


From Students-as-Partners theory to Students-as-Partners practice: reflecting on staff-student collaborative partnership in an academic development context.

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Abstract.

Informed by principles of action research and presented in the form of a report-like reflective enquiry, this article outlines and contextualises key aspects of Students-as-Partners ('SaP') practice as implemented and experienced in an educational development context in academic year 2020/21. Reflecting on their own experiences of the SaP model, the authors set out principles and prompt questions that aim to support teaching and learning centres and/or academic departments to integrate SaP activity in their own practices. These reflections are outlined, discussed, and positioned in relation to the growing SaP literature base. The article is accompanied by a student-generated short resource pack intended to provide practical advice supporting a broad audience of staff and students to take first or next steps with staff-student partnership approaches in their own institutional contexts.

Keywords: Resources; Students-as-partners; Student partnership.

1. Introduction.

This practice-based enquiry seeks to document and reflect on a staff-student partnership undertaken in the context of educational/academic development work. Students-as-Partners ('SaP') approaches are inevitably – perhaps always – context dependent (Healey & Healey, 2014). In the context of the pandemic, this has meant all interactions between the student partner and the academic developer partner have taken place online, mostly in the form of 1-on-1 or small-group meetings and occasionally supplemented by mutual engagement in an

online-hosted sectoral '*Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning in Irish Universities*' community of practice (Wenger, 1998). We believe strongly that our partnership work in this environment has surfaced themes and principles highly relevant to other learning partnerships in higher education.

Drawing on our own experience of successful staff/student collaboration and of generating resources aligned closely to institutional enhancement priorities, we articulate various barriers and enablers to partnership we have encountered. Key '*lightbulb moments*' from our own partnership activity impacting on our partnership are explored and discussed here. The article first outlines the background and sets the context in which our partnership took place. It then discusses the process of partnership development and implementation at various points across a project cycle, identifying key considerations to be aware of when engaging in partnership work. Barriers to productive SaP approaches are also explored as part of our discussion of successful features of partnership praxis. The article concludes by opening space for reflective responses to SaP-aligned '*research questions*' by both staff and student partners, underscoring and reaffirming our own commitment to open dialogue as perhaps the defining feature of productive partnership - and of successful SaP practice overall.

2. Students-as-Partners: translating national priority to individual practice.

National policies and resources signal that student engagement is supported when students are enabled to participate actively in decision making and through active collaboration with staff at the institutional level (HEA, 2016). Similarly, Ireland's National Student Engagement Programme ('NStEP') 4-4-5 model ('*Steps to Partnership*', USI/QQI/HEA 2021, p.11) sets out key principles, drivers, and enablers of student engagement and partnership. These include dialogue, student co-creation, Communities of Practice, and institutional cultures of inclusion, reflection, and enhancement among others. Our enquiry discusses and explores how each of these drivers might be addressed in practice at distinct phases of partnership projects. Sample resources shared as appendices to this article take these ideas further, suggesting a set of principles to bear in mind for both staff and students when considering and undertaking partnership work that are grounded in the emergent research base and which amplify key expert voices advocating for partnership in and across institutional curricula (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard & Moore-Cherry, 2015; Murphy, Nixon, Brooman & Fearon, 2017).

Our own understanding of ‘successful’ SaP practice closely aligns to Cook-Sather and Felten’s discussion of ethical reciprocity, mutual respect, and shared values as highly desirable features of contemporary higher education practice (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017). From our experience, we suggest that SaP praxis is best conceived as process-oriented and developmental and that SaP approaches function best when structured for active collaboration, when the power and knowledge asymmetries of partners and their respective roles within the institution are explicitly acknowledged, and when communication flows evenly between partners. We envision shared dialogue that unpacks and critically sites institutional norms and normative behaviours as a critical enabler for the voicing of SaP perspectives that ‘creat[e]space for relational narratives about learning, teaching, and higher education’ (Matthews, Dwyer, Hines, & Turner, 2018, p.4.). The challenges we have faced in implementing a SaP approach are, inevitably, explored from our perspective and sited within our own institutional context. Our discussion of our lived experience of partnership practices, however, seeks to support colleagues and students to foster opportunities for open dialogue relating to SaP implementation in a range of institutional settings. We share here prompts for reflection informing partnership work that, we believe, should offer a productive point of departure for staff and students engaging in SaP approaches and mitigate against the various operational challenges that can constrain partnership praxis across the sector.

Even in institutional environments such as our own that have long espoused a commitment to working in partnership with students (Whelehan, 2020), projects and practices aligned to SaP approaches typically inform incremental and/or longitudinal change in institutional activities. We suggest, however, that partnership interventions are more likely to be successful where an immediate or near-immediate impact is acknowledged and/or experienced by partners. We propose that embedding an action research/reflective enquiry cycle into SaP interactions offers one way to provide a rapid feedback loop, enhance the visibility and impact of SaP work, and enable the dissemination of partnership outputs within the timeline of the partnership itself. This has enabled us to adopt a critically reflective lens on partnership and also afforded us clear opportunity to document retrospectively our experiences of partnership (Pine, 2009; Kember & Gow, 1992; Healy, Flint, and Harrington, 2014). This reflective/dialogic cycle of do – describe – reflect – act is echoed in the structure of this article, offering insight into how partnership interactions might best be supported at distinct stages of a partnership process.

3. Benefits of Students-as-Partners in an educational development context.

For both staff and student partners engaging in SaP practices, partnership work can lay important ground in developing confidence and authority to speak with and forge connections across the institution, e.g. connecting with faculty, staff, Students' Union officials, and of course with other student partners and interns.

