Creating a more supportive learning environment

A proposal for partnership in higher education in Northern Ireland

Working in partnership beyond student charters

nus usi
Northern Ireland

Contents

Students as partners

What is partnership?

For a number of years now higher education across the UK has been talking about student engagement and, more recently, partnership as a process of achieving sustainable and effective student engagement.

Partnership, in essence, positions students as equally responsible to academics and institutional managers for their own learning, for the quality of their learning environment and, through their student representative systems, for the development of policies and initiatives to enhance their learning community.

The origins of the idea of partnership is in a recognition that, in getting to grips with the types of knowledge and skills expected in higher education study, students are co-producers of knowledge and learning. Fundamentally their own efforts to develop a critical awareness of their subject are the key determinant of their overall success.

The partnership approach can be defined in contrast to more traditional approaches of canvassing students' views on issues that affect them or soliciting retrospective feedback on teaching quality. In these latter approaches students are essentially passive: they do not get to shape their own education; or to develop their understanding of their environment in order to influence it.[1]

For students to feel engaged in learning, and a sense of belonging in their institution, both recognised as crucial to student retention and success, they need to feel they have a personal stake in their learning and in the environment that makes it possible. Passive engagement can only have a limited impact.[2]

The partnership agenda also recognises that services are qualitatively enhanced when co-designed with their users. Sector agencies have long worked closely with student representative organisations, knowing that, by working in partnership with students, the outcomes for the sector and for students are more inclusive of all stakeholders, consensual and aligned to students' needs.

The Higher Education Academy has listed some prospective benefits of supporting students to be partners in learning and teaching:

- Increased student engagement with learning
- Development of knowledge and skills to support employability
- Greater sense of belonging and community
- Transformed staff experience and thinking about practice
- Deeper understanding of contributions to an academic community[3]

Partnership is not a product or end goal as much as it is a process of engagement. It is a way of doing things. All partnership can be considered student engagement but, as we can see in our own institutions, not all student engagement is partnership.

Partnership is a relationship where everyone involved is actively engaged in –

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[1] NUS, 2012. *A Manifesto for Partnership*.
[2] See Thomas, L., 2012. *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education in a time of change.* Higher Education Academy.

[3] HEA, 2014. *A framework for partnership in learning and teaching*.

and stands to benefit from – the process of learning and working together.

Partnership is much more than just 'listening' to the student voice and enabling students to have input into decisions that affect them. Partnership frames an environment where the priorities, content and direction of the learning experience are all set by students and staff together. The student should be involved from the outset of this journey.

Partnership also presents an opportunity to articulate to all students a broader picture of the learning experience, and introduce opportunities they may have to effect positive, beneficial and lasting change in the higher education experience.

Partnership in policy

Chapter B5 of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education sets out the expectations of higher education providers in relation to student engagement.

"Expectation: higher education providers take steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience".
Quality Code, Chapter B5

Indicators of good practice include clear communication to students of the opportunities available to be involved in shaping their learning environment, plans to monitor the success of student engagement efforts and effective representation structures, with training and support for those involved.

Work has also been undertaken by the English and Scottish sectors, building on student charters, to work towards supporting institutions and students' unions/associations to agree a joint approach to supporting students to be

partners in education and to work together to enhance the learning environment.

In Scotland, the sector has agreed to adopt partnership agreements in place of the student charter and produced guidance for institutions and students' associations on how to create a partnership agreement. In England, a review of student charters chaired by NUS and UUK and undertaken at the request of David Willetts, the Universities and Science Minister, found that they were considered valuable in creating mutual expectations within the higher education community but tended to have limited impact on student engagement, quality enhancement or the sense of belonging and connection in the wider learning community.

The report *Building a Framework for Partnership: student charters three years on* recommends that charters be both developed in partnership between student representative bodies and providers, that the expectations set out in them be more closely aligned to supporting student success, and that they should be underpinned by a programme of shared engagement and enhancement activity designed to achieve positive change within the institution.

