

## Reflections on 15 years of working in student partnerships: Successes, challenges and the future possibilities

Julie Blackwell Young, Abertay University

Luke Millard, Abertay University

### ABSTRACT

Based on the reflections of the authors' experiences of working in the 'students as partners' space for the past 15 years, this paper will weave together Julie and Luke's reflections on those experiences with commentary from some of the students who have been involved, and key ideas from the literature. The authors have worked in this area within institutions and across the sector, and have separately been involved in a number of students as partners projects, from students co-creating; students as research partners; students as facilitators of other students' learning; students as evaluators; and students as leaders. Within this work, both have had different roles and responsibilities and worked in different institutions. Their involvement in this area has now converged at Abertay University, bringing together these experiences with an increased institutional emphasis on co-working with students within the university environment. Over those 15 years, this work has been stimulating and invigorating both for the staff and students involved, however, there have often been challenges, particularly when working against the 'usual' ways of institutional working and in supporting the students involved, as well as doubts and scepticism from some quarters. Finally, the evolution of this work in the future, both from an institutional and sector perspective, will be considered.

**Keywords:** student partnership, reflection, future directions, student experience

### Introduction and context

"a transformative concept for me" (student)

"sense of community" (staff)

"changed my life completely" (student)

These comments are the voices of students and staff engaged in student partnership work. This article is a broader reflection on the experiences of the authors in working in student partnership and our thoughts on where student engagement and partnership work could be heading in the future. Interspersed with our own reflections are the developmental thoughts of some of the students who engaged in projects at our various

institutions. Some of these student reflections are contemporaneous from when they were taking part but, somewhat uniquely we think, we have also approached some of those students, who took part in those earlier days, for their reflections. We asked those former students about their recollections, why they had decided to take part in a student partnership project, what they got out of it at the time and also the impact it may have had (or not) on their university experience; and also since. We attempt to consider our own experiences and those of the students in relation to the literature and also then go on to think about what the future of student partnership might look like within the sector.

In terms of data collection, we the authors, Julie and Luke, reflectively discussed our experiences and practices in working with students as partners. We also posed written questions to each other. We used existing published reflections from students which had been gathered from project outputs, and contributions to journal articles, case studies, book chapters and videos created during their time as students as partners or just after. In terms of the former students we have re-contacted, some provided written reflections and others took part in a recorded conversation. Full ethical approval was previously obtained. All student names have been changed.

The students as partners projects we reflect on took place in two English universities and one Scottish university over the time period from 2008-2023. All projects were internally funded by the institutions. Data was created whilst the projects discussed in the rest of this paper were running. In one English institution, the data creation primarily took place between 2008 and 2014; at another English institution this was between 2011 and 2013. The students at the Scottish institution were taking part in projects around 2014-2016. The authors' reflections were gathered in 2023 as were the reflections of students formerly involved in projects.

Luke is the more experienced hand with involvement in student partnership work since 2008 and Julie is the incomer who only came into this scene in 2011. Our paths first crossed in 2012 when Luke was co-facilitating the Higher Education Academy Students as Partners Change Academy and Julie was co-leading a team from an institution taking part. Our institutions were very different. Julie was in a small university college whereas Luke was in a large city-centre-based university with multiple campuses. We now work together within the Abertay Learning Enhancement Academy and both maintain that focus on enhancing the student experience from the perspective that this is best done working in partnership with students.

### Reflections on our experiences

Back in 2008, the student partnership landscape was very different. A lot of the key literature had not yet been written and student partnership was something whispered in corners rather than being out there and announced from institutional strategies and national priorities. That is not to say there was nothing going on. Many universities were starting to engage students in quality assurance processes and on university committees. The University of Exeter launched 'Students as agents of change in learning and teaching' in 2008-2009 (BIS, 2009) and there was work being led by Bovill (Bovill et al., 2008) as part of the Scottish Enhancement Themes 'First Year Experience' Theme which ran from 2006-2008 (Mayes, 2009) which recommended students should be partners within curriculum design and gave some case studies where this was taking place. There were other pockets where people were working to co-create with students or bring students into roles where they went beyond a consultative approach to working with students in finding solutions, testing ideas and implementing change. However, this was not a widespread phenomenon within the UK higher education scene.

