Case study

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Building Capacity for Student Engagement through a Staff-Student Partnership Approach

Rationale for the case study

The focus of this case study is to explore the impact of a staff-student partnership approach in an institutional-wide Change Programme (2012-2015), What Works? Student Retention & Success, (SRS) aimed at improving student retention and success.

In recent years, awareness of the benefits of student-staff partnerships across the UK and beyond has increased with many institutions promoting practices which shift from a transmission mode of learning to an interactive collaborative ethos where all participants, i.e. staff and students each contribute to, and benefit from learning situations (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2015; Curran & Millard, 2015; Healey et al., 2014). However, there can still be reluctance or a capacity deficit on the part of both staff and students on adopting a partnership approach, and as Healey, Flint & Harrington (2014) highlight 'that the understandings of the impact of partnership work – for students, staff, institutions, society more broadly – remain relatively poor, and there is a need for a greater evidence base around the benefits of partnership'.

This case study provides the basis for demonstrating how staff-student partnership as an ethos creates a more favourable learning environment in which individual learning is optimised by developing student capacity to engage and staff capacity to be engaging.

Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

Ulster University was one of 13 institutions involved in the Change Programme which sought to improve the strategic approach to the engagement, belonging, retention and success of first year students through the implementation of interventions in the areas of induction, active learning and co-curricular activities in seven selected discipline areas. Central to the What Works? Model, Thomas (2012) is the positioning of student engagement and 'belonging' at the heart of improving student retention and success. One of the key principles of the Change Programme, is that students should be actively involved in not just the identification of areas for enhancement but also the identification and implementation of the solution.

To this end, the university selected seven discipline areas to be involved in this programme. The basis for selection was; disciplines with high attrition rates or disciplines with a record of effective practice resulting in low attrition. Each of the discipline teams was made up of course team

members and student partners (who volunteered for the role) who worked together to identify, implement and evaluate interventions aimed at improving the overall first-year experience and impact positively on attrition. See table 1. A core team involving a senior manager, project lead, academic member of staff, data analyst, students' union representative and a full-time student was also established to lead the Change Programme.

Table 1: SRS Discipline team breakdown

Discipline	Textile Art, Design & Fashion	Built Environment	Accountancy (full- and part-time)	Law	Computing	Nursing (Mental Health)	Creative Technologies
Campus	Belfast	Jordanstown			Coleraine	Magee	
Staff	5	10	11	8	4	7	6
Students	11	16	8	30	16	3	10

Over the course of the two academic years, 2013-2015, the students and staff within each discipline team introduced interventions including *inter alia*:

- Common themed project which involved different year groups
- Induction with a more social focus
- Academic Mentor System
- Pre-entry activities
- Peer mentoring activities
- Drop-in, Don't drop out campaign
- Digital chats between lecturers and students (informal)
- Student representatives involvement
- Informal industry-led projects off-campus
- Industry-linked projects
- Student trips – informal interaction
- Changes to lecture style – interactive lectures, trusting students to research, independent learning, group work etc.

Staff roles

Staff involvement was in the main focused on introducing these interventions at the appropriate point along the student journey and leading their respective course teams to become involved and to support the implementation and evaluation thereof.

Student roles

Students were involved in different ways in the various discipline and campus contexts. Examples include *inter alia*:

- Computing - the student partners were final-year students who were selected as 'coaches' for the first years and supported them in a first-year programming module. The partners also worked with staff in re-designing the delivery of the curriculum by bringing back industry intelligence from their recently completed placement.

- Accountancy – the student partners were involved as members of the Accounting, Finance and Economics Student Society committee and took leadership of the scheduling and organisation of social events with the aim of promoting belongingness for students with their cohort and the Accountancy professional networks and employers.

- Textile Art, Design and Fashion – the student partners were involved in a variety of roles; as ambassadors for the course/university at Open Days for prospective students; leading workshops with prospective students at interview days and at pre-induction summer schools.

- Nursing (Mental-Health) – the student partners were primarily the student representatives across the three years of the programme. The partners instigated the ideas for the induction of new students and led these induction activities with support from academic partners.

