



Learning Together in, and about, Student-Staff Partnership in Higher Education.

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Abstract.

Student-staff partnerships are increasingly encouraged as a student engagement practice in Higher Education. By working in partnership, students and staff can learn from each other's experiences and expertise, generating benefits for all. In this article, co-authored by students and staff, we offer insights into a student-staff partnership initiative at Maynooth University and Maynooth Students' Union. Our partnership has its roots in the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) project, a cross-institutional initiative that aims to enhance the digital educational experiences and digital attributes of Irish university students. We discuss the development of our partnership, and outline some of the work that we have cooperated on so far, including collaborative development of student supports, resources, and social media campaigns, as well as facilitating shared student-staff conversations and action around wider institutional and national concerns. We draw on concrete examples from our time working in this partnership, and in this context, we highlight the benefits we have experienced; outline the challenges we encountered; and provide insight into the learning and unique perspectives that Maynooth students and staff members of our partnership gained in the process. By reflecting on our journey and sharing both our learning and the challenges, we hope to contribute to the wider discourses around meaningful student-staff partnership approaches in Higher Education.

Keywords: Digital Learning and Teaching; Student Engagement; Student-staff partnership.

1. Introduction.

Authentic student-staff partnerships, whereby "*students are directly involved as change agents and partners within the system*" (Collins et al., 2016, p. 16) are increasingly encouraged as a student engagement practice in Higher Education (HE) (Cooke-Sather & Luz, 2014; NStEP,

2021; USI 2018). Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felton (2014, pp. 6-7) define effective student-staff partnership as “*a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the same opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis*”. By working in partnership, students and staff can benefit from each other’s experiences and expertise, generating benefits for all involved. Through partnership initiatives, students are invited to share in the responsibility for shaping and improving their learning and teaching environment in meaningful ways, and to participate in shared decision-making. Working alongside students provides staff with an insight into what it is like to be a student today, and encourages them to challenge assumptions that they make about the student experience and students’ needs, thus influencing their practice. Treating students as authentic partners in their learning is also central to supporting students to become critical thinkers and active citizens, as depicted by Bovill and Bulley (2011) in their adaption of Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation. Such partnership opportunities aim to treat students as equals in decision-making and influence. Students, in an ideal partnership-model, are supported to move from being excluded entirely from such opportunities to being authentic partners, without being treated in a tokenistic fashion. But how can we start to climb this ladder? In this article, co-authored by students and staff, we offer insights from a student-staff partnership initiative at Maynooth University. We first discuss the development of our partnership. Next, we reflect on the benefits we have experienced and outline the challenges we encountered. Finally, we consider how well we managed to work towards the goal of authentic partnership.

2. Building a Student-Staff Partnership.

Our partnership has its roots in the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) project. Commencing in 2019, this cross-institutional initiative is co-ordinated through the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and aims to enhance the digital attributes and educational experiences of Irish university students. A key principle underpinning the EDTL project is “*Students as Partners*” (Flynn, Lowney, Munro & Byrne, 2019). In this context, towards the end of 2019, the Maynooth University EDTL Project Lead; the Maynooth Students’ Union (MSU) Vice President Education; an MSU Student Senator with an interest in digital learning and teaching; and the MSU Communications Manager initiated a partnership aimed at ensuring that the EDTL project at Maynooth was authentically informed by the student voice. Over time our partnership group has further expanded to include wider student and staff representation. From

2019 onwards, a student internship programme was integrated into the EDTL project. Initially one student intern was appointed at a cross-institutional level. Following on from this, at least one additional Intern was recruited in each of the seven participating universities. The EDTL Internships are part-time (15 hours per week), paid positions, with their overall remit being to contribute to the work of the project, by bringing the student voice to project activities and communications. At Maynooth University, one intern was appointed in the first instance in August 2020, followed by three additional Interns over the course of 2020 and 2021. Our current EDTL Interns represent all three Academic Faculties of Maynooth University, come from a range of levels of study, and have included a first-year student and a postgraduate student. As well as contributing to our local EDTL student-staff partnership, the Interns also collaborate with the cross-institutional team of EDTL Interns across the seven universities.