Partnership in action

In each devolved nation of Great Britain a national organisation has been set up, with public funding, to support the development of student engagement practice.

The longest-standing of these is Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs), created by the Scottish Funding Council with the support of the further and higher education sector. Sparqs has produced a framework for student engagement setting out the key features of student engagement and indicators of effective practice.

Likewise NUS Wales hosts the Welsh Initiative for Student Engagement, supported by all the major sector bodies including the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Higher Education Academy and the Quality Assurance Agency. The WISE partnership statement underpins the sector-wide approach to partnership.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England has established the Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP). TSEP supports, develops and promotes student engagement activity in the higher education sector in England. Their work is underpinned by their statement on the principles of student engagement.

Through developing student engagement practices and supporting students to take an active role in developing their educational experience, and helping institutional staff to build a collaborative learning environment, the work of these organisations and initiatives has started shifting towards students as partners beyond simply adopting student charters or electing student reps.

"It is notable that for an institution to do well in engaging students it needs to work in partnership with the representative student body" QAA, 2012

Some examples of projects undertaken by these bodies include:

- Development of a framework to support college higher education providers to comply with Chapter B5 of the Quality code

- Training for student academic representatives to enable students to be full participants in process of course feedback, review, validation and enhancement.

- Support for students' unions to engage students in Higher Education Review.

- Gather and disseminate case studies and examples of good practice in the engagement of students in academic development, for example, as pedagogic researchers, as course peer reviewers, as interlocutors in lecturer professional development provision, through staff-student conferences on learning and teaching enhancement.

In Northern Ireland there has been no formal campus wide or national initiatives in our HE and FEs for student engagement or partnership work. In saying this there is lots of good work being carried out in our institutions and our students' unions that could be built on to develop more systemic partnership approaches.

NUS-USI believes that student charters do not go far enough in recognising or supporting key work that is being done. In basic terms they simply manage expectations rather than meaningfully involving staff and students in shaping education. This is the sector's opportunity through the DEL strategy to create a more supportive learning environment.

Examples of where partnership is working

There are many examples of how practices of partnership give a deeper meaning for students and staff thus creating a more supportive learning environment. Practices are happening in different locations; in the classroom, in the curriculum, in policy

making, in teaching practices and staff development.

Techniques and practices that position students as partners in the development and delivery of learning and teaching, encouraging academics to share power in determining the curriculum, and how students engage with it, as good reference points for recognising work that is already being done and highlights good practice across the sector.

For example, in 2011 the Partnership at the University of Leeds was formulated. The Partnership developed a set of aspirations around behaviours to become the key articulation of the campus community. The central themes put students at the centre of their learning and frame the student-staff relationship as transformational as opposed to transactional.

Aidan Grills, Chief Executive, Leeds University Union remarks on this work;

"The University of Leeds and Leeds University Union have worked directly in partnership for several years to develop a range of approaches and activities to support student engagement. Resourcing for this work comes both from the University, Union and at a local level within faculties. The impact of this work is seen in the general approach to teaching and learning across the institution, but also on a project basis either in targeted areas of the curriculum or to accelerate improvement".

Examples include joint working in developing the use of technology to enhance learning, improving module enrolment processes and improving learning resources at a strategic level such as the libraries or laboratory provision for students.

The full case study of The Leeds Partnership between Leeds University Union and Leeds University three years on can be found in the appendix.

Further education colleges like Blackburn College are leading the way in partnership work through their University centre. At Blackburn College they completed an overhaul of their student charter moving towards partnership agreements. Their student charter did seem logical but it was not what was felt was important. A consultation was launched with both students and staff allowing them to critique, comment and contribute to the new partnership agreement. This work not only fulfilled their ambition of a culture of co-creation, but also ensured the document moved from being tokenistic to something meaningful and useful.