- Creative Technologies – the student partners were involved in data collection (led focus groups with staff and students) on the identification of first-year issues and subsequently put forward ideas to staff of interventions to address these. These interventions were co-developed by the student and staff partners.

- Law – the student partners were involved in data collection (led focus groups with students) on the week 0 induction activities. Some student partners were also PASS leaders (peer mentors) and were used to support the new students at induction and in orientation. Student partners also acted as ambassadors for the Law programmes at Open Days for prospective students and Insight events for applicants.

Process of staff-student partnerships

The process of student-staff partnership was very different across disciplines. In some areas, such as computing, the role of the student partner is well defined and indeed the students have to formally apply for the role and undergo an interview. In other areas, the partnership was more organic and as issues were highlighted and ideas developed into interventions, then so did the roles of the partners. In some areas, the student representative role also morphed into the student partner role. However, although the processes were different, the common theme across all successful partnerships was that this was an opportunity for staff and students to; work together with a common purpose (improve the first-year experience); to hear each other's perspective and to break down the 'them and us' status quo by developing relationships outside of the classroom that have impact on what happens in the classroom.

Challenges of staff-student partnership

Staff-student partnerships are not without their challenges and these are also documented in (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2015; Curran & Millard, 2015; Healey et al., 2014). They can include issues such as; time, resistance and capacity (for both staff and students) and how these challenges are addressed can differ across the disciplines. The learning for all the teams in this Change Programme is that if you are thinking of adopting a student partnership ethos, then start small – situate it within a module and make sure that all students are aware of what you are trying to do. Although only a few students might put themselves forward initially, try to think of ways of getting others involved – creating roles for students as indicated above is an excellent way of collaborating with students.

Internal/external factors as enablers

The University had previously been involved in a HEA Students as Partners Change Programme (2012-2013) and an evaluation of this had highlighted some of the challenges around partnerships. This meant that more supportive structures were put in place from the outset of the Change Programme to address concerns around working in partnership. In addition students and staff were treated as equal contributors to the project workings with strong values including respect and trust underpinning the work.

Evidence of impact

In order to better understand the 'lived experience' of working in partnership and how it impacts on the individuals involved, one-to-one hour-long semi-structured interviews (n=14) were conducted with staff (n=7) and students (n=7). Trigger questions were used (see table 2) and the interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a six-stage approach to qualitative data analysis as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2008).

Table 2 Semi-structured interview trigger questions
1. How do you feel about staff student partnerships?
2. Have you seen any differences in the way you interact with staff/students since the partnership was introduced? If so, could you describe them?
3. Has the staff student partnership changed your approach to your studies/teaching practice? If so, how?
4. Has the development of the staff student partnership in which you are involved presented any opportunities and/or challenges? If so, could you describe them?
5. Any further comments

Data analysis was approached with specific questions in mind – *How has being involved in this partnership enhanced or improved student engagement?* And *How do the outcomes of staff-student partnerships inform the learning of others interested in pursuing similar activities?* In doing so, this enabled the drawing out of the benefits of partnership in relation to how it enhances student engagement whilst at the same time highlighting the challenges and recommendations which should be considered for staff-student partnership to be sustained and be effective.

Impact of staff-student partnership

The benefits of SSP are very similar for both staff and students and are described in the context of changing attitudes and behaviour, articulated below under two main themes: **personal development** and **enhances the learning climate**. For both students and staff, it can challenge traditional norms in HE and provide each with an insight into the other's perspective thereby motivating each to adopt new approaches to staff-student engagement. Within each theme, sub-themes were identified: for personal development the sub-themes were 'new skills' and 'new ways of thinking'; for enhances the learning climate the sub-themes were 'builds relationships', 'creates a ripple effect' and encourages 'active learning approaches'. See Table 3.

