

Supporting Student Engagement and Partnership in Higher Education Decision-Making during the Pandemic: A reflection from the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP).

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Abstract.

This reflective article was drawn together from the experiences of student and staff team members at the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) during the period of the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Irish higher education, and is supported by the work of national partner organisations in assessing that impact. The article examines some of the key challenges for student engagement in decision-making in higher education institutions, as well as the way in which student partnerships may change and emerge as result.

1. Introduction.

The National Student Engagement Programme, known as NStEP, was established in 2016 by three partner organisations (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, Higher Education Authority, and Union of Students in Ireland) to enhance student engagement in decision-making across Irish higher education. NStEP recognises and promotes the value of students and staff as a collective learning community, while building individual and institutional capacities to foster sustainable partnerships. The work of NStEP is underpinned by the 'conceptual framework' for student engagement (HEA, 2016), which is currently being revised and reimagined to provide a more comprehensive approach to meaningful student engagement and partnership.

COVID-19 had a significant (and perhaps, unexpected) influence on dialogue on the role of student partnership in institutional decision-making, and particularly on teaching, learning and assessment. This reflection on the nature of that impact on student engagement was prepared by members of the NStEP team, including Student Trainers and Student Associates. It will

explore some of the challenges the sector faced, while highlighting core themes for embedding the good practices that emerged.

2. Rapid Reaction.

The Learning and Teaching Academy at Heriot-Watt University identified four phases of response by higher education to the pandemic, beginning with '*the rapid transition to remote teaching and learning*'. Key challenges during this phase centred on the need for effective communication about the move to online teaching and the way in which institutions were re-organising. Other challenges identified from a national survey of students at the end of academic year included the need for peer engagement between classmates, the quality of online content, the difficulties of moving to alternative and online assessment methods, and the accessibility of college resources and services (USI, 2020).

The challenges of digital poverty and remaining motivated were significant barriers to student engagement. The national evaluation of teaching, learning and assessment during the pandemic found that interactivity between students and teachers was varied, with an overall positive response from staff and students. However, the reactive nature of this period meant that there was a significant need to improve both 'the quality and quantity of interaction between students and teachers', supported by setting clear expectations for online learning, and the development of "*interactive approaches so that students feel part of a connected learning community.*" (QQI, 2020, p.92-93).

This initial period of crisis presented a significant threat to student engagement with learning, student engagement with institutional life, and indeed, student engagement in institutional decision-making.

3. Re-examining Partnerships.

A significant need to consult, negotiate and to find agreement or consensus with students on different elements of teaching, learning and assessment was identified across the sector. An online discursive consultation during June 2020 also noted the link between engagement of students in decision-making and ensuring both the quality and interactivity of the move to remote

and online learning (NStEP and OpinionX, 2020).

A progressive and cooperative partnership between institutions and their learners can create the necessary trust that prevents a breakdown in student engagement practices. Partnership can be defined as a “*collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to... conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis*” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). This partnership should be underpinned by the recognition of existing power dynamics and the need for the empowerment of the partners (Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2020), supported by capacity building initiatives for students, staff, and institutions (HEA, 2016).

It is important to avoid a tokenistic approach to student engagement, which can often be compounded by the risk averse nature of higher education (Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2020). Arguably, within a climate of high risk and disruption there is now a chance to re-examine the nature of partnership with students. Capturing and understanding this experience and the practices that emerged, both positive and negative, is a crucial undertaking for the future of meaningful student engagement.

4. Representation and Communication.

The ‘shutdown’ of on-campus higher education ultimately caused significant disruption, uncertainty, and anxiety, but willingness to recognise this uncertainty and provide flexibility was reassuring to students. The goodwill created as a result, coupled with the need to very suddenly engage as many students and staff as possible in open dialogue and communication, ultimately led to a chance to shift the dynamic of the existing power balance – not necessarily to the perceived detriment of any party.

Arguably the approach to student engagement was the “*re-adding the basics*” phase of the response (Heriot-Watt LTA, 2020), with new or amended approaches undertaken to protect communication, dialogue, and existing collaboration with students. Understanding and implementing strategies to promote active engagement in learning and assessment, setting-up ad hoc processes to check-in with students to understand concerns, and creating an informative

process for student queries formed the backbone of responses.

Core to these strategies were pre-existing student representation structures. While a more systematic approach to academic representation in higher education has emerged over the preceding period (NStEPb, 2020), COVID threatened to fundamentally undermine efforts to enhance and sustain the role of class representatives.

Ultimately, the national effort focused on ensuring both engagement with whole cohorts and sustained partnership with representatives, with the maintenance of semi-formal and formal communication and feedback in teaching and learning, as well as quality assurance and governance (NStEP, 2020a). Overall, it was clear that students wanted answers and reassurance, inundating their class reps with concerns and queries. These representatives formed a large constituent part of the success of the response. Anecdotally, class reps became ever more critical for institutional and students' union approaches. They were also ever more crucial in maintaining communication between teaching staff and their peers, even stepping up to support elements of online learning, as staff grappled with the sudden need for widespread changes in approach. Ultimately, this 'frontline' role is a key example of the need to foster a student-staff partnership that recognises students as part of a learning community (HEA, 2016).