Another example of partnership in practice can be found at University of Winchester. The philosophy behind student engagement at Winchester is to provide opportunities and conditions for both students and staff to work together to address the issues that concern them. This partnership approach is best represented by the Student Fellows Scheme which is co-managed and co-funded in partnership between the Academic Quality and Development department of the University and the Winchester Students Union.

This scheme empowers students and staff to identify and mutually address barriers to a satisfying student experience through research projects and the development of new initiatives and interventions. They have around 60 projects running which make changes to the running and organisation of various aspects of the university including module feedback, course structure, curriculum content and the social environment of the institutions. Some examples include:
- An online database to assist academic staff with internationalising their curriculum and assessments
- Development of 'physical learning' resources in Law

- Production of video module guides in English
- Student-led re-shaping of modular feedback in five different departments

Dr Stuart Sims, Research & Teaching Fellow (Student Engagement) Learning & Teaching Development at the University of Winchester shared his thoughts on the Student Fellows Scheme;

'Such changes are shared through institutional structures so that good practice in one area can be shared anywhere else it may be appropriate on campus leading to significant changes to improve conditions for students'.

Partnership in a local context

As stated in the department's 'Graduating to success' ensuring high quality teaching and learning, enhancing the employability prospects of students and maintaining a supportive learning environment are important factors which contribute to the overall quality of higher education.

The vision for higher education in Northern Ireland to 2020 is ambitious and challenging. The higher education sector not only needs to work in partnership with government, business, but most importantly, its students to meet the expectations of this Strategy. NUS-USI believes that the HE sector only meets the basic requirements of just having a learning agreement in place. Having a learning agreement or student charter is simply not enough. By the time the strategy comes into fruition Northern Ireland will be lagging even further behind when it comes to creating a more supportive learning environment.

Furthermore the impact of the proposed cut to DEL could lead to long term to

recovery from the infrastructural damage that any cut could have on universities or colleges. Any potential cut to their funding could have a very troubling impact on teaching and education quality for students. There is a need more than ever to ensure that institutions approach student engagement in a more dynamic way.

New technologies have made massive changes in our way of life, including in education. Universities and colleges are hierarchical in nature, whereas the global environment in which we operate is becoming much more fluid. The development of leadership capacity may be more important than hierarchy. Within the education field, the effects of technology touch almost every area of practice, including curricula, pedagogy, and assessment. What's more, it is changing the needs and expectations of learners. The traditional modes of teaching are not adequate to meet the needs of today's students in terms of the competencies and skills that they will need for the future. Students are more likely to take to social media to critique the work of a lecturer rather than engage in the structures that are available. Instead of introducing social media policies to 'police' student opinion there should be work done around working with students in the forums or locations that are accessible to them. There is even more need for students to be co-creators in their learning.

Our institutions and students' unions are leading in partnership work, however this work is often not recognised or fully supported. It is often inconsistent or in isolation. Student engagement of HE in FE is often underdevelopment. Lines of representation and accountability are often blurred. Students find themselves disconnected from their course institution.

We have identified 'pockets' of good practice existing within small groups/structures such as departments but it is often a challenge to translate this upwards to reflect the positive level of engagement at faculty or school level of the institution. These activities should feed into, and form sustainable, enduring and longstanding partnerships between students, staff and universities / colleges. The ultimate aim is to ensure partnership becomes a natural part of staff and students' experiences across Northern Ireland.

In both QUB (2009) and UU (2010) QAA institutional audits, they were both recognised as having strong democratic structures, with class rep systems and representation on boards and committees, etc. All these are excellent ways for students to feed into processes and policies. However, in both reports it was found that the effectiveness of course-level committees to be variable and part of the recommendation that the university addresses the variability in education practices at school level to ensure equity of treatment of all students and of the student experience.

At QUB it was advised to address the variability in education practices at school level to ensure equity of treatment of all students and of the student experience. Ulster University was advised to consider ways of extending active participation of students in the quality assurance of educational provision. Furthermore in Ulster University's analysis of minutes from staff-student consultative committees the audit team found that it effectively provided feedback but this was not necessarily followed through by action in course committees.