Table 3 Impact of staff-student partnership on engagement	
Personal Development	
New ways of thinking	SSP encourages dialogue and mutual respect. For students; it provides an insight into the complex world of HE and challenges them to question the adequacy of a passive role in their own learning.
	For staff, SSP provides an insight into what it's like to be a student in today's world and challenges them to think about; assumptions that they make about students; and the effectiveness of their current practice.
New Skills	Students report that skills such as note-taking, being reflective, team working, writing and presenting have got better and with this brings increased confidence, motivation and readiness for different learning situations.
	Staff report that SSP prompted them to stand back, solicit ideas from the students and to take on the role of a facilitator. For some staff SSP mimics the profession, which enhances students' readiness for employment.
Enhances the learning climate	
Builds Relationships	SSP breaks down barriers which can impede learning. For students; getting to know staff within and outside of the classroom reduces student anxieties and prompts them to approach staff for support and guidance.
	For staff, SSP helps to see students as individuals with different goals and aspirations. Knowing their capabilities better allows guidance and feedback to be better targeted. It also gives staff on-going feedback on their teaching practice.
Creates a ripple effect	SSP not only benefits staff and student directly involved in initiatives or projects. Students report that when enthused student partners are more active in the classroom; it rubs off on the other students and promotes more collaborative learning for everyone.
	Staff report that when learners get to know staff and each other outside of the classroom through course-based opportunities such as; pre-entry contact, induction activities and field trips, the ripple effect is felt back in the classroom through a sense of a cohesive team with everybody learning together.
Encourages	SSP breaks down the 'them and us' situation and promotes active engagement. For

active learning	students, they are more likely to ask questions and put forward ideas and suggestions which leads to taking responsibility for their own learning and a better understanding of staff expectations of independent learning.
	For staff, SSP has provided the impetus to take more risks in the classroom – in the sense of 'letting go' complete control. It has freed staff up to be innovative in their approaches to suit their contexts, which ultimately leads to a growing sense of a 'discipline community'.

Contribution to Students' confidence, engagement and belonging?

The benefits articulated above in table 3 provides the basis for demonstrating how staff-student partnership as an ethos creates a more favourable learning environment in which individual learning is optimised by developing student capacity to engage and staff capacity to be engaging.

Drawing on extracts from the data under the themes and sub-themes demonstrates the impact of the partnership on the individual. In reporting qualitative comments, the following convention is used:

> T for tutor, interview number, M/F for gender, number of years' experience

> S for student, interview number, M/F for gender, year of study

Staff and students commented on how the partnership encouraged dialogue and mutual respect. It gave each person an insight into the others' world and that enabled them to become more open in terms of their own practice and to consider other, **newer ways of thinking**. One staff member reflected:

> *I had a sense of letting go – somebody has labeled me as an expert…but the students are the experts in their experience'. I've gained in confidence but a challenge is being able to let go and trust my students, I've had to let go the notion that I know best, that I know what the students are experiencing (T3,M, 12)*

Another staff member who has taught for a long time reflected on the notion that students' opinions do count and they can act as a mirror for staff to reflect on whether their practice is effective:

> *We can't work in isolation without the students. The students have quite an influence and they should be partners. They give us a sounding board, they are here for 4 years, and we are here longer.' (T4,M,29)*

A student who has a role as a mentor to lower-level students and works in collaboration with staff reflected on how this was impacting on her personally.

> *I have developed confidence as a result of this – and I feel I am a member of staff as I have got to know them [staff] well. This year, I have developed my knowledge through student questions… the students see me as more approachable and that I can help them. (S7,F,4)*

Another student commented on how his views of staff on their availability and approachability had changed and how this helps when there are issues to discuss.

> I feel more comfortable speaking with staff if there are issues. In the past, I would have shirked away from that. I find that staff are a lot more open to ask about what students think and feel. (S6,M,1)

One staff member also highlighted how his thinking had changed in relation to viewing the students as individuals as opposed to seeing them as a collective whole. This change of lens had prompted him to think differently about how he worked with students in class.

> I am more open to students, I'm probably not as judgmental; I'm more open to hearing what they have to say and taking on their suggestions and doing something if we can… having the students lead themselves, them actually doing what they want to do. They will all have different journeys, rather than looking at people as a cohort, I see them as individuals who have their own hopes and aspirations. How I work with the students probably has changed. (T3,M,12)

The interviews also indicated the value of this work in developing staff and student capacity to engage. Working together can be seen as a catalyst for student engagement.

One part-time student articulated the usefulness of seeing the individual rather than the role.