For student partners, working with academic development teams can be less intimidating than working in partnership directly with lecturers as there is no need to renegotiate a pre-existing hierarchical power relationship when engaging in partnership. For educational developers, working in a SaP model can afford valuable insight into the challenges likely to be experienced by disciplinary academics and other colleagues holding roles in teaching and supporting learning as they take advance partnership approaches in their own teaching and learning contexts. From the practitioner's perspective, SaP activity has potential to support educational development credibility and 'currency of approach' by re-introducing direct interaction with students to academic developer practice, recognising that many educational development colleagues work in units that have limited (if any) direct contact with students.

Our partnership has afforded us real insight into how not to just '*talk the talk*' in terms of supporting partnership, but also to '*walk the walk*' in working in direct partnership with each other. We suggest this experiential perspective on partnership, combined with a working knowledge of the SaP evidence base, provides us with useful insights into both theory and practices of SaP. These insights have informed the development of prompt questions appropriate for distinct phases of staff-student partnership work.

4. Process and practices: developing and implementing partnership.

We cleave to the idea that student partnership activity – whether cocurricular, intracurricular, or extracurricular - should not impact negatively on a student's capacity to engage in their own studies (Lewis, 2017). Clarification of what both parties deem to be '*reasonable*' expectations in terms of volume of work, email contact, '*virtual*' meeting contact, etc. needs to be agreed early on. Aligned closely to this is the need to consider just '*who*' the student partners are in any given scenario and the intended '*shape*' of a partnership (Bovill, 2017). We see '*deep*'

partnership as emerging from sustained and reciprocal interactions between a small number of partners and 'shallow' partnership is perhaps more akin to broader understandings of student 'voice' (Seale, 2009, 2010; Canning, 2017; McLeod, 2011). Acknowledging this distinction in 'intensity' of partnership opens up questions of follow-on partnerships for staff: whether deep engagement with one student partner, for example, might be used to foster a network of students willing to support shallower partnership activities, or perhaps how shallow partnership might be used to capacity-build for future deep partnership. We suggest and firmly believe deep partnership praxis should be acknowledged as a site of academic labour. We question how ethical sustained partnership approaches can be that do not acknowledge as their starting point the need to recognise student time and effort in contributing to the development of a longitudinal partnership. '*Expertise represents an important form of symbolic capital in universities*' (Matthews, 2017, p.3): we believe, however, that student partners should be rewarded in more than 'merely' symbolic capital when they commit to significant partnership work; clarity on this should be established early on.

In the early stages of partnership, our interactions were very structured and intentionally formalised. This aimed to build trust between partners and to support both partners to develop insight into each other's work practices and approaches. Dialogic conversation informed written reflection on both sides, which then in turn informed project development activity – this iterative and action-research-adjacent process underpinned our collaboration across the year. As a partnership 'kick-off' activity, the student partner was asked to prepare (informal) written responses on their experiences of assessment, using a series of questions developed by the staff partner. Further reflective prompts were provided at intervals to scaffold the development of a shared project vocabulary (e.g. ensuring mutually intelligible jargon around project themes such as assessment). Similar meetings took place online for other project themes and also involved written and oral scaffolding of language and concepts. Supports and areas of misunderstanding on both sides could thus be clarified and picked up at an early stage, supporting and further building experience in how to communicate effectively across the staff/student divide. Our discussions and interactions clarified a shared understanding of how we might circulate and disseminate resources and our reflections on the partnership project, recognising dissemination as a key challenge in the process.

Partnership work undertaken reflected this dialogic negotiation: (open) resources emerging from the partnership have been 'co-published' by both parties, alternating 'lead author' status depending on whether resources produced are more likely to be staff-facing or student-facing

(and thus maximising on author credibility for the intended audience). By developing resources students are able to rapidly develop their own expertise in the desired practice domain, following an assessment-as-learning understanding of learning development (Black & William, 1998; National Forum, 2016), but also producing resources suitable for use by the academic development unit in professional practice. For the student partner, any resources developed and published can be used for a range of purposes – not just on a personal development basis to inform and support their learning in their own disciplinary context, but perhaps as a talking point or output linked to the presence of the partnership as an internship on a CV (e.g. transferrable for use outside of the university context).

Getting started with partnership practices: key considerations.

- (i) Who is/are involved in SaP processes? How much time is reasonable to expect from student partners and how should their contribution to partnership be acknowledged (e.g. '*pizza lunch*', occasional vouchers, hourly rate, weekly rate)?
- (ii) Why is/are SaP models beneficial or desirable in practice, e.g. in the context of a particular project/institutional enhancement theme. How might the process-orientated nature of SaP impact on the desired outcomes of the project? How might both partners benefit from these outcomes?
- (iii) Identify dissemination venues in advance of the partnership project '*launch*' where appropriate: what are the desired outputs for the partnership and what might appropriate dissemination channels be, e.g. via social media, internal institutional channels, national project themes, scholarly journals, poster presentations at conferences, resource handbooks under Creative-Commons licence, or something different?
- (iv) Do any plans for dissemination need to go through an institutional ethics process? Who will get '*credit*' for publishing/disseminating outputs? Which name(s), if any, are outputs to be attributed to?
- (v) Agree workload/responsibility check-in points.
- (vi) Develop a shared understanding of appropriate language – e.g. developing a shared language between partners, but also an understanding of language appropriate for target audiences in either staff/student-facing outputs (ideally avoiding the unnecessary use of jargon).
- (vii) Ensure there is a process of establishing mutual understanding and formalise '*reflection*

on where we are/where next' as an iterative practice, informing all activities undertaken within the project.

5. Barriers to successful partnership.

Through reflection and open dialogue we have become aware of particular challenges that have at times impeded our activities in partnership. We highlight these in the hope that colleagues can take proactive steps to avoid or mitigate similar missteps in their own models of partnership.

