Enhancing programmes through student-staff partnership: Why, how and what to pay attention to.

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In this paper I want to consider how student-staff partnership can aid the work of Programme Leaders in enhancing their programmes and stimulate thinking about how to overcome some of the common challenges that may be anticipated.

BUILDING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

As the *Enhancing Support for Programme Leadership Collaborative Cluster* has highlighted the issues that really affect overall satisfaction in the UK's National Student Survey (NSS) are those at programme level, such as teaching quality and feeling part of a learning community (Ellis, 2019). Student judgement of teaching quality itself is dependent upon the availability of academic staff (Jones-Devitt and LeBihan, 2018) and learning is more effective where there is a meaningful connection between students and teacher (Bovill, 2020a). The development of a learning community that includes students and teachers on a programme is therefore crucial.

One of the major benefits that arises from student-staff partnership is the development of frequent and meaningful staff-student interaction, which underlies effective learning (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014). The greater motivation and learning to arise from partnership is a clear benefit but also leads to a moral imperative to ensure that such opportunities are accessible to all students (Bovill, 2020b). Where partnership occurs across a programme, the learning community formed can become a supportive community of practice, where learning and teaching concepts and practices become discussed and shared (Cook-Sather et al, 2014). At UCL I introduced the practice of students reviewing the teaching of staff, and students reported back that they gained more respect for their lecturers from the experience and had not previously appreciated the constraints under which they operated. Staff reported that they gained ideas from their student partners and confidence that they were either doing the right things or planning to. In other words, it generated a more supportive environment for staff, and students got to witness the

effort and care that staff were putting into their teaching. The benefits should of course be wider if an entire programme team were involved, as this would provide a space to generate consistency of practice between the team.

INTERPRETING DATA TOGETHER

The work of programme leaders to enhance their programme is often informed by data, but the data can be overwhelming, hard to navigate and conflicting (Fotheringham, 2019). As Haddow (2019) has argued it may indicate where there is a problem but not what the solution may be; the issue may be specific to a cohort of students that are no longer on the programme; and data can serve to disempower programme leaders where their knowledge of the programme and what needs to be done to enhance it is undermined by the need for change to be evidence-based. Yet agency is key to the ability of programme leaders to thrive (Lawrence, 2021).

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The NSS is one of the major forms of data that inform programme enhancement in the UK. However, it is not just programme leader agency that can be diminished by this data: Sabri (2011) argues that the concept of the student experience, which is built into it, reduces student agency because it constrains students' voices by isolating them from those around them (including

programme leaders) and the complex environment in which they are in. Working in partnership with students to interpret the data and identify enhancements can increase the agency of both students and staff. Students can help staff to understand whether the issue still applies, identify possible solutions and whether they are likely to make a significant difference. Students' experience of the programme and any issues with it can then come together with the programme leader's perception of issues and their causes to allow for creative solutions that all input into.

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I introduced an initiative at UCL that was intended to facilitate such partnership in understanding NSS results, whereby a student outside of a particular department worked with the department and their student representatives to better understand the NSS data through student focus groups and as a result, recommended ways to enhance practice. While the results depended on the department's engagement with the process, there were some noticeable improvements in NSS overall satisfaction. The improved scores were sometimes so rapid that if they were related to the work, they could only be due to participating in the process and changes in the perception of the department as listening to, and caring about, the student experience.

INCLUSIVITY
As highlighted above inclusivity in such partnership work is key: not just because the process benefits those students working in partnership but because the outcomes are more likely to benefit students most like them. As Sabri (2011) has argued there is no single student experience even within a programme because each student's experience is influenced by their different context, e.g. class, ethnicity, gender etc.; and because it is influenced by their relationship with both staff and other students. If we work with

students of a particular demographic, or those who are most engaged or the high-achieving, we risk the solutions benefitting some groups of students more than others and therefore exacerbating awarding gaps.

The other form of partnership working I facilitated at UCL, was on educational enhancement projects. Such projects ranged from designing resources and teaching activities to ways of engaging students more with the course. Such a process could easily be used to design or redesign part of the curriculum for a programme.