So what led us on our student partnership journey? In our discussions, it was clear that there were very different institutional drivers for the work that both Luke and Julie helped steer. Luke's was a whole institutional piece centered around disappointing National Student Survey (NSS) results, especially around

the sense of community within the university. There were some real challenges: a multi-campus university, large numbers of students commuting to campus, and with complicated lives. It might have been easy to think about hygiene aspects such as facilities (Herzberg et al., 1959) but the Director of Learning and Teaching at the time argued that something more fundamental was needed. As Luke says, the conversation started to turn to:

... can we start to think about, how can we change the experience of a student at university to be more than just coming to a lecture? To be more around wider engagement with peers, staff and campus that generates a sense of community.

The Director of Learning and Teaching was the originator of the students as partners work and often commented that it was only made possible through the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) funding which had been secured from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). This project was originally looking at developing health care partnerships, but like many things in this space, developed into something else that had wider institutional impact. The work went through a process of evolution, which again, Luke feels was a key aspect of the work becoming embedded and sustained within the institution. Starting from individual projects within individual disciplines, the focus shifted to big institutional change projects and a student employability system on campus. At one point around 1,000 students were employed on campus in all areas of the university and at its peak, 75 learning and teaching projects were running in a year. As we pick up later, this leads to improvements in services as the service user is so embedded in making the service work, as well as students better understanding the university as a whole entity, not just their disciplinary studies. This helps inculcate a sense of belonging which we know is vitally important to ensuring student success (Thomas, 2012; Nygaard et al., 2013; Cook-Sather et al., 2014)

Julie's starting point was applying for internal, institutional project funding which was offered along with an institutional Fellowship in Academic Practice. The call was for 'Student participation in curriculum design, review and enhancement' and only one project would be funded so this was starting out small from an institutional perspective. Julie's project received funding to create a community of practice with staff and students working collaboratively to develop a co-curricular research methods resource, created by psychology students for psychology students. Whilst discipline-specific and small-scale, the project was designed to also be a proof of concept for students as partners work and the Fellowship aspect included a remit to disseminate and support this wider initiative across the institution. The initial project was successful with students creating resources such as YouTube videos on how to do statistical tests, a decision tree for choosing tests, and a beginner's guide to qualitative methodologies. Looking back, Julie says:

... it was absolutely incredible what the students were creating. One student taught themselves some basic coding in order to make their vision of a useful resource into a reality. Others taught themselves areas of research methods that they hadn't encountered before and they picked up a lot of digital skills. I was blown away by their ideas, their inventiveness, and their sheer commitment to doing something that would be helpful to others.

This realisation of the levels of professionalism and creativity by our students when they are given the opportunity to develop and demonstrate these skills and attributes is echoed in much of the students as partners literature (see for example, Rowe et al, 2013; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill, 2021). Despite some of the challenges around turning control around to students, as will be discussed later, our experiences are that any fears are unjustified and the vast majority of students excel in this work.

Much of the literature around students as partners is centred specifically in the learning and teaching sphere. For example, students co-creating curricula, working as part of teams to develop or redevelop programmes, or in the case of Julie's work, developing co-curricular resources to support student learning. However, Luke's institution went far beyond this to build student partnership into every facet of university

life. An outcome of this was that students really understood the underpinnings of the institution and in turn, could explain these to other students and act as advocates for the wider university. Luke writes about this in Millard (2020) and other, international literature also attests to this positive outcome from engaging in partnership work (Peseta et al., 2020). We return to this idea of the need for student partnership to move beyond the curriculum and into the whole sphere of the university towards the end of this paper, when thinking about the future of student partnership and engagement work within the sector.