Partnership approaches assume that students are empowered to direct their own activity, at least to some extent (Bovill & Bulley, 2011). In a teaching and learning context, educational developers acknowledge the need to articulate and advocate for connectivist and (social) constructivist approaches as a scaffold for learning, recognising that telling a student '*go and read material XYZ in isolation*' is likely to have limited impact on that student's learning and development. This also resonates in student partnership work relating to teaching and learning in an educational development context. Anticipating a level of scaffolding appropriate to enabling learner autonomy in a particular area has time and workload implications for staff partners: it is not just about the student partner '*reading*' the source material, but doing something meaningful with it, also ensuring turnaround on these is appropriate. Student partners benefit clearly from explicit scaffolding as they formalise and align their experiences of learning to the evidence base of education as a field of scholarship and practice.

Time pressures and workload in the context of COVID-19 have posed significant challenges to all staff and students in recent years. Recognising the need for timely intervention at each stage of the draft/review/redraft/disseminate cycle from both student and staff perspectives in the context of a particularly busy academic year has been useful for both partners.

The ongoing volatility of public health restrictions at the time of our partnership placed significant pressures relating to supporting (remote) teaching, learning, and assessment on the educational development unit in which we were based. Managing time effectively enough for the staff partner to review and return '*meaningful*' activities undertaken by the student partner during the partnership – e.g. working collaboratively to identify knowledge and skills gaps to be addressed by both partners as areas for development in advance of the production of resources – was at times extremely difficult in our own context. Meaningful work involved the student partner undertaking literature reviews, drafting resources, developing short

summary papers – and generating annotated bibliographies suitable for use by staff and students alike (see appendix); these were not always reviewed/engaged with by the staff partner as promptly as they perhaps should have been (!).

Inevitably, all of our partnership activities have been complicated further by the dynamics of lockdown: our interactions have been fully online, via email, webinar, video call, etc. While it is beyond the scope of this reflection to explore whether/how fully remote interactions are reshaping the dynamics of staff-student partnership praxis, we note that we have worked closely – and productively – for more than a full academic year without having met in physical space. We suggest that there can be challenges to acknowledging vulnerabilities posed by the online medium, particularly early on in a partnership relationship. A key need is to establish trust that means it's ok for either partner to say '*I don't understand what is meant here*' or '*I think we've gone the wrong way here – we might need to scrap this and start again*'. We suggest that it is crucial to establish a working relationship where it is ok to disagree with each other: the asymmetry of knowledge between partners should lead to different opinions: the decision whether or not to act on this difference of opinion, however, rests with each partner. In light of the '*disinhibition*' effect of online interactions (Rose, 2014, following Suler, 2004), we believe that placing a discourse analysis lens on the conversations that take place in institutionally-provided digital spaces (e.g. Teams calls, Zoom rooms etc) would likely afford a productive arena for future research focusing on SaP interactions.

Key challenges to anticipate and pre-empt in partnership work:

- (i) Pandemic and/or remote interaction challenges: remember that building connection remotely can be challenging.
- (ii) Autonomy of the student partner: how much '*freedom*' is appropriate for the student and how might the staff partner build in checks to support and scaffold student agency?
- (iii) Workload and frequency of interaction: how much energy/time can the student allocate to the partnership and how much energy/time can the staff member allocate to the partnership?
- (iv) Time pressures: What is reasonable turnaround activity where materials need '*peer review*' by the other partner?
- (v) Scaffolding and clarity: Remember that partnership activities should be meaningful, not '*make-work for students*' – and bear in mind that students may be unfamiliar with your

own disciplinary or institutional jargon, particularly when working with students in earlier years or newer to the institution.

- (vi) Individualism: Student partners do not '*speak*' for all students: their interactions and voice are important, but their opinions are not universal.
- (vii) Nature of partnership: is the partnership intended to be deep/shallow? Why?
- (viii) Future partnerships: (how) might the partnership capacity-build and support future direct linkages between the academic development unit and students?

6. Successes.

We see a commitment to reciprocal and open dialogue as perhaps the greatest enabler of '*successful*' partnership, supporting the development of insights into institutional contexts, behaviours, and norms that can either limit or catalyse change in teaching and learning activities and advocating for dialogic reciprocity as enabling the voicing of '*troublesome*' - yet valuable - partner perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2014, p. 186). Trust between partners has been a key success of our own partnership, and this level of trust would not have been possible without open dialogue and free-flowing communication between partners contextualising each other's environments and working knowledge of the institution from different perspectives. From both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, areas of partnership strength have included the development and use of a range of resources and materials supporting staff with teaching responsibilities and students, the potential to scaffold significant learning through effective prompt design, and the opportunity to connect into and support national project activity in similar areas. These successes have been fostered and enabled by meaningful engagement, a commitment to open dialogue, and of course the level of trust between the partners involved across the duration of the partnership.

For us, it has been enormously beneficial to recognise that '*good enough is good enough*' for resources and project outputs – limiting a tendency towards perfectionism on both sides of the partnership! We have also found it particularly beneficial to recognise that resources and materials have a limited shelf life – artefacts produced are likely to not be used long term given the current pace of change in (Irish) higher education. It can be helpful to acknowledge this early on in partnership work, perhaps linking to the advice shared in '*Steps to Partnership*': '*activities and the learning environment rarely stays the same for long*' [in higher

education] (p.13). Resources emerging from partnership work should be practical and user-friendly – they do not, however, need to be '*perfect*' to be useful.

