

Students as Partners: A Model to Promote Student Engagement in Post-COVID-19 Teaching and Learning.

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Abstract.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a seismic shift to the ways and means in which higher education institutions (HEIs) approached teaching, learning and assessment provision. The medium and longer-term effects of COVID-19 are likely to have an impact on the approaches of education, to which students and staff could work collaboratively as 'partners' in ensuring a student-centred approach. Development of a culture of Student Partnership has been identified as a means of working within resource constraint environments and optimising educational experiences for students and staff alike. This paper makes a series of recommendations aimed at supporting and enhancing the quality of higher education in the post-COVID 19 future.

Keywords: COVID-19, teaching and learning, quality assurance, student engagement, student partnership.

1. Introduction.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the way society thinks and behaves. In the context of higher education, many institutions have had to adapt to online-learning, and with it, a grappling of complex systems of technology, innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, as well as adapting to work-from-home environments which have become a salient feature of the lives of many. A lesser focus has been given to student-centred engagement into the design and implementation of these processes. This is unsurprising given the timeframe in which such drastic changes had to occur, as well as the orientation of time with regards to proximity to annual examinations. As we shift from the acute phase of the pandemic into the longer-term sustainable changes that are required, it is important that students should play an equal role in their education shaping its design, implementation and review (Marquis et al., 2015). This is in line with the European Standards and Guidelines

(2015) approach to student-centred approaches to ensuring a quality higher education provision (ESG, 2015). The active involvement of 'students as partners' can facilitate implementation of key activities in a blended learning environment to facilitate overcoming challenges to implementation of educational frameworks such as competency-based education (Gruppen et al., 2016; Miller, 1990). This paper discusses principles of student partnership and suggests some key activities which staff could actively engage with in order to facilitate student-centred learning as we move into a post-COVID-19 higher education system.

2. Current Landscape.

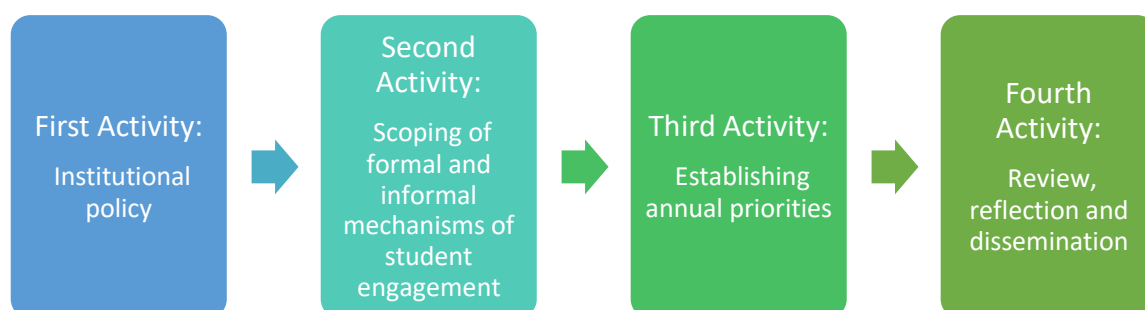
The acute management of COVID-19 in higher education has provided useful insights for institutions to critically reflect upon. Reactive processes reflect a sector that didn't have a culture of students engaging in decision making from the outset. Such processes include decision outdated didactic online teaching (Bishop, 2002), inappropriate philosophies and assessment methods to measure higher-level thinking (Agarwal, 2019) and difficulty in finding the balance in implementing an inclusive roadmap (Felten & Baumann, 2013) for examinations provision with consideration for students' environment or resources. Learning from these decisions is important as we move to a digital environment. According to the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education's Irish National Digital Experience Survey (INDEX, 2020), teaching online was a relatively new concept for many academic staff, with the report noting that 70% of staff had never taught in a live online environment prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Involvement of students in design of the post-COVID blended curriculum may enhance motivation and student engagement, fostering a stronger more collaborative learning community (Deeley & Bovill, 2017) between students and staff.

