches should not be dismissed as failures but rather used as an opportunity to learn. Unfortunately, before we had the opportunity to consider in detail what we might change in response to not achieving what we had hoped for, the UK went into the first COVID 19 lockdown. Thus we felt unable to proceed with the project and so suspended it for the time being.

As we spent the next six months adapting to the drastic changes in our working lives, there was little time to devote on reflection on this project, and any barriers to the success of the project in 19/20 seemed likely to be even higher in the current circumstances. On the other hand it seemed even more important to strengthen the partnership between students and staff at a time of substantial stress to the whole academic community. After consultation with IATL, we decided to resume the project in January 2021. Due to other work commitments, Dr Lazic was unfortunately unable to continue with the project, however, Dr Martyn Parker took up her role.

Building on our experience in 19/20, when resuming the project we thought carefully about changes that we could implement in this second phase. Student engagement is often conceptualised as a participation ladder, see Arnstein (1969), Bovill and Bulley (2011) and Varwell (2021). Successive rungs of the ladder correspond to relationships in which students have increasing influence and control. Given our past experience of a relatively unsuccessful call for projects and our awareness of the complexities that students were currently facing with lockdowns and social distancing measures as well as the transition to blended learning, it seemed that a more promising approach would be to be less ambitious and offer

opportunities on a lower “rung” of the participation ladder. Hence we decided to not insist on student-led proposals but we instead also offered broad themes that students could apply to participate in. Noting the particular circumstances of the academic year 20/21 we decided on themes around blended learning and community building. While the themes were proposed by staff, they were inspired by informal feedback from students.

As the student-focussed workshops had little take up in 19/20, it seemed futile to try to run these again but instead we decided to offer support activities as an integrated part of the partnership projects. While these changes were departures from the original plan, they seemed conducive to establishing an effective partnership and team cohesion and were in fact in keeping with the general philosophy of student-staff partnership as a process rather than a product.

We were apprehensive that, with the pressures students were under due to the pandemic, we might not be able to attract participants to the scheme. However, this worry was unfounded and, in fact, we were able to recruit seven undergraduate students from the Statistics department onto the partnership project.

The context and timing of the student-staff partnership scheme was far from ideal. We were unable to meet in person and so all team meetings had to be conducted online. With this came the usual challenges of having to work as a virtual team. Another organisational issue was balancing the partnership project with other commitments and availability of team members, in particular, as the duration of the project extended into and beyond the exam period. This highlights the complexity of student-staff partnership in an environment that places constant other demands on both students and staff.

The project was off to a relatively slow start but it was important to allow time for the team to establish itself, particularly as we were forced to work virtually. We also wanted to ensure that, given the original themes had been suggested by staff, students would have sufficient opportunity to influence the direction of the partnership project. Integrating elements of joint learning such as using the ABC methodology (Young and Perovic, 2016) to develop a module outline helped us to establish ourselves as a team working in partnership, to develop a common language but also to get to know and better understand each other’s perspectives. Organisational arrangements such as rotating the role of the meeting chair and the minute taker were useful in establishing a climate of shared responsibility.

As outcome for our partnership project, the student-staff partnership team decided to develop a moodle course for departmental staff that would illustrate some items identified as good practice in blended learning. We also produced a departmental bulletin that discussed various topics related to the student experience including blended learning. In hindsight, the decision to focus the partnership project on blended learning was a good one. With all the obstacles that the pandemic had thrown into our path, blended learning was a subject that was of acute relevance to everyone involved, but it was also something that students and staff alike were relatively new to and so could discover and explore together.

The literature on students-as-partners points out the context specific nature of the approach and the need for flexibility. The original plan of this IATL project was to establish

training that was separate from the actual student-staff partnership projects and delivered as a precursor for such activity. However, as described above, we found that there was little uptake and so what we had planned did not fit into the departmental context. In response we moved to a model of experiential and integrated learning which seemed more authentic and meaningful. It also facilitated a more immediate exchange of perspectives and experiences between partners, and thus built a foundation for collaborative work.

Because the initial idea of stand-alone workshops was not successful, we decided that for this IATL project we would collate ideas and suggested activities that could be integrated into partnership-based work as and when needed. Thus, rather than presenting the suggestions as a formal program, we decided to make them available in a Pick'n'Mix approach that can be adapted to specific needs and contexts. Where appropriate the activities are supported by relevant literature and/or links to online resources. We have curated the material in a [moodle course](#) divided into six sections: appreciative inquiry, exploring partnership, designing schemes, values, attitudes and behaviours, and finally, student-led proposals.

The literature on students-as-partners often cites as a benefit of partnership that it provides an opportunity to uncover “implicit assumptions” and to open up “new ways of thinking, learning and working” (Healey et al, 2014, p. 7). We therefore felt that creative problem solving approaches which encourage divergent thinking and differ from more traditional approaches to learning would fit well into the partnership remit. In fact, at Warwick, design thinking has a strong track record as a tool for student engagement in form of the Warwick Secret Challenge. In our view, the emphasis on creative approaches also helps with transitioning out of established roles and identities that may not serve partnership. Thus, a number of the suggested activities that we collated are based on creative problem solving and design thinking techniques.

Partnership is a mindset and takes time to establish. It is a process of interaction and collaboration rather than an end product. The activities we collated were chosen to ensure that the partnership is not confined to a transactional approach focused on delivering an output, but fosters meaningful social connection that provides a platform for transformation whether of assumptions, roles or identities.

Some activities are relatively short while others are more extended to suit different needs and time constraints. Most of the activities facilitate an exploration of conceptualisation, values, attitudes and behaviours that underpin successful partnership. We envisage students and staff engaging in these jointly and thus developing a shared understanding of partnership among participants.

The final section of the moodle course entitled student-led proposals stands a little apart from the other sections as it contains pointers and activities for students wishing to develop a partnership project proposal. Thus this caters for the “higher rungs” of the participation ladder.

Without doubt, this was an extremely challenging period to try to run this project and this was not without consequence. A more formal evaluation and the dissemination of the project was not possible within the given timeframe, but is being considered going forward. Given that the whole time scale of the project slipped due to external circumstances, it is difficult to quantify its impact. The original plan was to evaluate the impact of the workshops but due to the low uptake we were unable to collect such data. In hindsight it may have also been overly optimistic to expect to be able to measure impact so early on.

But we hope that our pilot has created sufficient critical mass of experience amongst students and staff to make the process of student engagement through partnership sustainable in the longer term. There is an increasing awareness of the approach in the department and funding for such activities is being considered. A more immediate outcome of the project is a suggestion by the students in our partnership team to create resources that would attract students to such activities which we plan to explore further.

At this point I should like to express my sincere thanks to the whole partnership team who rose to the challenge and participated so wholeheartedly and with enthusiasm in very difficult circumstances. I would also like to thank IATL for the funding and support provided under very turbulent circumstances.

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