In addition to the EDTL student Interns, our partnership group has also been joined by additional staff and students from across the university community. Staff membership now includes representation from academic staff, as well as an additional member of the EDTL project team. The expansion of student membership of our partnership was co-ordinated through MSU, and this had several benefits. Students' Unions are democratically organised institutions; thus, we were able to bring MSU Academic Representatives, who had been elected by the wider student body, into the partnership. Students' Unions also typically have positions dedicated to specific cohorts of students, making inclusion of the perspectives of those cohorts easier: for example, we were able to include a Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP) Student Representative in our group. Furthermore, the student body is, by definition, transient in nature: partnership with the Students' Union has enabled ongoing recruitment of membership over time, as well as affording continuity as students leave and join the group.

In the sections that follow, we discuss some of the work that we have collaborated on as part of our partnership so far, including: co-creation of student resources and supports; generating collaborative responses to shared concerns; and the establishment of opportunities for staff and students to engage in dialogue and to learn from each other's perspectives. As an extended example, we share our approach to writing this article in partnership. Other than some initial meetings prior to the pandemic, most of our work so far has been conducted entirely online, with a shared Microsoft Teams channel used for meetings, ongoing communications, and collaborative resource development.

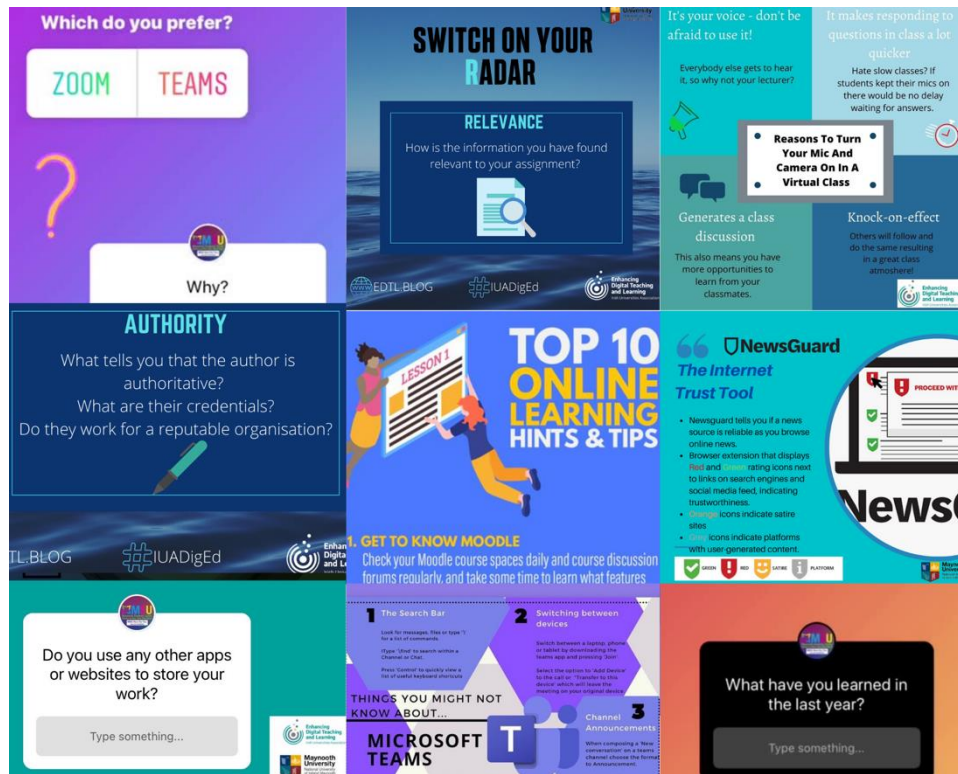
2.1 Co-creation of student resources and supports.