Key areas to focus on to foster success in partnerships:

- (i) Acknowledge that there is an asymmetry of knowledge and expertise: both staff and students have different '*working*' knowledges of the institutional environment, which can be exploited to produce resources targeted to the needs of distinct stakeholder groups.
- (ii) Acknowledge that there is an asymmetry of power in the hierarchy of the institution: what are the implications for both parties of engaging in partnership? Which names feature in/are acknowledged in SaP project outputs?
- (iii) Consider how partnership informs professionalism in practice: how might partnership approaches best be fostered? Does communication flow in both directions and how reciprocal is the partnership dynamic? Is one partner always '*talking more*' during interactions? Does the partnership tend towards a manager/team model vs a co-collaborator model?
- (iv) In what ways can a partnership interaction support the development or articulation of '*professionalism*' in the student partner(s)? Can this be highlighted or explored in a way that enables students to articulate the benefits of partnership in non-university contexts?
- (v) Co-ordinating partnership work is a joint responsibility: all parties involved should plan explicitly for regular check-ins (e.g. video calls, email updates) – asynchronous document mark-ups can support dialogue between partners even where regular check-ins are hard to coordinate.
- (vi) Identify tangible project outputs early on where possible: developing partnership is a process that is likely benefited by having an end goal 'outcome in mind! Products (e.g. resources) are better '*usable and finished*' than perfect: it is important for both sides of the partnership to recognise that resources developed inevitably have a limited shelf life.
- (vii) Where possible, consider connecting into and supporting broader national activity to demonstrate the flow of information between partnership activities at local, institutional, and sectoral levels and consider impact of the partnership. This might be achieved through webinars, conferences, resources shared through national repositories etc.

7. Comments and reflections.

a) In your opinion, what has been the biggest challenge of working in partnership?

Ben: Students-as-Partners ('SaP') models aren't always used well. Students can be easily overwhelmed by a lack of guidance and support, particularly when it comes to assessment co-creation (cf: Deeley & Bovill, 2017). Being able to articulate 'why' something isn't working in a way that doesn't come across as rude or unprofessional can be difficult – particularly in a subject area where you don't know the staff very well. Without setting clear boundaries for the length of time devoted to discussion around assessment, co-creation conversations can drag on and take away from time spent engaging with content in class. Before having these discussions with students, staff should clearly outline how long will be spent discussing assessments and what they hope to achieve from the conversation. I also think staff need to be sure that co-creation discussions should involve lots of student voices, not just the loud ones! This can be done by having a variety of different ways in which students can contribute to the discussion (in-class discussions, online forms, one-on-one office hours etc.). I personally think students should be involved in assessments at every step of the way from creation onwards. I think this leads to better engagement with lecture and module content and can give students a better understanding of the assessment process. We can clearly tell when an assessment is just recycled year in year out - the assessment feels stale when it doesn't match to a module's current content or context. We know there has to be some balance with updating materials in terms of workload for staff – particularly with very large classes – but assessments should at the absolute very least match the current version of a module.

Jonny: For me, one of the biggest challenges has always been managing workload in a way that provided Ben with meaningful things to do. The last year has been particularly intense in terms of managing my own daily workflow and ensuring that work could be '*shared*' appropriately has been a real challenge – where and when to handover work and the amount of '*structure*' and scaffold required of a student partner is very different at different points of a partnership. What I asked Ben to do early on is quite different to suggesting activity at a later stage of interaction. At times I've also found it tough to manage expectations about turnaround activity in a way that provides Ben with useful feedback. There's no point in a student partner doing a load of work if they don't do anything with it – I've encouraged Ben to develop reading lists, annotated bibliographies, short summaries, and pragmatic user guides as a way to summarise and capture his understanding of various themes explored through the

partnerships, and I think disseminating outputs are really important to signal how good I think the student input has been to our area as a whole. I've really valued being able to run documents by Ben for an opinion on language – it's easy to overlook your own use of jargon in everyday language, and if a student partner doesn't understand what's meant by a sentence, then it's likely to not be understandable across the disciplines either.

b) In your opinion, can staff and students ever really work as partners with students?

Ben: Students are more than capable of being partners with staff in a range of ways, but particularly in assessment. Staff don't always see us as assessment experts but the reality is that we very much experience assessment from the programme perspective - we can see and experience all sorts of different assessments across modules and honestly, we have a pretty good sense of what has or hasn't worked for us in the past. We know what kind of assessments we find interesting and challenging. The challenge is compromising on what a variety of different students within a module may want, as well as compromising on what students as a whole and staff want from this assessment. Involving students in the assessment process can help us be more engaged in the module and get us to develop key skills like communication, teamwork and compromise.

Jonny: I think so, yes, but it can be a bit of a fine line to tread sometimes. Partnership with students is doable and desirable but requires active planning and scaffolding for it to be successful as student partner activity should be '*meaningful*', not artificial or '*make-worky*' [sic] if partnership is to be genuine. There's definitely asymmetry in the partnership dynamic and working in partnership has given me real insight into how things have moved on from the student perspective in the last year. From the staff perspective, yes – I have the knowledge – but I tend towards being text-heavy and don't always have the best (non-traditional) ideas of how to translate it into student-appropriate language or have a good idea about how to capture and present information about a specific area of expertise in a way that a student might actually engage with it, which Ben has been amazingly proactive about suggesting. I've also found it interesting to unpick how some of the institutional context works – e.g. to explain in student-friendly language how and why some things work the way they do. I've learned huge amounts from the partnership – I think there is definitely space for partnership that is authentic but that it's a good idea to clarify likely areas of expertise on both sides early on - acknowledging each other as experts offers a really good platform to build a partnership on.

8. Discussion and findings.

Developing insight into each other's experiences of partnership is a core feature of successful partnership activity. Staff/student partnerships inevitably feature an asymmetry of knowledge and power (Bovill et al, 2015). By explicitly acknowledging this at the outset (e.g. that each partner will draw on different experiences and institutional knowledges), it is possible to create and support a space in which open dialogue can be fostered, supporting the emergence of a relationship of '*active collaboration*' rather than '*team lead/team member*'. In our own practice, this translated to setting out broad '*research questions*' that would serve as action research touchpoints across the partnership: what did we hope to achieve through collaboration? How would we know we had achieved it? What might '*successful activity*' look like by the end of [x] project phase? How might the partnership approach be beneficial/useful to both partners?