This evolution of bringing partnership working into a wider institutional sphere was also part of a later 'students as partners' initiative Julie was involved in where students were asked to submit proposals for student-led projects that would have a wider university benefit. This was still project-based so still not quite getting to the systemic ideas we discuss when thinking about the future, but an important step nevertheless in evolving institutional practice. In particular, a key aspect was that this call was co-facilitated with the Students' Association. The response was phenomenal with more submissions than for the call for a staff-led project bid that went out at the same time, which appears to be unique for the sector (Smith & Axson, 2023). This unfortunately meant that not all projects were able to be funded even though there were many great ideas. The funding for these student-led projects came from funds received by the institution through the Scottish Enhancement Themes, a core principle of the Enhancement Themes work nationally being the partnership with students, therefore this demonstrated both institutional and sector alignment.

A key aspect of the criteria for choosing projects is that the impact must be beyond the student team who initiate the project to ensure a wider applicability of the work. The projects included: online resources for students transitioning to university based on student feedback on what would have been useful; a platform for students to showcase their portfolios and gain feedback from peers; an empirical study into the impact of room layouts on student engagement; a web application to gather student feedback and an evaluation of an institution-wide feedback initiative. For Julie, this was an energising experience and the Students' Association described taking part as "exciting" and an opportunity to work with students to "develop their own leadership potential at the same time as earning some money". In the end we had 9 students all leading on work that was a priority to them that would be impactful for other students.

The element of giving something to the wider student and university community came across strongly in discussions with the project teams, for example one of the students said that they had wanted to engage in their project to give the university "some long term data to make some implementations and change policy". Students also indicated that they felt the responsibility from leading on work on behalf of the wider student body but also found it rewarding. Students also talked about developing key transferable skills from "programming and [online] community management"; "invaluable" independent research skills; and industry relevant skills. As mentioned earlier, these aspects of skills development and employability are also echoed in much of the literature (see Stevens, 2022 and Peart et al., 2023 for an overview).

When asked about their experience, a number of participants mentioned the importance of the funding, for example "if I didn't have this funding, I'll be able to invest a little bit of time, but I would feel my time wasn't being valued" and feeling that this allowed them to be more professional about their projects. This exemplifies one of the key philosophies of the work that we both engage in and we will discuss those key philosophies further now.

### Key philosophies

A key philosophy behind both our approaches has been paying students for the time they spend in partnership working. Julie says "Their [the students'] time is valuable and we're asking them to do something that's over and above ... But actually, if I'm being paid for this, then they should be being paid for this as well".

Luke reflects that early on, this was a contentious issue, with some institutions that were engaging in students as partners work actively arguing against paying students because the work had a benefit to the students in and of itself, both in terms of developing their learning experience and giving them transferable skills. Luke recalls arguing:

... we need to put value on this because it shows the students that we value it. In addition, if we don't pay students, we will only get those students engaging who are rich enough to not need to work. At a widening participation university with a diverse student population, you need your developments to reflect the whole student population.

In Julie's project, one of the drivers for paying students was to bring in that wider group of students, particularly those who would not normally be engaged in this kind of activity. Similar to Luke's institution, the students were predominantly commuter students and from a widening participation background, often with caring and work responsibilities outside of study. Therefore, not paying automatically restricts access to partnership work for a number of students and we both felt in our respective contexts that this was unfair and didn't align with our core values. Luke also suggests that paying students led to institutional shifts in mindset, in particular the viewing of students as colleagues and a wider embedding of student partnership working across the whole university and not just in the teaching and learning space. We argue that these key ideas of equity and embedding are fundamental in ensuring that students as partners work moves from being potential pet projects to something with legacy. We will pick up on this later.

Without realising it, back in 2011 Julie was embodying the principles of respect, reciprocity and responsibility that Cook-Sather et al. (2014) indicate are key requirements for working with students as partners. The starting point for the project was to work with the students in discussing the issue and how best to approach it. It was already decided in Julie's funding application that a place on the virtual learning environment (VLE) would be created for hosting the co-curricular resources and that in fact, co-curricular resources were the way to go, but even this idea was discussed with the student group once created. The students themselves came up with ideas for getting feedback from the wider student population as well as wanting to create resources that they would find useful as students.

