

Staff and Student Guide to Engagement through Partnership

Context

Decades of research show that effective student engagement promotes deep learning, focuses on what the student does and engages students in active learning (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Entwistle, 2009; Thomas, 2002). This focus on students acknowledges that learning is a joint activity, starts from the student's experience and changes the learner's perspective on knowledge (Mezirow, 1991; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). Learning therefore is less about the absorption of knowledge and more about how we set the right conditions for conceptual change to take place. According to Biggs and Tang (2011) conditions for such a change include *inter alia*: student motivation and students working collaboratively with others, both peers and teachers.

The learning climate that promotes independent lifelong learners is one that is based on high trust and the extent to which we lean more towards this trusting climate translates into action at all levels of student-teacher interaction (McGregor, 1960; Gardner, 1993; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Biggs & Tang, 2011).

More recently across the higher education sector, there has been a focus on the process or ethos of engagement, evidenced by publications such as the NUS Manifesto for Partnerships (2013) and the HEA Framework for engagement through partnership (2014). This HEA framework illustrates four overlapping areas of focus where partnerships may be fostered, and this guide relates to one of these areas: learning, teaching and assessment.

International research shows that if we engage our students as partners in learning and teaching, and this partnership is based on respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility, then we can make learning and teaching more engaging and effective for students and staff (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014).

Partnership is understood as fundamentally about a relationship in which all involved...– are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together. Partnership is essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself

(Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014, p.12).

At Ulster, Strategic Aim 2 of the Learning & Teaching Strategy (2013/14 – 2017/18) clearly articulates how we should realise our goal

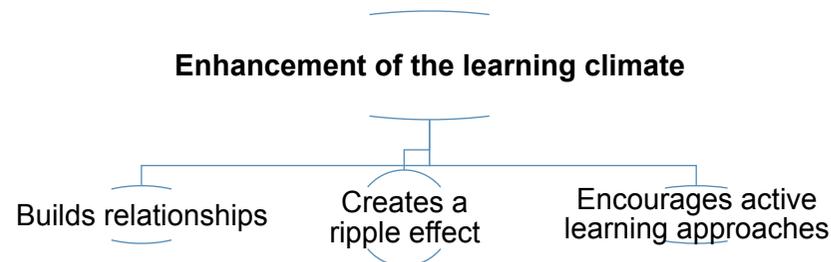
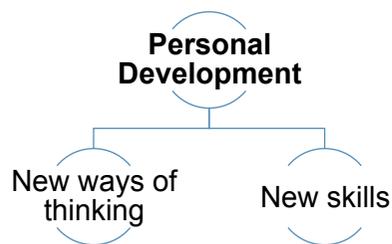
To provide transformative, high quality, learning experiences through the promotion of meaningful staff student partnerships that engender a shared responsibility.

Aim

This guide is aimed at all staff and students and articulates the benefits of adopting a philosophy of staff student partnership to student engagement. It is intended to inspire and enhance practice through practical recommendations for staff and students.

What is the impact of staff-student partnership (SSP) on engagement?

The benefits of SSP are very similar for both staff and students, and are outlined below under two main themes: personal development and enhancement of 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.



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 improved 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 discipline profession, which enhances students' readiness for employment.
Enhancement of the learning climate	
Builds Relationships	SSP breaks down barriers which can impede learning. For students, they get to know staff within and outside of the classroom which 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 allows guidance and feedback to be better targeted. It also gives staff on-going feedback on their teaching practice.
Creates a ripple effect	SSP benefits staff and student directly involved in initiatives or projects. However, 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-entr 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 active learning	SSP breaks down the 'them and us' situation and promotes active engagement. For 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'.

How do I get started or build on what I'm already doing?

For staff, **critically reflect** on your approach to supporting and enhancing the student experience. What opportunities are there for students to build relationships, take on active roles, exercise choice in tasks/assessments, learn collaboratively, practice their discipline, engage in research, work on curriculum enhancements and so on...

For students, **seek opportunities** to develop your skills, confidence and performance. This may mean that you have to step out of your comfort zone, and shift from a passive to an active role in your own studies.

Recommendations

Developing strong partnership learning communities which engage staff and students is key to embedding partnership as part of the culture and ethos of the institution (Healey et al, 2014). Here are some recommendations, to consider which can promote partnership.

