Interim Report for the IATL funded strategic project:

A pilot scheme for student-staff partnership projects

Enhancement activities in which students and staff work collaboratively, so called student-staff partnerships or students-as-partners schemes, are rapidly establishing themselves as a core approach for 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).

The aim of this project is to develop a training programme for students and staff to facilitate students and staff working in partnerships to enhance teaching, learning and the wider student experience. The project also offers funding for a small number of student-staff partnership projects.

In order to collect data to evaluate the project, we applied for ethical approval from the Biomedical and Scientific Research Ethics Committee (BSREC). The reference number of the granted ethical approval is BSREC 15/19-20.

As part of the project we developed three workshops, see details below. These were originally planned to be offered in Term 1. However, the delay in receiving ethical approval together with the UCU strike action meant that we had to postpone the workshops until Term 2. The workshops were advertised through shout-outs in core lectures, posters across the department, the SSLC as well as a staff-student event organised by the Statistics Society. We also developed a dedicated student-facing [website](#) for the project.

Workshop 1 – Design Thinking – 22 January 2020

The first workshop was planned as a focus group to explore the perspectives and ideas of students around students-as-partners enhancement activities. The aim was to get student input at an early stage in order to shape the scheme.

To ensure that the event was also a learning opportunity not only for the project leaders but also for students, we developed the workshop as an introduction to design-thinking. As defined by Kelly and Kelly (2013) design-thinking is "a way of finding human needs and creating new solutions using the tools and mindsets of design practitioners". This human-centred approach to design and problem-solving is focused on empathy and connection with the target audience and thus appears a natural approach to student engagement. In fact, design-thinking as a concept and method for student engagement has been successfully pioneered at Warwick by Dr Bo Kelestyn. The workshop was modeled on Dr Kelestyn's Warwick Secret Challenges and we would like to acknowledge her support provided through workshop materials and advice.

Elements of our workshop included:

- A brief introduction to student-staff partnership in learning and teaching.
- A short overview to the elements of design thinking.
- A brief introduction to convergent and divergent modes of thinking.
- A warm-up exercise asking participants to reflect on various roles they adopted on the previous day.
- A design-thinking task to explore possible schemes around students-as-partners in enhancement including
  - Inspiration: a task on empathy using the empathy map designed by XPLANE (see Gray et al., 2010).
  - Ideation: a thought-shower exercise to create ideas.
  - Implementation: an elevator pitch exercise to refine the ideas.

Although a small number of students had signed up for the workshop, only two arrived at the start. As per ethical approval students had been sent a participation information leaflet and consent form to collect the data generated by this focus group. However, the students felt uncomfortable signing the consent form and even after being offered to participate the workshop without collecting any data, they declined to participate.

Workshop 2 – Proposal Writing – 5 February 2020

The proposal writing workshop was developed as an opportunity for students to discuss their enhancement ideas with staff and fellow-students and to provide support to students in submitting an application for funding. Elements of the workshop included:

- A discussion on how to generate ideas for projects.
- An empathy exercise to encourage students to consider projects both from the student and the staff perspective.
- A brief introduction to project planning.
- Following on from a project idea suggested by a student, a facilitated discussion on how to refine the project by considering goals, impact and constraints.
- A discussion of the application form.

Again, a small number students had signed up for the workshop, but only two attended. We had a lively discussion around project ideas and the perspectives from students and staff. Students also pointed out improvements for the application form.

Workshop 3 – Teaching forum – 14 February 2020

This workshop was a staff event aimed at a discussion on students-as-partners in enhancement within the department. Nine staff members (including one external participant) attended who had a range of experience in student-staff partnership approaches.

The workshop elements included:

- An overview of current literature on students-as-partners approaches including the HEA framework for students-as-partners.
- An overview on Warwick's student engagement model, plans for student engagement and partnership as well as for building learning communities.
- JISC viewpoint cards on developing successful student-staff partnerships.

The workshop was delivered using an active learning approach as staff were introduced to key ideas and conceptual models and then encouraged to reflect on their own viewpoints and experience. In groups, staff chose sub-topics from the JISC viewpoint cards and used these as prompts for further discussion. In particular, obstacles around engaging students in enhancement were discussed as well as values underlying this approach as well as how these values are expressed in the day-to-day practice within the department.

Call for Proposals:

Application forms and funding guidelines were developed before two calls for proposals went out to students. These had deadlines for application on 26th February 2020 and 23rd March 2020. There is a further open call with deadline 8th May 2020. As few students had taken up the training opportunities, students who were interested in the scheme were encouraged to get in touch with the scheme leaders for additional support. Two applications were received, one of which the selection panel agreed to fund and the other was given feedback and been invited for re-application after revision.

What worked and what did not:

Establishing partnership-based approaches 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 the student from "being passive recipients" to becoming "active agents" and for staff from being "disciplinary content experts" to "facilitators" (Bovill et al. 2016, p. 197).