All students were given the opportunity to put themselves forward to take part and we didn't just have students who were already strong at research methods putting themselves forward. We had a mix of genders, ethnicities, ages and backgrounds. The group included those who enjoyed research methods and those who struggled with statistics and felt this would be a way of helping themselves to learn statistics as well as helping their peers and future students. Again, this approach fed back into that idea of wanting to give to the wider community, not just to enhance their own skills and employability. Julie feels that this diversity of students was instrumental in getting wider student interest in the project and to show the institution that we could reach out beyond the 'usual suspects' to involve a wide variety of students. This is made possible when partnership working is undertaken with the ethos of making it easier for all students to engage, giving students responsibility for the work and showing value for their contribution. A key aspect to this is establishing positive relationships between the staff and students and inculcating an atmosphere of trust amongst all participants.

The importance of this is shown by the students from across the numerous projects with which we have been involved, as many indicated a key outcome for them was stronger working relationships with staff and breaking down perceived (and actual) power dynamics. Stewart said "... perhaps the most rewarding aspect of this partnership was the strong working relationship I was able to establish with staff members. These relationships were built on mutual trust, respect, and collaboration. Thom felt that he had come "... into higher education with a preconception of university as a place with a very obvious power dynamic between staff and student. Working on [partnership project] completely blew this perception out of the water"; while Janice said "... it was quite nice just sort of forming some of those relationships as well [with you]."

This is echoed in other partnership literature (e.g. Nygaard et al., 2013; Mercer-Mapstone, et al. 2017; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill, 2021) but uniquely about these particular quotations is that they come from the students who took part in projects between 6 and 15 years ago. Therefore, a long-lasting impression from these experiences has been that sense of relationship which indicates just how important it is.

For both Luke and Julie, that initial work has had some legacy. The work Luke was involved with in 2008, led to a Times Higher Education Award in 2010 for Outstanding Support for Students as well as a substantial increase in National Student Survey (NSS) learning community scores. The key components of the work that Julie initiated are still in existence in that the organisation and current staff say they can trace back its influence on their current practice. However, despite both authors being involved in successful projects with some continued legacy, this success has not always been easily translated into new initiatives in new circumstances.

#### Reflections on some of the challenges we have faced

An attempt to expand Julie's initial project into other areas of the university was not as successful as the original project. Reflecting back, the areas who came on board did not seem to quite understand some of the underpinning ideas behind the original project. Some of the staff were much more directive in terms of asking students to do tasks but without handing ownership of the project and its outputs to the students. Similarly, following the success of the student-led projects mentioned earlier, there was an energy around student partnership work, however, we were unable to capitalise on this opportunity. A different model of funding was introduced the following year where we attempted to have a pool of students who were interested in taking part in enhancement work and staff and students could submit project ideas to effectively bid for student time from the pool. This change of model led to a distinct fall in the number of project bids submitted which was disappointing and showed that a change to a successful formula could sound the death knell on an idea. On reflection, this was because the major strength of the previous model, which placed students firmly in control was lacking and the clear messaging of how students could make an impact on the university through being funded was not evident. Reflecting on the initial projects as well, this sense of student control and ownership was missing. What is not so clear is whether Julie was unable to fully explain this underlying principle and so it was not implemented in the newer work or whether those taking over the ideas did not think it was as important as it appears to be. Either way, it does seem to be fundamentally important for the success of this kind of work and so it needs to be fully understood by all taking part, especially staff who may find it difficult to relinquish this level of control.