The focus of our initial partnership group - which comprised student and staff representatives from MSU, and the EDTL institutional lead - was to consider how findings from the Irish National Digital Experience (INDEX) survey (National Forum, 2020) might frame our work. As such, we planned to hold student focus groups towards the end of the 2019/20 academic year, to further explore themes emerging from the survey, and to identify priority areas for collaboration. The context for our partnership's work changed when, on 12th March 2020 Irish colleges and universities closed their physical classrooms due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and teaching was suddenly forced online. We discussed whether our planned focus groups, which had been intended to take place face-to-face, might go ahead online; however, we concluded that the emergency context was not the appropriate juncture for this. Instead, the group began to consider how we might collaborate to support Maynooth students in the rapid transition to remote learning. Bringing together student and staff knowledge and experiences, we developed a series of Top 10 Online Learning Hints and Tips for Maynooth University Students, which were disseminated via MSU's social media channels within two weeks of the university closures (Figure 1). Compiling the tips collaboratively brought together existing staff knowledge about online learning with the lived experiences of students, and enabled students' immediate experiences of remote learning due to the pandemic to be quickly integrated into the advice provided. Building on this, in advance of a shift to remote exams and assessments, we developed our Top 10 Online Exams and Assessments Tips, again, combining staff knowledge of best practices in assessment in this context with practical insights from students (Figure 1).

Membership of our partnership expanded in August 2020, with the appointment of our EDTL Student Interns at Maynooth, and with the recruitment of additional student and staff representation from across the university. Informed by discussions in the group about the key issues impacting students at this time, including consideration for how best to empower students to develop their digital skills and competencies, the EDTL Interns have held several "*Takeovers*" of the MSU Instagram account. Topics covered during these takeovers have included "*Online learning tips*"; "*Online exam and assessment advice*", "*Maynooth (Digital) supports*", "*Digital detoxing*", and "*Backing up your data and organising your desktop*". These sessions are generally kept fun, light, and engaging, yet informative. They have achieved high engagement rates as well as positive feedback, and seemed to be beneficial for all parties involved. During the takeovers, Interns engage with students through polls and opened ended questions. This

feedback has provided a useful source of additional and immediate data for our group on students' perspectives and experiences (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Montage of some of our outputs.



In their recent framework for student engagement in decision making Steps to Partnership: A Framework for Authentic Student Engagement in Decision-Making, the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) stress that “*co-creation and co-design of knowledge, actions, and outcomes, where engagement culture shifts from passivity to collaboration*” is crucial to successful partnership (NStEP, 2021, p.11). In other words, it is essential for the flourishing of the team that every member is actively engaged in the collaboration process. This guiding principle informed the planning process of our takeover days. Topics covered were decided collectively by the partnership group. Each Intern then chose a particular timeslot during the day that defined when and for how long they oversaw the content on the Students' Union Instagram account. After every takeover, student interns were responsible for saving the graphics and short videos they had shared, and for saving engagement statistics.

Our partnership extends beyond our core group into different university departments. For example, one of our Interns is a final year business student. Over the course of her studies, she

had noticed that there was a disconnect between the kind of news sources that teaching staff were expecting students to engage with, and the sources students were actually using. Similarly, staff in the School of Business had noted that students were not always engaging with appropriate sources of news and found that they were instead more likely to make use of less credible sources of information, for example social media feeds. To address this disconnect, the Intern collaborated with staff in the School of Business to create a series of infographics to help students better engage with business news and credible internet sources, including promotion of “*NewsGuard*”, an internet trust tool that serves to help students to evaluate the appropriateness of a particular information source (NewsGuard, 2021). Student Interns promoted the infographics via the School of Business, MSU, and EDTL project Instagram and Facebook pages. Through this collaboration, we learned that staff had for a long time been concerned about the reputability and trustworthiness of the online sources that students were using for their written assignments. The student perspective allowed us to see that, at the same time, students were finding it difficult to navigate the ‘sea of information’ that is provided by the internet, and identify relevant and reliable sources for their research. To combat this shared concern, and again in collaboration with the School of Business, the same Intern created a second set of resources. The aim of this work was to promote the ‘*RADAR*’ technique, which is framed around five questions students should ask themselves about information sources: Relevance?, Authority?, Date?, Appearance?, and Reason for Writing? (Mandalios, 2013). A series of infographics were created to encourage students to become autonomous, responsible, and informed academic researchers. These infographics were again disseminated through the School of Business, MSU, and EDTL project social media platforms. Both NewsGuard and RADAR were also promoted to students during our Instagram Takeover days (Figure 1). The Interns created short, engaging video content that they posted throughout the day. These posts served to highlight any tips, approaches or resources available to assist students. Polls and questions were used to check in with students, who were asked to highlight any questions or difficulties they were having.

