



## A meeting of minds: the impact of partnership working

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### **A meeting of minds: the impact of partnership working**

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In a higher education (HE) context where student numbers have expanded significantly and demographics are more diverse—engaging all students has become more problematic (Kahn, 2014). In addition, the construct of student engagement (SE) is in itself complex (Gibbs, 2016) and can be determined and practiced differently according to discipline, beliefs, traditions, and country (Bryson, 2014; Harrington, Sinfield & Burns, 2016; Kahu, 2013). Many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are now implementing a 'students as partners' (SaP) approach to SE to challenge a dominant 'student as consumer' (SaC) attitude which Scullion, Molesworth, and Nixon (2011) argue is an outcome of the marketisation of HE.

This workshop examined the influence of a SaP approach on student and staff participants and how this impacts on SE (see Curran, 2017 for full paper). The context for the research is limited to one institution that participated in a three-year What Works Change Programme (2013-2016), which set out to improve student retention and success across 13 institutions in the UK (Thomas et al., 2017). The data drawn upon here was collected during the Ulster University 'What Works project', which adopted a SaP ethos and involved a core team and seven discipline teams (representing 145 participants: 94 students and 51 staff). The findings of interviews carried out with students and staff (n=14), which aimed to capture rich descriptions of the lived experience of individuals (van Manen, 1990), revealed that there was a high level of consensus between staff and students in how they described their lived experiences and the impact that partnership working was having on them.

Two dominant themes were identified: 'personal development' and 'enhancement of the learning climate'. Within each theme, sub-themes were identified: for personal development the sub-themes were 'new ways of thinking' and 'new skills'; for enhancement of the learning climate the sub-themes were 'relationship-building', 'ripple effects' and 'active learning'. Under the theme of personal development, staff and students described how over the life of the project their beliefs about HE were changing. Through working together both students and staff appreciated better how HE was being experienced from the others' perspective. Staff gained insight into what it is like to be a student today, and students gained a better appreciation of how HE operates beyond the classroom. This in turn prompted changes in attitudes and caused both students and staff to challenge their existing approaches. Reflecting on the three dimensions of SE which include behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Trowler, 2010; Solomonides, 2013; Kahu, 2013), it became apparent that within this study the three dimensions were working together. Emotion was evident in the descriptions of lived experience, and both staff and students described how they were feeling engaged or motivated or more involved, which was changing their thinking. Under the second theme, enhancement of the learning climate, students and staff talked about the building of relationships and how a SaP approach was beneficial in bringing staff and students together. Getting to know each other was breaking down real or perceived barriers and this was having a positive effect on learning in the classroom.

An output from this study: Staff and Student Guide to Engagement through Partnership (Curran, 2016) was available for participants to discuss in an interactive session; its potential use as a tool to encourage others to buy-in to partnership working was explored (see Figure 1 for extract). Participants identified some of the suggested activities such as: student societies, the use of higher-level students to induct first-years, and co-curricular activities as being interventions that could easily

be introduced or enhanced within their own contexts. Consideration was also given to how we might support the scaling up of a SaP approach. Recognizing the three inter-related dimensions of SE may allow institutions to better support staff and students to develop relational partnerships, which in turn may enhance and develop student engagement.

Figure 1: Extract from Staff and Student Guide to Engagement through Partnership (Curran, 2016)

**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 <b>welcoming environment</b> 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><b>What works?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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;</li> <li>• Introduce students to key staff that they will come into contact with that year so that relationships can be initiated;</li> <li>• Peer mentoring – students welcome the wisdom and support offered by higher-level</li> </ul>	<p>Be <b>open and flexible</b> and remember that everyone is feeling the same at the start. Get involved and participate in activities offered.</p> <p><b>What works?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend all course induction and Week 0 activities;</li> <li>• Join in group activities and get to know other students and staff;</li> <li>• Seek guidance and support from your Studies Adviser, Module Tutor or higher-level students who have already been through this;</li> <li>• Familiarise yourself with Student Support on your campus. Advice and guidance is available</li> </ul>

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