On a very practical level, it can be extremely beneficial to work in '*comment and mark-up*' on shared documents, rather than pass documents back and forward by email, particularly when working around each other's schedules precludes live/synchronous meetings – and document mark-ups can support iterative feedback dialogues that feel less ephemeral, perhaps, as a trace of partnership interactions when revisited at a later stage. Prompt questions, scaffolding documents, and reading '*frames*' can all be used to support student partners to rapidly acquire expertise in project activity; comment mark-ups of these can then be used to inform conversation – reflection – action cycles as features of partnership.

9. Conclusion.

In this reflective enquiry we have explored and highlighted some of our experiences of working in what has been an overwhelming positive staff/student partnership model in academic year 2020-2021. While we rightly talk about partnership impacting positively on student experience and engagement, we should also acknowledge that the '*soft*' skills supported by student partnership work are highly transferrable: confidence in public speaking, confidence to articulate opinions, and being able to demonstrate collaborative teamworking skills are all valuable features for student partners when articulating the benefit of partnership work both in and outwith the academy.

While the circumstances and context in which the partnership emerged were difficult and at times seemed unmanageable, we suggest that if Students-as-Partners approaches can be implemented even in the context of pandemic disruption, adopting partnership models can certainly play a role in shaping staff and learner expectations and experiences of higher education in the coming years.

For students, becoming involved in partnership work can foster engagement and enhance the student experience more generally. For staff, students who are engaged are more likely to '*do the reading*', contribute actively and respond to teaching, and develop the independence which we want our learners to achieve. The student-generated annotated bibliography and '*quick start*' resources in the appendix outline further considerations to bear in mind when working collaboratively in partnership - whether from the context of a Teaching and Learning Centre, from the perspective of a disciplinary academic, or perhaps most importantly, from the perspective of a prospective student partner.

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Cited policy documents:

1. [Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision Making](#) Report of the Working Group on Student Engagement. HEA (Ireland), 2016.
2. [Steps to Partnership](#) USI/QQI/HEA (Ireland), 2021.

Appendix: Supplementary Resources 1-3:

These three linked resources are intended to support staff/students new to thinking about Students-as-Partners ('SaP') approaches as they explore the evidence base that explores markers of successful SaP activity. This student-generated resource pack includes two research-informed 'quick-start' 2-page resources (one staff-facing, one student-facing) on 'quick strategies for SaP success' intended to provide practical and pragmatic advice, drawing on and reflecting best practices aligned to the evidence base shared in the annotated bibliography (resource 3).

Resource 1 (student-facing resource): Quick strategies to support you as a Student Partner in Learning

Students-as-Partners approaches ('SaP') are intended to help you to develop agency in your learning as you navigate higher education. Put simply, this means that SaP approaches let you make decisions and take responsibility for your own learning. This isn't always easy either for you or for staff: taking on an active role in your learning can be a change for you, particularly if you're only getting used to higher education teaching and learning and the independence you're given by staff to manage your own learning. It's important to not be intimidated by this – staff who engage in SaP activities are very aware that your voice matters and that you have something to say that is worth listening to. For staff, working in partnership can be challenging at times, as SaP approaches can shake up the power dynamics of higher education. The below points are shared here to help you get the most out of SaP approaches to higher education.

Why engage in Students-as-Partners approaches to learning and teaching?

- Develop a sense of ownership of your own learning.
- SaP approaches can deepen your understanding of your subject and how well you do in assessments.
- Shape the kind of teaching and learning experience you want to have.
- Develop a variety of skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, analysis and more.
- Can lead to better performance in assessments and academic work, while also improving key employability skills (Lewis, 2017).

1. You know more than you might think you do – your opinion matters too!

While you may not always think it, you have a wealth of knowledge when it comes to Teaching & Learning practices. Consider just how many lectures, classes, tutorials, labs etc. you have sat through and how many assignments/assessments you've already completed. You know which assessments you found the most rewarding, the most frustrating, and which styles of teaching you've found most engaging or most supportive of your learning. Use this information to provide feedback to help shape your current classes as well as the learning experiences of future students.

2. Embrace increased independence and agency in your learning.

Taking on increased independence for your learning can be daunting. Knowledge is complex in higher education – it's not like school where there is/are only one or two right answer(s). Getting it right isn't easy when you're learning how to learn in higher education and instead of

being told what you need to do, you're expected to make your own decisions and apply critical independent thinking. One of the most frequently used SaP activities is co-creation, either of assessment or of a module. Co-creation is about giving students increased agency in their learning (Deeley & Bovill, 2017) – this can be a great opportunity for you to shape the kind of assessment you think actually tests your learning.

3. SaP approaches are about the process of learning, not just about the 'product' of learning.

By engaging with staff and other students around different styles of learning, you are developing your critical thinking and analytical skills. By engaging in an assessment co-creation activity, for example, you're actively developing insight into the 'how' and 'why' assessment matters, as well as thinking about the 'what' is being assessed. Engaging in co-creation can develop your critical thinking and analytical skills before you even begin to start the assessment itself.

4. Be ready to think differently about hierarchies.

SaP activities assume that both staff and students are equally respected team members with unique knowledge and experience they can bring to a project (Murphy et al. 2017). While you may be hesitant to question your lecturer given their expertise, SaP approaches encourage you to develop the negotiation and softer diplomatic skills to question the decisions of others and express your own views – in this case about how you best learn. Try to move beyond the 'traditional' student-staff relationship where the lecturer has all the answers and towards a mindset where they can enable you to learn and find the answers yourself.

5. Communication is key.

Effective communication is central to the success of SaP (Bovill et al. 2015). SaP approaches work best when there is a dialogue between staff and students. This can support lecturers and students alike to understand why/where barriers to learning emerge.