2.2 Working collaboratively to address common concerns.

Working in partnership has enabled us to find collaborative solutions in response to shared concerns. For example, through our partnership, students and staff collaborated to initiate the development of a set of lecture-recording guidelines for the University. Following the move to remote teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students had raised concerns about variability

in practice regarding the recording of live online lectures. In addition, there was a lack of guidance for staff in this context. Staff, on the other hand, had raised concerns about intellectual property of recorded materials, the potential for the inappropriate sharing of recordings beyond the context originally intended, academic freedom regarding teaching approaches, and decreased student attendance at face-to-face lectures. Following preliminary discussions, our student and staff partnership group authored a set of draft guidelines rather than a recording policy, establishing best clarity and guidance around the most important questions surrounding the recording of remotely delivered classes or the use of pre-recorded lectures. To incorporate perspectives of students beyond the partnership group, the MSU Vice President for Education worked with individual class representatives (170 in total) to conduct consultations with every class, so that all students had the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. The draft guidelines were further refined in consultation with a range of university offices and staff/student committees, most importantly, the Teaching and Learning Committees of the individual Faculties as well as of the University. Engaging in dialogue around issues relating to lecture recording allowed staff to better understand the perspectives of students, and vice versa, and by working in partnership we were able to incorporate these perspectives into the guidelines. The result, precisely because it is a guide to best practice rather than a prescriptive policy, addressed the concerns of both staff and students in such a manner that it has now been accepted as the MU recording guidelines.

A further area of shared concern for both students and staff in HE is academic integrity; indeed, this was an issue that came up frequently in our groups' discussions. Based on this, we decided that part of our wider agenda would be to build a shared culture of responsibility for academic integrity. Initial collaboration in this area included creation of infographics, an Instagram campaign and workshops for MSU student representatives (Munro et al., 2021). During Academic Integrity Week 2021 we built on this work further by utilising both online and on-campus spaces to increase both our physical and digital presence in order to develop more awareness of, and to encourage conversation between students and staff around, academic integrity. Initiatives included a digital academic integrity pledge space that both student and staff contributed to; an Instagram campaign; and provision of student and staff workshops, co-designed and co-delivered by students and staff. The week culminated with a workshop where students and staff engaged in dialog about academic integrity.

2.3 Learning with and from each other through open dialogue.

A further benefit of our partnership has been the creation of opportunities for staff and students to engage in dialogue around topics that they may have not had the opportunity to discuss previously; this has provided staff with valuable insights into students' experiences and perspectives, and vice versa. For example, as part of an accredited module for staff, Digital Technologies in Higher Education Teaching and Learning, the EDTL Student Interns led workshops on supporting digital learners and developing their digital literacies. These workshops were designed collaboratively: students developed the workshop content and activities, with the EDTL project lead providing guidance and input as needed. Teaching this class placed students in the unique position where they could experience themselves in the role of lecturers. Indeed, students and staff found themselves in flipped roles, which radically subverted pre-existing roles, and reconfigured power-dynamics in the classroom.

After the class, student interns and the project lead reflected on their experiences. During the conversation, student interns expressed their surprise at the level of interest shown by staff members in their student perspectives. Student interns felt listened to and said that it was brilliant to hear the audience's thoughtful questions, which felt like embarking on a journey of collaboration that had not been there before; having had the opportunity to design and deliver a class to staff challenged preconceived notions on all sides. In other words, students were able to get insight into the staff perspective, whereas staff had the opportunity to hear the students' point of view. Student Interns felt empowered by the chance to discuss topics that could enrich their online learning experience, such as lecture recording, information on educational video making and editing, and the use of PowerPoint slides. They also had the chance to voice their worries about their privacy, such as having a camera and microphone on during an online lecture while both parties are at home. Lecturers were also able to express their feelings and difficulties, such as the extra time and effort that it takes to create a fully edited pre-recording of a class, and ensuring effective communication between staff and students during an online lecture. These classes not only were a space for students to gain skills as lecturers and communicators. In these student-led classes, a shared understanding between lecturers and students of their respective positions on topics that concerned both parties could be reached.