While some individual partnership projects have taken place in previous years, students-as-partners approaches are not yet fully established within the department. Much of the discussion in the staff workshop centred around identities and the roles of students and staff within a partnership-based approach. The participation ladder suggested by the Warwick student engagement model was a useful tool to explore the diverse viewpoints that staff held about the various levels of participation.

Due to the low participation by students in the workshop it is difficult to evaluate the students' perspectives. Potential barriers to participation might have been the lack of an established culture of partnership projects, the substantial term-time contact hours and workload that is common to mathematics-based courses, the employability focus of our students (particular towards the competitive financial and actuarial sector). Moving students into more participatory roles not only requires a shift in role by staff but also in the role and identity of students. In degree courses like ours which are delivered cross-

departmentally, it appears particularly challenging to achieve a real integration of such activities in the student experience.

Going forward:

Our initial calls were for student-led proposals as we aimed for students to take as active a role as possible. However, both the lack of take-up by students suggests that opportunities on a lower "rung" of the participation ladder might be more successful in the initial phase of establishing partnership approached. In response we thus planned to develop a small number of staff-led proposals to which students could apply.

Interim Update – April 2021

Due to the uncertainty of whether funding could be carried over to the next academic year and the transition needed to blended learning delivery for 20/21 we suspended the project temporarily but then in January 2021 resumed it in a slightly different format than originally planned as agreed in discussion with Caroline Gibson. As students were adapting to lock-down measures and blended learning, we decided to move from student-led proposals for project funding to offering broad themes that students could apply for to participate in. (The opportunity for students to submit a student-led proposal was retained but no submissions were received.) Also, rather than offering the training for students via workshops, which had not been popular in 2020, we decided to integrate the training into the student-staff projects themselves.

We recruited seven Statistics undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds who are currently working on the two themes below. While these themes were proposed by staff, they were inspired from discussions with members of the SSLC.

- Blended learning – what have we learnt so far?

  In this project a group of students and staff are exploring their experience of blended learning, both from a staff and a student perspective. Based on this collective sense-making of the recent period of rapid changes to the teaching delivery, we aim to develop recommendations for future academic years. As part of the project, we engaged in various activities aimed at preparing students and staff for working collaboratively as partners in enhancement. In the initial phase, we shared our experience and thus engaged in active listening, ensuring that everyone felt heard but also that everyone had the opportunity to consider recent experiences from other people's perspective. We then used the RSA Future Change Framework to structure the discussion using a "scan" of the recent changes to teaching and the student experience more generally followed by a mapping onto activities to maintain, amplify, restart and let go of. To give students a more immediate experience of issues relating to the development and delivery of a module, they, with the support from staff, used the ABC learning design to develop a first sketch draft of a first year module. This exercise was useful in drawing out student priorities for a module, such as the opportunity to work with other students, but also helped

to illustrate the staff perspective when designing a module. Based on this exercise, we are now working on refining potential recommendations for future blended learning, ensuring that both student and staff perspectives are explicitly addressed. This raises the issue of the need for providing evidence for recommendations and also the use of appropriate terminology, thus establishing a common language that will support students and staff working collaboratively in enhancement. We are also working on developing some exemplars that illustrate some of the good practice in blended learning that we identified.

- Creating a community – a departmental bulletin

While running under a separate header, this theme is closely linked with the previous theme and members of our student team participate to a certain extent in both. The bulletin picks up on some of the items considered in the blended learning project and aims to include the wider departmental community in the discussion. Each bulletin has a feature theme that is explored both from a student and a staff perspective. This includes a link to a padlet where staff and students can make contributions and so join the discussion. In total we are planning four such bulletins with themes Community, Revision, Wellbeing Pedagogy and, finally, Blended Learning. By inviting the whole departmental community to participate we are hoping to embed the role of students as active participants in the discussion around teaching, learning and the student experience, make their voices more visible and also encourage them to view themselves as partners in enhancement activities.

Evaluation of progress so far:

The experience of running student-staff partnership projects while exploring how to best prepare and support participants on such projects more generally proves invaluable. 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, possibly due to not having a substantial track record in the department of student-staff partnership projects and thus a lack of relevance for the students. Instead, we have moved to a model of experiential learning which seems more authentic and meaningful. We are hoping that this will create a critical mass of experience amongst students and staff and thus make such activity sustainable longer term. The next step of the project will be to use the experience gained from this to formulate an integrated model of experiential learning that can be adopted by other departments.

The timing of the project was not ideal with some of the activity now running into the exam period, but could not be helped given the circumstances. But it also highlights some of the challenges of student-staff partnership in an environment that places constant other demands on both students and staff. As a consequence, dissemination has taken a bit of a back role at the moment, but the aim is to work on this beyond the official project end.

References

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