6. Don't be afraid to remind staff about your other time commitments.

SaP projects are an amazing opportunity to develop new strategies to support and enhance your learning. Like with anything else, SaP work can become overwhelming if you are not effectively managing your time. If you are working on a SaP project outside of your course requirements, be sure to remind the staff team members of your other commitments outside of that particular project. Staff are usually very accommodating, however, it is on you to remind them of any upcoming deadlines or projects that may impede your SaP work – and partnership activity shouldn't interfere with your normal assessment deadlines! You may not know what deadlines your academic tutor/partner is working towards (e.g. towards a book deadline, research grant application, or conference activity) – they don't always know what else you have coming up in your timetable. Be conscious of each other's priorities.

In summary:

- 1. You know more than you might think you do – your opinion matters too!**
- 2. Embrace increased independence and agency in your learning.**
- 3. SAP approaches are about the process of learning, not just about the ‘product’ of learning.**
- 4. Be ready to think differently about hierarchies.**
- 5. Communication is key.**
- 6. Don’t be afraid to remind staff about your other time commitments**

Resource 2 (staff-facing resource): Quick strategies for successful partnership with students

At their core, Students-as-Partners approaches ('SaP') are about enabling students to develop agency in their learning as they navigate higher education. SaP approaches empower students to make decisions and take responsibility for their own learning. This isn't always straightforward for staff, particularly as it involves oscillating between the twin positions of staff-as-disciplinary-expert and staff-as-facilitator-of-learning (Murphy et al., 2017). Power dynamics and a disciplinary knowledge imbalance must be negotiated regularly between staff and students. Students can be overwhelmed and intimidated where staff do not adequately scaffold the pathway to independence and choice. In an assessment context, for example, complete freedom is undesirable for students and staff alike. As an alternative to total freedom of assessment activity, consider providing a limited number of 'desirable' or achievable assessment stimuli. You might then encourage students to either choose a pre-created assessment task relating to these stimulus materials or to develop a new assessment activity along similar guidelines working together in concert with peers/you as the academic.

STAFF: Why engage in Students-as-Partners approaches?

- Foster better relationships with student cohorts by engaging in dialogue (and reciprocal feedback).
- Encourage students to develop the meta-knowledge students possess regarding their learning process (Murphy et al. 2017).
- Develop new insight into how students prefer to learn and be assessed.

Key principles underpinning Students-as-Partners work:**1. Students-as-Partners approaches are process-oriented and developmental.**

Consider that the process of co-creation is itself a learning tool for students: affording students the opportunity to select an appropriate essay title or marking criteria furthers their understanding of the language of assessment (Deeley & Bovill, 2017). Students in higher education are expected to be, and supported to become, independent and to take responsibility for their own learning: SaP approaches foster that very independence.

2. Start small, start early.

SaP activities can take place at micro, meso, or macro level, e.g. with small groups, module cohorts, or at institutional level, and at a range of levels of 'importance' from low-impact decisions such as assessment deadlines to significant engagement in curricular design and revision (Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Matthews, Abbot, Cheng, Felten, Knorr, Marquis, Shammis & Swaim, 2017). Getting started can be as simple as collaborating with students on logistical issues such as deadlines or assessment volume by way of a simple introduction to SaP. From there, look to use SaP approaches in more complex and meaningful ways, perhaps collaborating with students on assessment activities, rubric codesign, revamping syllabi, or on design of learning materials and resources.

3. Leave behind the 'traditional' student-staff power dynamics.

Unlike 'traditional' activities in which staff have complete control of teaching delivery and in which a clear hierarchy is visible, SaP activities are based on the principle that both staff and students are equally respected team members. Each equity group has their own unique

knowledge and experience to bring to the project (Murphy et al. 2017). Consider reframing how you view the staff-student relationship. Students are often hesitant to speak up or disagree with a figure that they can perceive as being 'all-knowing', so remind student partners that their opinion is equally welcome and that you encourage thoughts and questions. This likely results in a better collaborative process and encouraging students to develop the 'researcherly' thinking that higher education seeks to foster in graduates.

4. Communication is key.

Effective communication is central to the success of any SaP activity (Bovill et al. 2015). Students can be reluctant to take up the increased responsibility for their learning or may not see the benefit in SaP – particularly where they perceive SaP as requiring more 'work' on their part than the more passive role they play in traditional lecturing environments. It is important to clearly outline the activity process, the reasoning underlying your selection of a SaP approach, and to be explicit in what you hope they will get out of the process, e.g. increased motivation or enhanced critical thinking or collaborative skills (Deeley & Bovill 2017).

5. Students know more than you might think.

Despite frequent characterisation to the contrary, students are not passive learners who do not care about their learning process (Matthews et al. 2017). The reality is most students care greatly about the ways in which they learn and will gladly contribute to any discussion about how to improve their learning (particularly where a likely positive impact on assessment performance can be highlighted). Students often do not have the confidence or insight into their own metaknowledge of learning. Foster this confidence through asking for, and respecting, student voices.

6. Overcoming resistance to co-creation.

While many staff see the benefits of co-creation with students, they are often hesitant to actually commit to SaP projects. This is often linked to a stance that sites students as inexperienced or incapable of providing constructive input on teaching and learning decisions (Murphy et al. 2017). For staff, the best way to overcome this resistance is to trial some form of SaP activity in your context in a low-stakes environment.

7. Be conscious of students' other time commitments.

Students have lives outside of the university and many students balance caring responsibilities, part-time work, complex home environments, and complex health needs. It is important to check in with students regarding their other commitments and, particularly when working closely with a small number of student partners, to clarify reasonable expectations for the amount of time they can devote to a particular SaP project. For a SaP project involving large cohorts such as an entire class, liaising with class representatives to set suitable deadlines can ensure students have sufficient time to engage with the project. Where developing partnership projects outside of the taught curriculum, remind students that they should prioritise their formal teaching and learning commitments.