Staff	Students
<p>Create a welcoming environment so that students coming to HE can easily make friends, find their way around and get ready to learn in a different way.</p> <p>What works?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group working to aid socialisation is critical at pre-entry and induction to promote belongingness. Information overload at this stage should not be the primary focus; • Introduce students to key staff that they will come into contact with that year so that relationships can be initiated; • Peer mentoring – students welcome the wisdom and support offered by higher-level students. Current students could be involved at open evenings, pre-arrival and induction activities; • Provide a tour of the campus, identifying key spaces such as classrooms, seminar rooms, library, Student Support and catering facilities. 	<p>Be open and flexible and remember that everyone is feeling the same at the start. Get involved and participate in activities offered.</p> <p>What works?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend all course induction and Week 0 activities; • Join in group activities and get to know other students and staff; • Seek guidance and support from your Studies Adviser, Module Tutor or higher-level students who have already been through this; • Familiarise yourself with Student Support on your campus. Advice and guidance is available on health and wellbeing, disability and medical conditions and student finance.
<p>Make all timetabled sessions interactive so that relationships are developed and learning is collaborative, interesting and worthwhile.</p> <p>What works?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt a friendly approachable and facilitative style – this is hugely valued by students and has a considerable impact on engagement; • Small group activities especially in large classes 	<p>Attend and participate in all timetabled sessions and get to know staff and other students.</p> <p>What works?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Come prepared to all sessions by reading module handbooks and learning resources. Participate in discussion and ask questions; • Contribute to group work activities as it is widely recognised that you learn more by

Staff	Students
<p>can promote a shift from passive to active learning and enthuse students to become involved;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider how digitally based learning resources can facilitate pre-reading and revision of fundamental concepts thereby freeing up time in-class for discussion and clarification; Provide clarity and direction of what is expected in terms of independent learning. 	<p>sharing and collaborating;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider your existing skill-set and avail of support provided to develop this. This may come from within your course, central departments or online; Use your unscheduled time to engage in independent learning. Each module will have a reading list with required and recommended resources.
<p>Provide opportunities for students to engage in activities beyond the classroom which can motivate students and help them to make connections in their learning.</p> <p>What works?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Industry-focused field trips which link theory to practice and promote collaboration between staff and students and amongst students; Co-curricular activities which link modules together and provide opportunities for students to work across year groups; Subject-based society which actively encourages debate and activities about the profession and is accessible to all students; Create roles for students, which allow them to work alongside staff in different ways. Examples include; acting as ambassadors at open evenings and induction activities, peer-mentoring, curriculum planning etc. 	<p>Remember that not all learning happens in the classroom. Your timetable only schedules contact time with your tutors but there are other opportunities to practise your discipline.</p> <p>What works?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avail of opportunities to participate in trips and discipline-related activities outside of normal class time; Suggest other activities in which you might wish to get involved; Attend SU events; join a club or your subject society – its never too late to do this, you can still join later in year 1 or year 2.
<p>Design authentic assessment and feedback tasks, which help students to test the application of their knowledge and understanding and to learn from constructive feedback.</p> <p>What works?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Authentic assessments, which are industry- and/or discipline-related and provide students with real-life skills in preparation for employment; Group-work activities that are well structured allow students to gain team-working skills and to learn from each other; Choice in assessment allows students to pick a topic of interest, which is highly motivational 	<p>Assessment and feedback tasks are not just hoops to be jumped through. They are opportunities to see how far you've come and to receive feedback on how to improve.</p> <p>What works?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make sufficient time to complete assessment tasks and submit on time; Be prepared to take on different roles within a group task and contribute as part of a team; Familiarise yourself with the assessment criteria, this will help you see where the goal posts are and should allow you to assess yourself before submission; Use formative feedback to self-correct, make

Staff	Students
<p>and prompts learners to take responsibility for their own learning;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessments, which are clear and unambiguous with assessment criteria made available in advance; • Formative feedback available to all students to help them self-correct and to learn from mistakes. Cumulative assessment tasks work well here. 	<p>an action plan for yourself in terms of what you are going to do to improve;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be prepared to give peers feedback, this will help you to judge your own work more adequately.

What are the challenges?

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. **Large class sizes** can also seem like a deterrent to staff-student partnerships but it is widely recognised that students learn more by sharing and collaborating. If you are thinking of adopting a student partnership ethos, then the advice generally is to **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.

Acknowledgements

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These guidelines are one of the outputs from research carried out during Ulster's involvement in this Change Programme (2012-2015) where the research involved:

- An exploration of the 'lived experience' of staff and students involved in partnership during the change Programme, through semi-structured interviews.
- Focus groups (17) with first-year students across seven discipline areas and focus groups with the staff involved in these course teams, using an Appreciative Inquiry methodology.
- A Belonging survey which identified changes over time in students' sense of belonging to their institution, their academic engagement and their self-confidence. Four surveys containing 16 questions rated on a Likert scale were administered to all first years in the seven discipline areas, the first of these in November 2013 (n=274), the second in April 2014 (n=230), the third in November 2014 (n=359) and the fourth in April 2015 to both first years (n=333) and second years (n=240). The data was compared with the findings in 12 other UK Universities (n=3718).

They are also informed by a 2014 HEA publication, Engagement through Partnership: Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching in Higher education. These guidelines focus specifically on student engagement through partnership in learning, teaching and assessment.

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