Linked to this is finding some staff resistance in all the work we have engaged in. One student who took part in students as partners work around 6 years ago mentioned that "not all members of staff initially embraced the idea of students being treated as equals" (Stewart). This is a well-established finding in the historic literature (see Stevens, 2022 for a useful overview of this as well as Bovill et al., 2016 for some ideas on how this can be overcome). However, this still seems to be evident in more recent student partnership literature, where we still see scepticism from colleagues emerging (Thomas & Sorbara, 2023). We had really hoped that the sector had moved on from this, especially when that partnership is about co-creating the curriculum, so a part of partnership working which is well established. Similar objections are voiced in Thomas and Sobara around control and content, and replicate our own experiences of being taught without reflection on how they could be made better. As a sector, we have to consider how we can move on from this way of thinking.

There is also a challenge in the dual role of students being paid as colleagues. Discussions have to be had around trust, levels of responsibility, appropriate induction and how students employed by universities are viewed by their colleagues. We have both experienced questions being raised about whether students can be expected to do certain tasks, access certain systems and be given the freedom to do the job in their own

way. When a student colleague's activity does not go well, we have found a tendency for this to be blamed on the fact that it was a student doing the work, rather than the manager reflecting on induction processes or instructions not being as good as they could have been. Again, the mindset behind why this work is taking place and the aspects that make it a success need to be clear to all.

Wholeheartedly importing practice that works in one institution into another has also not been successful for us. This may seem self-evident in hindsight but when something has worked really well in one institution and seems to make sense in terms of how it works, then doing the same in the new institution seems logical. This is where understanding where the current institution is in terms of its attitudes, previous experience and institutional culture (Bovill, et al 2016; Mercer-Mapstone, et al., 2017; Smith & Axson, 2023) is of central importance. Therefore, we have both had to go back to our key philosophies and work out what those mean in the contexts of our evolving initiatives and institutions. For example, a formal board structure as a starting point may not translate into an institution where the groundwork in terms of building trust between staff, students and their representatives needs to be done first.

However, even when partnership working is established and succeeding, this does not always mean the visibility of student partnership work is as evident as we would have liked. We have encountered discussions with key figures in various institutions who have been unaware of previous partnership work or even existing partnership work. At times, it has been assumed that because the work was not visible it isn't happening. This makes continuing to raise the awareness of partnership work vitally important. It can be easy for a new initiative to get lots of space at committee meetings, internal conferences, newsletters etc., however, as it becomes less 'shiny' and other new initiatives come along, it can become lost and sometimes forgotten. Therefore, we urge that work in this area needs to be consistently championed until it becomes part of the mindset of the institution. To enable this, partnership working needs to also be codified in strategies, policies and guidance rather than institutional memory being the vector for continued implementation.

However, despite these challenges, we still fundamentally believe in the opportunities provided to institutions, staff and students in taking part in this kind of activity. To illustrate one facet of this, we have been collecting data from former students about the legacy of taking part in student partnership work whilst at university.

#### Impact on the students, even years later

When hearing from former students who took part in students as partners projects, it becomes clear that this was an important part of their university experience, with lasting impact. All the students took part in partnership projects between six and 15 years ago and all have since graduated and gained employment. Interestingly, all now work in the higher education sector in a variety of roles though several have worked in other industries before their current role in higher education. More work on the experience of those former students who took part in students as partners projects during their time at university is being undertaken by the current authors, and we discuss here some of the data we have collected so far.

Former students mention a number of transferable and professional skills they developed during their partnership working, many of which are directly related to the roles they now hold: "I think it's also safe to say that 10 years down the line, the work was a catalyst for me entering into the field I work in now" (Thom). Stewart noted: "My involvement in these initiatives not only broadened my understanding of higher education but also ignited a passion for working within higher education". These sentiments are echoed by Beth: "My project was to create an interactive online resource that helps students ... Now, in my current role, I create online learning materials ... for students and professionals" and Janice: "It's [the skills developed in the student partnership project] all just supported all the different job roles I've had". All four

are undertaking tasks in their current employment directly related to the work that they were doing in the students as partners work.