Our universities and colleges demonstrate commitment to including students in quality assurance processes is contained in

their student charter. Students' union officers, elected from students by students, play important roles in representing the views of students on committees and in discussions with senior staff. There are great examples of this across the HE sector. We have gathered some examples demonstrating partnership practice across our institutions.

Ulster University

In 2013 Ulster University published a Learning and Teaching Strategy for the next four years, with the following vision:

"Empowering learners to excel in professional life through transformative higher education".

Embedded within this strategy is a commitment to meaningful staff-student partnerships, articulated through strategic goal 2:

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

Partnerships have been developing in both curriculum development and improving the whole student experience.

In the Ulster University community development course team, based in Jordanstown, staff and student review the modules together. In doing this they highlight areas for improvement and plan together how these could be implemented.

Furthermore as part of the Ulster University computing science (Coleraine), final year students facilitate first year practical classes for their programming module. This provides practical peer support for their learning both within class time and outside of it.

With the ongoing development of the physical space across Ulster University, students were asked to envision the social learning spaces of the future. Following an open competition, the winners worked in partnership with the Director of the Centre of Higher Education, Research and Practice and Physical Resources to implement and launch their design. It is now a popular study space on the Jordanstown campus, and a team of student researchers are evaluating its effectiveness and developments for the future.

Demonstrating how working in partnership can also be linked to the further project objectives in regards to student retention, Ulster University has also introduced a student Retention and Success Project. This project encompasses seven courses across all six faculties and four campuses of Ulster University. It aims to identify positive actions which can be implemented throughout the course to improve student retention. The teams on each course consist of both staff and students who work in partnership to both identify the possible interventions, and evaluate their impact. When asking those involved why they invest in partnership, work the project Lead for this work stated;

*"In promoting and supporting staff student partnerships, I can categorically say that the benefits to both staff and students far outweigh any barriers that exist. Through my research carried out on staff and students' lived experience of partnerships, I have identified two major themes that demonstrate the transformational impact of partnership. The first theme relates to **changing mindsets** through new interactions, blurring of roles and developing relationships between staff and students which acts as a catalyst for*

changing practice which includes personal development and community development".

Another area of partnership work can be demonstrated in the development of the student representation system. The students' union (SU) liaises closely with faculties to continually improve student representation within Ulster University. In 2014-15 the SU have developed a partnership approach with the faculty of Social Sciences to embed a new student representative position and a more collaborative meeting format. This has been communicated to staff and students through the recent internal communication newsletter for Ulster, Inside Magazine[4].

Both the SU and the University find this work mutually beneficial. Colum Mackey (UUSU VP Academic and student affairs officer, Jordanstown) stated;

"Student experience forums – an exciting initiative – have been hugely beneficial in enhancing student partnerships and gaining high quality feedback. The success of the SEF has been a credit to the hard work of our inspirational reps and we look forward to introducing this type of forum to other faculties."

Professor Paul Carmichael, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences also further stated;

"The views of student representatives bring huge benefits to the Faculty and make a major contribution to shaping our work as educators."

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[4] http://www.ulster.ac.uk/insight/news/ulster-life-section/2014/11/listening-to-the-student-voice/

Queen's University Belfast

Queen's University Belfast (QUB) operates well established and strong structures that allow for students to participate in and active members in their learning communities. Alongside QUB Students' Union the institution actively promotes channels of student engagement. QUB hosts Student-Staff Consultative Committees (SSCCs) which are chaired by students. There are student reps on Academic Board. This year the students' union has focused on personal development of class and school reps offering a training programme designed to support develop key skills and knowledge to become effective. Hannah Niblock, QUBSU VP Education stated;

"Course reps are vital to the work of the university and the students' union in improving the quality of education here at Queen's University Belfast. Their hard work and effort makes the process truly collaborative and draws staff and students together to create a learning environment where students can achieve their potential. With the proper training and support course reps feel empowered to speak up on behalf of others and can come away from the experience feeling like they have made a difference to their peers and improved their own skills in the process".