8. Consider the inclusivity of any SaP activities.

Consider which students you are working in partnership with and the selection process. Which student voices are amplified in a student partnership context? Be wary of 'all students think

that...' blanket statements. Are you only working, for example, with class representatives or SU officers; are multi-student partnerships gender balanced and representative of the wider cohort? (Bovill et al. 2015). Using a variety of communication methods to connect with students allows for the most inclusive SaP activities – polls, chat, mic, google forms etc. More formal measures for improving inclusivity may be decided when selecting paid SaP partners for longer-term projects. Greater research is needed on the most effective ways to ensure inclusivity amongst student partners – this could, for example, offer an excellent focus for a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning project in the disciplines.

9. Give feedback, ask for feedback.

Dynamic feedback is a vital part of the SaP process: SaP approaches are likely to require ongoing monitoring and adjustments (Whelehan, 2020). Students often find it frustrating that they do not benefit from the feedback they provide, as changes are only implemented for subsequent cohorts (Whelehan, 2020). Providing opportunities for reciprocal feedback – e.g. part way through a module, or part way the academic year - may allow for changes to be made that benefit the current cohort of students. Where this is unfeasible or undesirable, consider outlining feedback findings to students and highlight changes for future practice. This emphasises to students that the process is 'live' – e.g. that their point of view and expertise is being acknowledged.

Consider asking your students for feedback on the SaP activities you undertake across a year; what worked, what didn't and what else would they like to see as a SaP activity. You might consider opening an anonymous forum (e.g. enabling students to voice their opinion safely) that remains open for the duration of the SaP activity, in addition to encouraging students to provide feedback through more usual channels (email, 1-on-1 discussion, during teaching events etc). Consider being explicit with your students: highlight that if you aren't aware of what they perceive as difficulties or challenges, it is harder for you to support them through a SaP or other learning process.

10. You are an expert, but so are they.

Students do not have your level of expertise in your discipline and are unlikely to develop it unless they become experienced full-time researchers/academic staff/clinicians/professionals etc. However, you most likely do not have their level of experience of their programme of study, of managing their own learning, or of 'being a student' in a (post-)COVID-19 context. How might you support a partnership that acknowledges this imbalance and that promotes a quality learning experience for all involved?

In Summary:

- 1. Students-as-Partners approaches are process-oriented and developmental.**
- 2. Start small, start early.**
- 3. Leave behind the 'traditional' student-staff power dynamics.**
- 4. Communication is key.**

5. **Students know more than you might think.**
6. **Overcoming resistance to co-creation.**
7. **Be conscious of students' other time commitments.**
8. **Consider the inclusivity of any SaP activities.**
9. **Give feedback, ask for feedback:**
10. **You are an expert, but so are they.**

Resource 3: Annotated Bibliography

This **short annotated bibliography** scopes current and seminal articles in the field and outlines key ideas for academics and students engaging in partnership and provides ideas on where and how practitioners reflecting on their own experiences of partnership might join the conversation.

1. We Want to be More Involved: Student Perceptions of Students as Partners Across the Degree Program Curriculum

Matthews, K. E., Groenendijk, L. J., & Chunduri, P. 2017, 'We Want to be More Involved: Student Perceptions of Students as Partners Across the Degree Program Curriculum', *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(2).

- This survey-based study focuses on students within an Australian HE institution and finds significant evidence to suggest students place a great deal of importance on being included in T&L decisions. The survey results firmly refute the consumerist notion that students are passive learners, proposing rather that students are keen to be more involved in co-creation and curricular development activities than they currently are. This offers a rich departure point for future work that considers how to move further away from consumerist orientations to higher education teaching and learning and support greater and more meaningful engagement between student, staff, and their respective orientations towards research, teaching, learning, and assessment.

2. Students as Partners in the Real World: A Whole-Institution Approach

Shaw, N., Rueckert, C., Smith, J., Tredinnick, J. & Lee, M. 2017, 'Students as Partners in the Real World: A Whole-Institution Approach', *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(1).

- SaP activities are often promoted and explored either at the micro-level of teacher-student or at the meso level of module and programme approaches. In this article Shaw et al. take a more macro approach and explore the use of SaP at the institutional level. Their key suggestion is the need to recognise diversity in the institution as a starting point for developing pilot plans that provide staff and students with a range of opportunities for partnership – e.g. recognising that there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach to student partnership. Pilot programmes can both gather support and nurture local champions as well as spotlight challenges to be addressed. The case study explored highlights the importance of 'meaningful' partnership work.

3. Conceptions of students as partners

Matthews, K.E., Dwyer, A., Hine, L. & Turner, J. 2018, 'Conceptions of students as partners', *Higher Education*, 76(6), pp. 957–971.

- The authors provide an overview of the issues of academic resistance to SaP and inclusion within staff-student partnerships. Matthews et al. identify a number of broad orientations towards Students-as-Partners practices, which are perhaps best summarised as follows. Firstly, SaP activities can be used as a counternarrative to the

traditional, hierarchical staff/students relationship and point towards a more equal, collaborative learning environment. Secondly, they suggest SaP approaches can also be used to provoke culture change within universities, challenging existing attitudes and practices surrounding teaching and learning. Finally, they articulate the need to recognise SaP activity as a values-based practice, with enabling activities that must be grounded in the values of reciprocity and mutual trust to acknowledge the respective expertise of both staff and student team members.

4. Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity in student–staff partnerships

Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., Felten, P., Millard, L. & Moore-Cherry, N. 2015, 'Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity in student–staff partnerships', *Higher Education*, 71(2), pp.195-208

- Bovill et al. explore three of the most common challenges associated with SaP practices: a resistance to co-creating teaching and learning, the difficulties of navigating institutional structures, practices & norms, and enabling principles for establishing an inclusive co-creation approach. The authors clarify that communication in partnership underpins successful activity, with a particular focus on ensuring shared definitions and working understanding between stakeholders in the co-creation dynamic.

5. “I am wary of giving too much power to students:” Addressing the ‘but’ in the Principle of Staff-Student Partnership

Murphy, R., Nixon, S., Brooman, S. & Fearon, D. 2017, “I am wary of giving too much power to students:” Addressing the “but” in the Principle of Staff-Student Partnership’, *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(1).

- While staff are generally supportive of SaP activities, their support for meaningful engagement is frequently accompanied by a sharp caveat (e.g. the ‘but that won’t work because’ frequently seen in student-staff partnership). Murphy et al. outline four ways to overcome this ‘but’ of student-staff partnership, with some particularly compelling input on the perspective shift from ‘staff as experts’ to ‘staff as facilitators’. Refuting the idea students are not expert enough to co-design/develop assessments and module pathways, the authors attempt to articulate the benefits of mixed levels of expertise in their advocacy for SaP methods to staff and students. They highlight that use of SaP practices both enable staff to better appreciate student perspectives of their courses and to realise and afford students agency in how they navigate their own programmes of study.

6. How conceptualisations of curriculum in higher education influence student-staff co-creation in and of the curriculum

Bovill, C. & Woolmer, C. 2018, 'How conceptualisations of curriculum in higher education influence student-staff co-creation in and of the curriculum', *Higher Education*, 78(3), pp.407-422.

- How a higher educational institution problematises and engages with the term 'curriculum' has implications for how both staff and students interact with curricula. The authors outline the most common differences between co-creation 'of' the curriculum and co-creation 'in'. In this article Bovill and Woolmer provide an overview of four prevalent curricular conceptualisations and outline the most common opportunities for co-creation that arise from each of these perspectives. The article suggests that co-creation opportunities are both more prevalent and more meaningful when curriculum is thought of as a process of learning, when it is student-focused, and when the dynamic nature of the teacher-staff relationship is understood.

7. Students as Partners: A model to promote student engagement in post-COVID-19 teaching and learning

Whelehan, D.F. 2020, 'Students as Partners: A model to promote student engagement in post-COVID-19 teaching and learning', *AISHE-J: The All Ireland Journal of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education*, 12(3), pp.1-10.

- This article highlights four distinct activities for promoting SaP approaches in HE institutions. Whelehan (a current researcher and former Students' Union sabbatical officer) suggests SaP approaches should be used in a meaningful way both at the institutional level and within individual classes and not reflect the non-existent or tokenistic student involvement often seen in HE institutions. One of the key challenges highlighted by Whelehan is the longitudinal nature of change year-on-year as experienced by staff and students. Students may not perceive adequate benefit from partnership approaches as the feed-forward from their partnership interactions influences future cohorts' activity, rather than being experienced directly by student partners themselves. Academics should consider whether partnership activities can impact directly on current cohorts of students as well as future cohorts. One way to do this might be for staff and students to establish what they wish to achieve within the year (or duration of partnership) and formalise a review of their activity. Partnership is more likely to be successful where immediate impact is seen – e.g. where students can point to change following a partnership intervention.

8. A Systematic Literature Review of Students as Partners in Higher Education

Mercer-Mapstone, L., Dvorakova, S. L., Matthews, K. E., Abbot, S., Cheng, B., Felten, P., Knorr, K., Marquis, E., Shammass, R., & Swaim, K. 2017, 'A Systematic Literature Review of Students as Partners in Higher Education', *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(1).

- This comprehensive literature review highlights the most commonly identified benefits & challenges of SaP activity and identifies/outlines the key stakeholders most likely to be involved in SaP processes. The authors acknowledge and discuss the need for reciprocity & the importance of dialogue and conversation between staff & students, and explore with sensitivity the dynamics of inclusion in staff/student partnerships – of particular interest is how partnership activity can broaden the conversation to amplify a range of student voices. The literature review also engages with the challenges of reporting poor experiences of SaP activity, acknowledging that there is likely a bias against reporting negative outcomes in reflections and studies relating to SaP projects.

9. Staff student partnership in assessment: enhancing assessment literacy through democratic practices

Deeley, S.J. & Bovill, C. 2017, 'Staff student partnership in assessment: enhancing assessment literacy through democratic practices', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(3), pp.463-477.

- Fostering partnerships grounded in assessment practice can be a particularly fruitful approach. Deeley and Bovill reflect here on how co-development and co-creation/evolution of assessment activity can significantly enhance students' assessment literacy. They suggest that co-creation of assessment instantiates and places great focus on the role of assessment *for* learning. The discussion is focused on the challenges posed by/the benefits afforded by student selection of essay titles and co-designed marking criteria. The authors advocate for staff to signpost and signal to their students how their engagement with co-design supports learning in order to address challenges identified in SaP approaches.

10. Extracurricular Partnerships as a Tool for Enhancing Graduate Employability

Lewis, D.I. 2017, 'Extracurricular Partnerships as a Tool for Enhancing Graduate Employability', *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(1).

- Lewis outlines the process of student-staff partnership outside the taught curriculum, an often overlooked area of SaP collaboration, and the benefits for both staff and students. He argues the process allows students involved to develop their professional skills while also providing valuable insight on the wider student perspective to which staff/faculty would otherwise have limited or no access. The results from the case study approach put forward in the article suggests that SaP approaches foster translatable/ transferrable 'soft' skills such as team-work, analysis and communication skills that are perhaps not always explicitly cultivated during undergraduate study; there are also likely benefits for students' self-perceptions of agency, seen e.g. where they report an appreciation for being treated as equals with staff.