Three of the four are directly taking part in work, projects or initiatives which are about amplifying the student voice, working with students as colleagues or setting up students as partners initiatives in their own institutions. All directly link the benefits they saw through their work as a student in this area to why they champion this in their own organisations now. The impact of the work undertaken by these students has often lasted beyond the immediate projects in which they were involved. Janice created videos on research methods that were held on YouTube. The current metrics for these videos shows that one has had 30,000 views, another 16,000 views with comments from viewers such as “Thank you so much! This has really helped me!” and “Thank you! Saved my life!”. The resources created by Beth inspired other such work across the university in terms of transition materials and she has come back to the university as an alumni to talk about her experiences and inspire the next generation of students to get the most out of their university experience.

Research methods skills are a key skill set former students mention developing through their partnership projects that have continued to prove useful to them in employment. A number also mention developing confidence through the work itself being beneficial, and one in particular mentioned the experience of presenting at academic conferences as an expert in her field, noting her previous partnership experiences as giving her the confidence to exert her expertise in the workplace with more senior colleagues. Communication skills, teamworking, and leadership skills are also key elements identified by these former students as important attributes that they developed through the partnership programmes that have directly led them to the kind of work they do today. Finally, former students identified that the partnership work gave them very concrete examples of working in a professional context that they could use when securing employment following university. As noted previously, this supports the literature which identifies key employability skills being developed during students as partners work, whilst also demonstrating the longevity of such experience post university.

Given the sustained impact of taking part in students as partners work and as practitioners in this area, it has been heartening to see the continued increase in prominence of students as partners since those early days e.g. the National Union of Students (NUS) Manifesto, Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Quality Code, the embedding of sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland) in the Scottish landscape, and the embedded nature of students as partners in the Scottish Enhancement Themes work, plus the use of Student Partnership Agreements which is becoming embedded in the culture of higher education in Scotland. In many areas of practice there is an expectation of student involvement, although it can be debated at what point on the models of student engagement these take place. As noted by various writers and recently by Smith and Axson (2023), there is always the risk that activity that is chosen can be done in a tokenistic and non-inclusive way, which, we argue, can perpetuate disadvantage. However, looking across work within the sector there is still more of a focus on small projects. Many papers mention the idea of partnership being a process (Healey et al., 2014) or a mindset or way of thinking. This does not yet seem to be firmly embedded within wider institutional processes and ideas. Therefore, we have tried to conceptualise what students as partners might look like in the future.

#### **A potential future for student engagement**

Bovill’s (2015) insightful adaptation of Arnstein’s (2007) ladder of citizen participation, which created a representation of student engagement through a ladder image, has been a source of inspiration and discomfort for the authors. Like all pieces of writing it reflected a point in time. At that point in time, there was more of a focus on the achievable and therefore, student engagement that could deliver local change.



The ladder that Bovill (2015) detailed was curriculum focused and transferred student participation from a dictated curriculum to a collaborative curriculum. In essence, this ladder saw a transition from tutor to student control. Perhaps, now that we are nearly 10 years on from Bovill's ladder we need to consider grander ambitions if we wish to make student engagement live up to its potential. For student engagement to reach its full potential it needs to move beyond the curriculum to the processes and infrastructure of the institution.

Rachel Wenstone, as Vice President of the NUS, wrote a foreword for the NUS document 'A Manifesto for Partnership' (2013). The manifesto sought to identify and challenge how student organisations and universities might work together to improve the student experience by embracing the new concept of 'students as partners'. In her foreword, Rachel challenged the sector to make the most of this opportunity.

Student engagement is a great concept but it needs to be deployed to radical ends. Students as partners is not just a nice-to-have, I believe it has the potential to help bring about social and educational transformation.

This ambition is now written into policies amongst the majority of UK universities and elsewhere. However, it could be said that much of this is likely to be tokenistic rather than impactful, where, as Bovill identified, student participation may be claimed but the university is really in control. That level of control is consoling for normally risk averse institutions like universities. However, effective and real partnership as identified by Bovill and Wenstone needs to impact upon the very fabric of the institution.