One of the reasons I facilitated different forms of partnership work was that I wanted to create a range of opportunities, so that there were ways for people with different interests and availabilities to be able to get involved, in order to be more inclusive. Beyond this though, we must consider how we communicate opportunities, ensure there are diverse role models, select participants and give appropriate recognition, if we want to ensure that partnership is truly open and accessible to all (Mercer-Mapstone, Islam & Reid, 2019).

COMMON PARTNERSHIP CHALLENGES
While inclusivity may be the top concern that should be kept in mind, there are a number of common challenges that staff face in working in partnership with students: time, role uncertainty, vulnerability and overcoming resistance to working in partnership.

Working in partnership is time-consuming (Healey, 2019). As Healey highlights without sufficient time, working in partnership rather than consulting students or involving them becomes very difficult. This is likely to be problematic for programme leaders whose role comes with considerable workload. While I have found partnership work rewarding, there have been occasions when I haven't had the time to devote myself to it fully and this can lead to frustration on all sides. Furthermore, students often recognise staff as being busy and can avoid engaging with them on the grounds that they do not wish to disturb them (Marie & McGowan, 2017).

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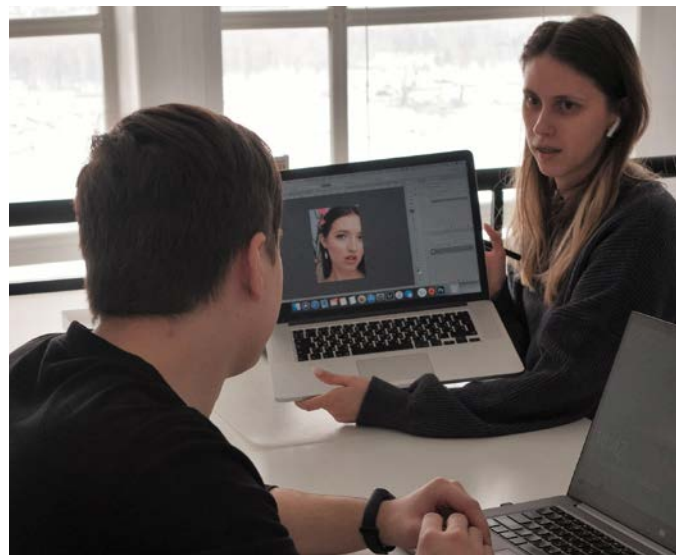
Bovill (2020b, 1024) highlights that in her experience "many staff and students prefer to talk of striving for meaningful relationships, which may, due to the nature of higher education structures and assessment processes, fall short of what many consider to be true partnership." True partnership in this context is often defined as "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather et al, 2014, 6-7). For programme leaders it may be difficult for students to have equal responsibility for the outcome of enhancement work, as the programme leader is ultimately responsible for the quality of provision on the programme. This can lead to a sense of role uncertainty, where staff fear disempowering students and yet need to control the quality of the product. Recognising that true partnership may not be possible or desirable in all contexts is important (Marie & McGowan, 2017).

Staff often report vulnerability when working in partnership. When I worked with a student to review my teaching, I felt judged. Somehow it was harder to discuss my teaching with a student at least initially because I felt that they were judging a snapshot of

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my practice and did not appreciate the context in which I was operating. Having a support network can really help to overcome vulnerability issues and to view student feedback as information for enhancement rather than criticism. The kinds of Programme Leadership Forum advocated by the QAA Scotland Collaborative Cluster (Caddell, Ellis, Haddow & Wilder-Davis, 2020) could really help to support programme leaders in dealing with the vulnerability of working with students as partners.

Programme leaders may well want to work in partnership with several members of academic staff and students to gain the benefits of consistency of practice, build a learning community, or to undertake a larger review of the curriculum. While there are examples of this in the literature (Healey, 2019), this may be challenging because partnership is contrary to normal staff and student roles and requires commitment as discussed above. The advice in the literature (Cook-Sather et al, 2014) is to start small. In my experience, once you demonstrate the potential of partnership working, it is far easier to persuade others to participate. After all, that is what programme leadership is all about: leading without authority and using persuasion to bring about the consistency and best student experience that you can.

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