> I possibly took it for granted they are the teacher; you are the student and it's a very well defined relationship. Outside of this it's interesting, the guys are just like me and like my colleagues [works in a bank] and it's useful to see them more as people and not just as lecturers. (S5,M,2)

Another student commented on how the growing of relationships can remove fear for students when approaching staff.

> I think it's good; we would get together with the tutors and get feedback. We have class reps and I was one last year, we would go around and ask other students what could be done to be improve the course. It's good for the tutors to be on our kind of level. There's not this feeling of being petrified of going to speak to the tutors. (S3,F,2)

Another student reflected on his role as a class representative and how that provided him with an opportunity to get to know staff and enable him to feed back issues to be addressed by the course team.

> I'm a student rep and that's how I became involved. I was asked to come to a meeting, it was very friendly and it made me feel like part of a team – not them and us. They kept it all down to earth and not too formal. At the start I didn't know much about it, but I then became aware it's about improving the course for next year. To make it better particularly for revalidation. I can also feedback aspects of the course that aren't working well. (S4,M,1)

Equally for staff the opportunity to build relationships with students is seen as a positive step to improving engagement for both parties as one staff member commented:

> It makes us seem more like people rather than staff. For us, it gives us feedback on our modules/projects and you develop a personal relationship with the students…I would

*have their ear a lot and have got to know them and they trust me…They see me more
human and approachable. I see them in the same way. I don't see them as a student
cohort now, I know them individually and their capabilities and personalities a bit
better. (T2,M,12)*

For another staff member, it's not just the one-to-one relationship that is developed but it
also enhances the team approach.

*You get to know your students better, what they are doing and what they are thinking.
We are lucky in a shared office with 4 of us and the students relate to us as a team of
staff rather than as individuals. They get a team approach.(T4,M,29)*

Unintended consequences

One of the most transformative outcomes of staff student partnership can be realised through the
increase in student motivation and the knock-on effect on their peers, as one student commented:

*There is an idolisation of professors as experts especially for a first year student. With
our programme in particular the large number of course representatives involved in
staff-student partnerships has meant that it has translated into a lot more questions
being asked in the classroom. It rubs off on the other students – when they hear
questions being asked, it gives them confidence to speak up? In the past there would
only be 30 seconds of questions, now it could be up to 20 minutes and I think it's down
to the barriers being broken down. After the first meeting, there seemed to be a whole
change in the class. (S6, M,1)*

This is an important consideration in terms of the potential of partnership working for the
engagement of all students and one that must be considered in terms of sustainability.

Sustainability

Reflections on supporting academic colleagues and students to engage in staff student
partnerships, and drawing on the data presented presents a convincing evidence-base that a
partnership approach provides a learning opportunity for both staff and students –where each can
see things from the others' perspective and the barriers to learning can be reduced. It is not
suggested that staff-student partnership is a panacea for all the challenges with 'engaging students'
but it is enabling in terms of motivating students to engage and prompting staff to create learning
climates based on trust and shared responsibilities.

The changes in attitude and behaviour by both staff and students is potentially very powerful and
can contribute to a change in culture if it can be adopted more widely throughout the institution. It
is also desirable to think about partnership in terms of 'engagement through partnership' where the
engagement is for **all** students, rather than the engagement of some already 'super-engaged'
students.

This research has informed the development of the Ulster Student Learning Experience Principles, in
particular, Principle 1; the Ulster Learning Model. These are due to be launched in January 2016 and
it is envisaged that staff will use these to inform on-going curriculum design and delivery. In
addition, a Guide for Staff and Students on Engagement through Partnership has been developed
which draws on this research and an evidence base of effective practice across the Ulster What
Works Change Programme. Practical recommendations for staff and students are outlined which

promotes partnership working for the engagement of all students. This Guide is available on the Student Engagement pages of the CHERP website.

Lessons learnt

Partnership should be an ethos or a process of engagement; it works best when it becomes a mind-set not just at individual level but at module, course, discipline and institutional level. It is predicated on relationship building, which breaks down the 'them and us' status quo and enhances student belonging, self-confidence and engagement, which is critical to addressing the issue of early leavers and enabling student success.

References

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