The UK QAA (2018) in its guidance to universities states that it expects to see:

meaningful participation of students in quality assurance and enhancement processes, which results in the improvement of their educational experience as well as benefiting the wider student body, institution and sector. For student engagement to contribute effectively to quality assurance and enhancement processes, it needs to capture the voices of all students, irrespective of location, mode of delivery, level of study, or discipline.

Assurance and enhancement processes may in many institutions stretch beyond the curriculum, but it could be argued that there is always an option to meet the baseline requirement rather than to genuinely embrace the concept.

Nygaard et al. (2013) contains multiple case studies that highlight the local change impact of partnership projects in disciplines within Birmingham City University (BCU). However, within it, the authors cite the grander ambition for institutional impact through the creation of student engagement as 'a state of mind'. At that time, BCU led the sector through its student academic partners approach (Freeman et al., 2014) and saw institutional mission and values being significantly influenced. In all aspects of work from curriculum design to policies on employment, the student perspective was considered and became part of institutional processes. As with all things, time has impacted this approach and the leaders of that work have moved on, resulting in the organisational potential for that change and impact being lost. However, it is pleasing to note that in some instances within that university, the lessons and beliefs have merely transferred to others willing to pick up the challenge.

For the authors of this article, the future of student engagement has to be institutionally focused. It cannot be an add-on and has to be seen as a key theme of institutional mission that is wrapped into institutional processes. The time for a few nice, but isolated, student co-creation projects has passed and the collective integration of student voice through quality assurance and enhancement process has to be a minimum ambition for university leaders. We believe that this is what the QAA guidance seeks to enshrine.

However, if we are to move beyond the QAA baseline we need to recognise that even those requirements are but a step on the journey. Millard (2020) wrote of the benefits of creating a new forum for engagement through students as colleagues. His research identified the job skills that students developed by working as employees within universities and hinted at the improvement of student facing services as a result. This approach was founded upon the inspirational work of Northwest Missouri State University, USA, which was cited in Sullivan (2008), a HEFCE report. Northwest Missouri sees around 20% of its student population employed on campus across all services from police dispatch to Presidential office. As a potential for student engagement, seeing student faces in all university services and offices could offer real insights for the institution and inspiration for the student body through role models.

This type of institutional approach and a focus on underpinning concepts was identified by Healey et al. (2014) who spoke of the importance of process and a way of working.

... partnership is understood as a relationship in which all involved are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement. Partnership is essentially a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself.

The phrases of 'a state of mind' or 'way of doing things' indicate a level of ambition in which we normalise student engagement and just make it something that is inherent to the way a university operates.

Within such an approach it becomes clear that students are key to institutional operations and institutional mission. McMillan and Chavis (1986) spoke of students developing a sense of mattering. Within such an interrelated system it is clear that students matter as the service could not operate without them. As we discuss earlier, the blurring of status between student and student colleague may be testing in such circumstances, but with individual and institutional commitment it can be achieved. Lizzio (2006) spoke of:

Successful students need to know the value of learning 'how things are done' and what is important or valued in new culture. A student's sense of cultural competence depends on their appreciation of the core values and ethical principles of the university and how these will inform their approaches to study and working relationships with fellow students (and staff).

We argue that the importance of the enhancement that is created as students become part of the institutional fabric, their understanding of the university culture and the lengths that the institution goes to, to support student development within and outside programmes, is multiplied as these student colleagues become champions for the institution; and a voice for understanding when the occasional university procedural mishap causes issues for students.

NUS (2013) in a section on institutional change states that:

Partnership means students and staff, at all levels, working together to achieve agreed goals. We have to move beyond defining a good relationship between an institution and a students' union as students' union officers and senior management working together. This will mean enabling academic staff, as well as students, to be part of the conversation on determining how partnership will work.