3. Developing Student Partnership.

Higher education now has the opportunity to start with a blank canvas - independent of the shackles of cultural norms to teaching and learning. A continuum of student participation in curriculum design exists (Bovill & Bulley, 2011) to which formal legislation protects (Universities Act, 1997), but there are other opportunities for students to get involved such as pedagogical planning (Bovill & Bulley, 2011), students-as-researchers (Maunder, Cunliffe, Galvin, Mjali & Rogers, 2012) and as strategic developers in a post-COVID education climate (Healey, O'Connor & Bradfoot, 2010). In the context of Irish higher education, in 2017 as Education

Officer of the Students Union, this author launched a 'student partnership campaign' in Trinity College Dublin in 2017 (Trinity College Dublin and Trinity College Dublin Students Union Student Partnership Policy, 2017) which focused on four main activities to develop a culture of partnership.

Figure 1: Four activities to develop a culture of student partnership in Higher Education Institutions.



3.1 First activity: Institutional policy.

The initial aspect of facilitating a culture of student partnership is the development of an agreement policy between the academic institution and the student representative body. National focus on 'student partnership' has been discussed by government bodies such as the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, as well as being facilitated by new national programmes such as the National Student Engagement Programme (NSTEP) and could act as resources for institutions to draw upon. A joint commitment from both stakeholders places dual-responsibility of student engagement, defined as '*...the investment of time; effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution*' (Trowler & Trowler, 2011), on students and staff. There are ten key principles which are important to

consider when designing and implementing institutional change that can facilitate student partnership in COVID-19 times (Higher Education Authority, 2016).

Table 1: Ten principles to guide develop an institutional approach to student engagement
(adapted from Higher Education Authority (2016)).

Principles of Student Engagement
Democracy
Students as stakeholders
Inclusivity and Diversity
Transparency
Students as co-creators
Collegiality and Parity of Esteem
Professionalism and Support
Reciprocal Feedback and Feedback Loops
Self-criticism and Enhancement
Consistency

Recommendation: Seek collaborative opportunities between student and staff academic representatives to create a road-map for policy provision in ensuring that in a post COVID-19 era, student-centred approaches to teaching and learning involve students from the conception, design, implementation and review of programmatic and institutional changes.

3.2 Second activity: Scoping of formal and informal mechanisms of student engagement.

In conjunction with the development of a long-term strategy for facilitating student engagement, a partnered scoping exercise in conjunction with governance experts and quality assurance experts could be undertaken to explore areas in which students currently engage in decision-making, the impact of such student engagement, and the potential opportunities for enhanced student engagement in relation to the COVID-19 changes to teaching and learning. Common

representations include sabbatical officers from Student Unions and affiliated representatives. Dual-training by students and staff leaders is an important role to enable effective representation. Students may get involved in feedback mechanisms at an institutional or local school level through quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms. This is an area needing urgent attention to reap the true benefits and potential of feedback. For many, the feedback loop is closed in an unsatisfactory way, by implementing change for subsequent cohorts, or by not actioning on any suggested approaches due to an 'insufficient response rate'. In the context of COVID, where such pitfalls have led to some of the aforementioned problems in the first place, academics need to recognise their key role in engaging students in quality enhancement through going beyond tokenistic means of 'capturing' the 'student voice', and instead truly listening in innovative ways such as focus groups, student-staff liaison committee meetings, or by actioning feedback in a live-manner. In the digital environment, where both students and staff are on a similar learning journey, a collaborative approach at the programme level in may play a pivotal role in ensuring students are successfully attaining a quality education.

Recommendation: Commence review of current opportunities for students to engage in teaching and learning provision, and ensure they are rigorous, involve closed loops, and make meaningful impact of students' experience. Consider development of processes which overcome pitfalls in current student feedback mechanisms through development of 'feedback spirals' (Carless, 2019) which allow analysis of complex teaching and learning processes and sustainability of change within education systems. Identify additional opportunities for student stakeholder engagement from the classroom level to institutional level through innovative collaboration in governance and quality assurance.

3.3 Third activity: Establishing annual priorities.

Accountability and measurable impact are important to both highlight the success of student partnership activities in facilitating student engagement, as well as help identify the areas for future improvement. It shows growth between both stakeholders in addressing the concerns raised by stakeholders in light of COVID-19 adaptations. Collection of quantitative and qualitative data regarding impact of COVID-19 on student engagement, from both stakeholders, can help inform the annual priorities for the year. In the context of Trinity College Dublin, an overarching theme of 'revolutionising student engagement through embedding a culture of collaboration and partnership' was further divided into three priorities:

- Engagement with representation in governance,
- Engagement in teaching and learning,
- Engagement with the wider community.