Representatives had to become more familiar with internal structures in an environment of confusion, unlike pre-pandemic where staff could be engaged informally and in-person. Class reps also seemed more in-tune with the national picture, in turn supporting their institutions to make informed, timely decisions to support their peers. Although the move to remote learning brought great uncertainty and change, it also brought greater responsibility and an opportunity for increased engagement with institutional processes. NStEP has trained over 2,700 since 2016, and while this training has received excellent feedback (NStEPc 2020), ultimately this training is of little use if class representatives cannot take up meaningful responsibility within an institutional environment that promotes their role. The impact of the pandemic on the role of the class rep is an invaluable example of the need for capacity building to navigate institutional governance.

5. Inclusive Student Engagement.

Seeking to engage diverse voices through partnership, requires innovation, dialogue, empowerment, accessibility, and inclusivity (Austen, 2018). When evaluating the impact of the pandemic on teaching, learning and assessment it was found that there was a more widespread sense of dissatisfaction among more marginalised students, with the maintenance of core supports and the accessibility of learning objectives key to ensuring equality and equity (QQI, 2020). Minimising interruption and disruption have been core characteristics of the effort to ensure an inclusive education, with the importance of communication across a more fragmented student and staff community key to protecting student success. The application of the principles and practices of universal design for learning (AHEAD, 2017) has also placed an emphasis on the creation of an inclusive learning environment, that is crafted through partnership, with feedback that is mutually beneficial.

When considering student engagement, the lens of undergraduate experience is often unintentionally applied. For postgraduate taught students, poor internet connections, alternative assessment confusion, and inconsistency in the delivery of online learning were cited as some key barriers (USI, 2020). Postgraduate research students cited several factors which have hindered progress; reduced access to resources, limited or paused data collection, and alteration in learning objectives. Some workloads need to be completely re-imagined or halted completely, such as research projects involving longitudinal data. A survey by the Royal Irish Academy (2020) highlights a concerning possibility that opportunities for PGRs will be curtailed, with delayed timelines, reduced dissemination, and less opportunity to build collaborations and networks for early-career researchers. With these challenges in mind, core to engagement throughout decision-making will be ensuring postgraduate inclusion.

6. Students Taking their Place in the Learning Community.

A critical distinction to consider is that 'all partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership' (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). With this in mind, partnership is a process by which meaningful engagement occurs, elevating the 'student voice' as an integral

part of the power dynamics and decision-making approaches within an institution, moving away from the idea of 'you said, we did' as the sole outcome of engagement.

In a time of great crisis in student engagement with all aspects of higher education discussion has centred on wellbeing and the loss of a sense of connection or belonging. Developing partnership necessitates the creation and fostering of a sense of belonging, with 'integration into academic, cultural and social communities' in higher education as a '*precursor to engagement*' (Hardy & Bryson, 2010). Institutions have been forced to make some monumental changes, with policies all but rewritten overnight, distance learning facilitated, and virtual learning environments updated. The necessary and vital conversations, and indeed clashes of opinion, that have occurred with students over these changes have in and of themselves provided more space for students to take up an active role in the direction of their own learning.

Simultaneously, a large proportion of the incoming student population energised to voice their opinion and take a stake in the way in which they are assessed. The COVID-19 crisis 'has highlighted the importance of student engagement and student voice from a second-level perspective' with Leaving Certificate students, in particular, '*mobilised in a structured way to amplify their voice and ultimately assert their right to a seat at the table*' (Fanning, 2020). Indeed, the language of partnership and a growing discussion of student voice at second-level would indicate that more and more first year school-leavers will already be well equipped for activism within higher education. With such flux across the sector and wider society, there is a need to re-examine how partnership can become a space for democratic principles and collaboration, with common goals and mutual respect.

7. A New Dialogue on Co-Creation.

The third and fourth phases of higher education's response to COVID-19 are the extended transitional phase in the 2020/21 academic year, followed by the 'emerging new normal' (Heriot-Watt LTA, 2020). Considering the huge amount of dialogue that has occurred as the result of the pandemic during the last academic year, it is vital the process of student engagement that is undertaken can nurture emerging partnerships. This may require some risks

to be recognised and accepted, with the new capacity that students may have found to navigate their institutions acknowledged to imagine the new normal, whatever that may be.

While the COVID-19 influence is a challenge in teaching and learning, it has also hugely increased discussion across Irish higher education on the role of 'students as co-creators'. As Roberston and Barber (2017, p.9) note, when students work together "*they create learning communities. Through these strong networks, students share what they know with each other and support each other in learning*". Given the context, the need for teachers and students to work in a collaborative manner in (re)designing the learning experience suggests online learning communities can start this collaborative conversation.

8. Conclusion.

NStEP will continue to support meaningful student engagement, that can ultimately foster partnership cultures that are sustainable. The importance of capacity building and exploration around concepts and practices of student engagement are vital in the time ahead, however difficult this will be in an environment of transition and disruption. The new narrative of co-creation is one that staff and students across Irish higher education must nurture, if an inclusive and democratic learning community is to be realised.

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