Belatedly, in 2023, we are now starting to address this challenge. Some universities and student organisations are considering moving beyond the static representation culture of termly meetings, Boards of Studies etc., to something much more organic and conversational. Perhaps it has been helped by the embracing of technology through the pandemic and advances in student voice platforms, but what we are now seeing in some minds is a move towards an approach where conversation is king. Where the corridor

collision and subsequent discussion becomes the driver for feedback and change; where the post workshop or lab conversation between students and staff identifies the challenging issues and prevents an issue escalating into a drama at the next formulaic standard meeting. This might make things a little messy, with a few less minutes being taken for quality reassurance, but surely that small risk is worthwhile to make the partners, students and staff, both listen and engage with that conversation in a dynamic way.

As Bovill (2015) suggested, there are many rungs on a ladder, and therefore it is likely that universities, student organisations, staff and students are at different points on that ladder. In reality, we need to embrace those differences and just be grateful that we are all engaged in that process. Being at different points in our student engagement journeys is fine and we need to support and encourage those who are taking those first steps and encountering their first institutional obstacles, whilst celebrating with those who are higher up the ladder and aspiring to climb further.

The essence of partnership is collaboration and therefore we could argue that placing students in control, the top rung of the Bovill ladder, is too extreme. Certainly, we would encourage students to take control of their learning journey and to some extent they already do that through selecting their university and programme and perhaps options within that programme. Some programmes may allow students to choose assessment type, while others offer students to design their own skills development through microcredentials (Millard et al., 2023). However, there still remains that element of university systems controlling the process.

The primary reason for a partnership approach, and why universities exist, has to be focused upon student success and how we enable students to transform their lives through skills development and academic endeavour. Student engagement is a good idea because it seeks to enable all students to succeed through the provision of feedback that informs the quality enhancement of institutional services and programmes of study. Through that collaborative development, programmes become better designed and supported and we are better able to address the individual needs of the diverse student groups that we now encounter.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stated that “the greatest impact (on success) appears to stem from students’ total level of campus engagement, particularly when academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular involvements are mutually reinforcing” (p.647). Whether you see students as partners or customers, or somewhere in between, it would be pretty odd for any business to ignore its main client base. If we integrate students into the fabric of our institutions and processes then we enhance the likelihood that they will be successful as individuals and as part of a thriving, self-supporting student community.

Meaningful integration of students into the staffing, processes and decision making of a university, impacts directly upon the culture and the norms of that institution. That has to be the ambition as it moves beyond the ‘state of mind’ mentioned as a goal at BCU to a situation that does not require active thought as it is just part of the way the university operates and delivers the student experience.

Ross and Neary (2019) wrote of a desire to create a co-operative university in the UK: “... an enterprise run and managed democratically by its members, in this case students, academics and administrators, for their benefit and the benefit of society as a whole, as a community of co-operators”. Mondragon University in Spain is cited as an existing example of such an approach and perhaps this is the next step in student engagement, to embrace that top step of a student engagement ladder and create a system of these universities across the world, where students as citizens are co-leaders and collaborators in the design and operation of the entirety of their experience.

As a sector, we know all the potential positives to come out of a fully engaged student and staff community. Now we have to rise up to the challenge to fully embrace a changed mindset and systemically embed student engagement and partnership into our organisations.

### Biographies

*Julie Blackwell Young* is Head of Teaching Quality and Learning Enhancement in the Abertay Learning Enhancement (AbLE) Academy. She has worked at a number of universities in England and Scotland and in her current post has cross-institutional strategic roles in teaching excellence, curriculum design and development and supporting pedagogic research. Julie can be contacted at: [j.blackwell-young@abertay.ac.uk](mailto:j.blackwell-young@abertay.ac.uk)

*Luke Millard* is Professor of Student Development, Dean of Teaching and Learning and Head of the AbLE Academy at Abertay University in Scotland. He is a Principal Fellow of the UK's Higher Education Academy which recognised his work on improving the student experience through collaborative working with staff and students in the areas of student engagement and co-creation, student employment, transitions and the first-year experience.

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