During COVID-19, a reflective campaign may centre around 'ensuring student engagement in the COVID-19 pandemic through a culture of partnership' through which a series of performance indicators which can be actioned, with responsibilities allocated to student and staff working groups are provided. In this new normal COVID-19 environments, priorities are likely to focus around how students and staff work together in implementing the pre-approved competency frameworks of their programmes in a blended learning environment, and could be facilitated through frank and open discussions with students at the beginning of the academic year around expectations and realities. While most curricula have devised comprehensive competency frameworks, it would be a missed opportunity for programme review boards to not consider comprehensive digital literacy as a key competency in all programmes going forward.

Recommendation: Using a strategic management approach, such as strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats (SWOT) analysis (Helms & Nixon, 2010), involve students in identifying their own priorities for the academic year and ensure cohesion between these recommendations and those of management and academics. Agree on a proposed plan of implementation of key overlapping areas for enhancement which will have a meaningful impact on all stakeholders' experiences, such as upskilling in pedagogical design of online teaching provision.

3.4 Fourth activity: Review, reflection and dissemination.

Other institutional approaches to developing a culture of 'Students as Partners' have recommended 3 phases to implementation – testing and prototype, identifying and implementing strategies, and developing systems and processes which support your planned activities (Shaw, Rueckert, Smith, Tredinnick & Lee, 2017) as well as recognising the importance of evaluation as a key activity to drive change (Coombe, Huang, Russell, Sheppard, Khosravi, 2018). The final activity to facilitate 'student partnership' is to take stock of the work of the collaboration between students and staff at the end of the academic year. This is organised through the annual review of the priorities, the successful implementation of any of the performance indicators, as well as through a showcase of best-practice within the institution of

partnered solutions. With flexibility required for COVID-19, such reflection ensures rigour of the policy in reflecting stakeholders' priorities. This dissemination also affords the opportunity to academics to adapt practices in an accessible way. Finally, it indicates potential future activities to further embed a culture of student partnership as we return to more in-house teaching - such as developing 'student leaders' in teaching and learning by involving them as peer-reviewers of teaching, and chairing committees.

Recommendation: As a live campaign, ensure ongoing discussions and review take place between students and staff throughout the year to monitor progress in agreed areas of priorities, or revision and adaption if required in light of changes to the national higher education context e.g. a return to in-class learning, increased resource provision through the creation of a Higher Education ministry. Identify, highlight and share the successes in the partnership between staff and students at the end of each year in overcoming COVID-19 related challenges.

4. Barriers and Benefits.

While many HEIs and staff have begun to truly embrace student partnership, it has been reported that some staff may feel uncomfortable in the shift of power to that of a 'partnership' with students (Murphy, Nixon, Brooman & Fearon, 2017). Murphy and colleagues identify four main processes that should occur to encourage 'buy-in' from academic staff

1. increasing staff willingness and involvement by starting at a place where issues are occurring (for e.g. online assessments) and working here with students in designing student-centric tools (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014).
2. Developing students in the partnership process by working with national training bodies on student engagement.
3. Shifting the focus from 'staff as experts' to 'staff as facilitators.'
4. Recognising that partnership activities are a professional development opportunity. A systematic review on 'Students as Partners' in Higher Education (Mercer Mapstone et al., 2017) also found an abundance of benefits for students including development of key transferrable competencies such as meta-cognition, increased critical skill development, and increased student-efficacy; and for staff including development of better curriculum materials, increased motivation for teaching and research, and improved personal career prospects.

5. Reflection and Conclusion.

This paper argues that the 'student voice' is often missing from making meaningful change, or is often involved too late in a tokenistic manner. If a culture of student partnership existed within institutions prior to COVID-19, which focused on troubleshooting and enhancing digital learning, it is likely that institutions collaborated with students to ensure pedagogically sound digital education provision. Nonetheless, the foundation for such cultures can be laid in the post-COVID era of teaching and learning, with a new opportunity for meaningful student and staff collaboration to ensure a quality education. This culture can be facilitated through a series of activities as outlined in this paper, recognising that ultimately responsibility of student engagement is a partnership between students and staff alike.

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