There is student representation on all of the main academic and quality committees. Examples of student engagement in these structures include;

- Students participating in the module reviews within their schools. They are involved in the review committees and the education committees in their schools.

- Student reps also sit on the courses and regulations committee. This committee agrees study regulations.

- QUBSU also sits on the HE Review project group and therefore is involved in the QAA inspection process in addition to the preparation of the student written submission.

Student engagement in university governance benefits student representatives, and student representation on committees in the UK is generally felt to be effective e.g. involvement in the development of the student charter. However it is institutions such as QUB that could shift incrementally from being fixated on structure to promoting a culture and ethos which is more meaningful to our students. In other words, create communities of practice where teachers recognise they are also learners – learning from their students.

Stranmillis University College

At Stranmillis University College Belfast, the institution, Stranmillis students' union and NUS-USI have developed a student mentor scheme which runs successfully on an annual basis[5]. The student mentor role is one way of supporting new students as they join the university college community. All student mentors are volunteers. The university college and the students' union consider this scheme to be an excellent way of assisting students to make the most of the opportunities available to them. It also allows for the mentors to develop essential skills needed for future employment. Student teachers

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[5]
http://www.stran.ac.uk/informationabout/department s/learningstudentservices/functionsofeducationservice s/studentmentorscheme/

perceive mentors and mentoring to be of
key importance to their training[6].

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[6] Hobson and Malderere (2002),
http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/pre_pdf_files/02_28_08.pdf

Proposal

The vision of NUS-USI is that students and their students' unions are seen as partners in their student experience and are actively involved in the development, management and governance of their institution, its academic programmes and their own learning experience within HE and FE. It is timely that the sector goes beyond ticking the box of having a student charter or learning agreement in place. We, as a collective, need to define and re-think what student engagement should look like and how partnership practices can transform the student experience. With this NUS-USI proposes the following recommendations to DEL and the sector.

Recommendations

1. A joint statement produced by the sector on what the future of student engagement with a commitment to partnership work. A steering group should be established to ensure the effective and efficient use of funding (if available) and inform the direction of the partnership's work.

    The membership of the steering group includes representatives from HE sector organisations (including those within FE), DEL, practitioners and funders (if applicable).

2. DEL should produce a guidance document working with the sector on what 'good partnership practice' should look like. Working with HEA and QAA with this to ensure if works with the requirements of HEAR and the higher education review.

3. Co-ordinated activity to build capacity. For the sector to fully participate in the partnership agenda there needs to be co-ordinated activity across all institutions. There is a need for a project co-ordinator to support institutions in this work. Funding from the sector for this position and work would be necessary. The steering group should have overall sign off of the project's final aims and objectives. We envisage that the unit would operate in two distinct phases: a one year establishment phase and a subsequent phase with increased delivery.

The project would support and influence local and national student engagement activity. Work of the project may involve:

*   Acting as a central point for staff working in HE providers, students unions, guilds or other such organisations wishing to develop or improve their local student engagement activity
*   Supporting institutions to develop effective ways of engaging with all students, with a particular focus on hard-to-reach groups and students less likely to be engaged
*   Assisting its core funders in meeting their aims to promote student engagement
*   Assisting the wider HE sector and government in developing knowledge of issues related to student engagement and partnership at sector and national level
*   Be open to all institutions and students' unions.

Appendices

Appendix one:

Case study: The Leeds Partnership between Leeds University Union and Leeds University three years on

Kath Owen, LUU

Since its formulation in 2011, the Partnership at the University of Leeds has developed from a set of aspirations around behaviours to become the key articulation of the campus community. The central themes put the student as an active participant, at the centre of their learning and frame the student-staff relationship as transformational as opposed to transactional. From a set of shared expectations, the Partnership has now been embedded across campus.

Three years on, both university and union have worked together to ensure all across campus know about and have opportunity to take part in partnership activity. This is of particular importance in Schools, with local articulations encouraged and supported.

Partnership in action

The Partnership at Leeds has always been focused on people's lived experience, rather than confined to documents. However, good practice guidelines are provided to ensure that in a range of local settings, the same key points are returned to. These are presented as a toolkit which covers interpretation of the concepts, how local action can demonstrate the concepts and what to do if expectations aren't met.

New staff and students are informed of the Partnership through induction activities and ongoing communications such as the student/staff forum, offering timely reminders of the lived experience. Student representatives in each School, supported by LUU take a lead on voicing student ideas and concerns.

Local examples

It was identified in the Faculty of Arts that for undergraduate students, research seminars could often be intimidating, with the assumption of background knowledge and technical terms creating barriers for involvement. Students at all levels are expected to contribute to the research-intensive environment, so Arts colleagues were keen to address this. The 'Students as Scholars' scheme was devised to provide a structured and supported approach to seminars, with students volunteering to take part and being mentored by PhD researchers. Support included a structured template for note taking and a debrief after the seminar. The scheme has proved so successful that it has been rolled out from one department to all across the Faculty.

The Partnership expects that students will engage with all learning opportunities and staff to use technologies to assist with learning outside contact time. The Maths Support Service at Leeds exemplifies just that. It was identified that some students found the transition from school to university maths difficult but did not always feel comfortable asking tutors for help. The Maths Support Service offers drop-in sessions and online resources as an alternative addition to degree programme contact time. Student users of the service promote it to others and research students act as advisers to the service. This engagement, along with the commitment from staff to alternative learning technologies, makes for a truly Partnership approach.

Refreshing the Partnership

With both the university and student union planning and preparing for new strategic plans which commence in 2014, the next year will see a refreshed and reinvigorated framework for working together. The Partnership is stronger than ever at Leeds and will remain a key characteristic of the community of students and staff.

Case study: University Centre at Blackburn College Student Partnership Agreement

As part of an ever-growing effort to make an institution-wide cultural shift, this academic year the Head of Student Engagement and the student union president re-imagined the role and potential the typical student charter contains.

Firstly, we wanted to introduce the idea of student partnership as soon as possible after enrolment, so changed the name of our document from Student Charter to Student Partnership Agreement. We felt that all though this is only a minute change, it emphasised further the collaborative approach a charter brings, whilst subtlety moving away from a consumerist 'holding to account' nature which people could use the charter for.

We then set about deciding what should be in a 'Student Partnership Agreement.' In order to do this, we examined the latest student charter, and realised that whilst both what we asking of the tutors and students to sign up to seemed logical, it may not have been what either felt was important, so we went into a time of consultation with both groups. This included sending the document out to all tutors who were going to asked to sign it with students and allowing them to critique, comment and contribute for the document, as well as asking the same of all Union officers and Student Reps, and visiting several tutorials for critique, comment and contribution sessions.

By allowing both students and tutors the opportunity to contribute to the new partnership agreement, we not only fulfilled our ambition of a culture of co-creation, but also ensured the document moved from being tokenistic to something meaningful and useful. On that same note, we felt that rather than the document simply stating what the student can expect and what we expect of them, the document had the potential to introduce and affirm the mission and vision of the institution as a whole, as well as both the Student Union and Student Engagement Team, as well as a series of aims for the year agreed by staff, students and the student union.

In terms of disseminating it to students, we go about it in various different ways. Firstly, during enrolment, we host 'welfare carousels' where students are introduced to different services available to them, as well as being introduced to the partnership agreement. We then put them out to all tutors, who in their first tutorials unpack and explore the documents, often inviting a Student Union rep in to discuss it from a slightly different angle, before both signing and keeping on file. We then fully embed the document into the tutorial model, ensuring that it is revisited and remembered at regular points during the year.

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