From a staff perspective, the workshops were essential to identify students' needs regarding remote and blended learning, and means for best teaching practice. It was an invaluable opportunity for staff to gain insight into a variety of students' perspectives while, at the same

time, to discuss difficulties and limits of different approaches surrounding blended and remote learning. Staff participants deemed this part of the module an invaluable learning experience where they could engage first-hand with student perspectives and experiences, as well as discuss different approaches to digital learning and digital skills development, thus also correcting a number of pre-conceived notions regarding the students' learning experience.

2.4 Writing this article in partnership.

2.4.1 Guiding principles.

As a final example of our partnership in action, we share our approach to writing this article. Since partnership is the core theme of our paper, we aimed to stay true to our collaborative values throughout its development. At the same time, since writing an article is an inherently creative act, we also wanted to establish conditions conducive for "*creative cognition*" (West & Sacramento, 2006, p. 27). According to Claxton (1997), a healthy climate for teamwork requires individuals to feel as safe and free from pressure as possible. To establish such a climate, we needed to be mindful of each other's feelings. We consciously decided to make space to express our worries and concerns throughout the process, and to reflect on them as a group. Working towards a coherent narrative became secondary in our initial agenda. Soon we discovered that the pursuit of equality within a mixed team required us, first of all, to become attuned to the ways power manifested. In other words, we had to learn how pre-existing power dynamics might influence and shape the collaborative writing process.

2.4.2 Our '*choir*' of different voices.

Our partnership group consists of different members of the Maynooth university community which members change each academic year. This diversity of student and staff voices meant that through the course of our studies and work, we had each become acquired to writing in a manner specific to our different disciplines and contexts. For example, authoring a paper in anthropology draws on a slightly different skillset, resulting in a unique style or tone, than a business or computing report or assessment. We knew that ignoring such pre-existing differences within the team would not be conducive to a truly collaborative outcome. The more we reflected on our initial aim to create equal conditions, the more we began to question its practical feasibility, especially when we realised that not only was the student cohort characterised by an inherent relative power-imbalance, the difference between student members and university staff was even greater. There was a clear gap in knowledge and

experience between those members of the group whose positions were referred to as “*students*” and “*staff*”. The mere terminology signals a power-imbalance between these two parties. However, the imbalance of knowledge exists for both parties. While staff may be more familiar with general university structures and processes, or the theories of digital teaching and learning, students hold the only authority on what it means to be a student at Maynooth today. On the one hand, this suggested that both students and staff had something to learn from each other. On the other hand, this meant that, even before starting any planning or writing process, we had to acknowledge pre-existing power dynamics within the team, and as a team. Only once we understood the unique skillset that each member brought to the team, we could learn how everyone could contribute their unique skills to both the wider project and to this paper. Some of the most important lessons we learned reflected general principles of partnership work, which we will briefly outline in the next sections. The three main lessons concerned 1) the importance of ensuring continuous, shared dialogue, 2) collaborative and democratic decision-making, and 3) the necessity for acknowledging the potential manifestation of systemically re-produced and thus pre-existing power inequalities within the group.

2.4.3 Employing the transformative potential of dialogue.

The design process of this collaborative writing project was in line with the model proposed by NStEP (2020) in *The Path to a New National Approach to Student Engagement in Decision-Making*. According to this framework, the best way to address possible challenges is through open, transparent dialogue. Of course, we also wanted to create equal and inclusive conditions for conversation built on “*trust*” (NStEP 2020, p. 11). According to the same model, “[a] sense of trust shapes spaces for cooperation, as well as shared roles and responsibilities” (NStEP 2020., p. 11). Therefore, we had to be continuously aware of existing or perceived hierarchical structures. For instance, a meeting facilitator might be considered to hold more power than others, because they have more control over the flow of the conversation. Further, the person taking notes might also be considered more powerful than the other members, because they are actively involved in determining what will be remembered from the meeting. We thus understood that equality was more a guiding principle than an end goal. In our meetings we aimed to mitigate against that by, for example, rotating responsibility for calling and chairing meetings, taking notes, and outlining action points. In addition, when writing this article, we decided collectively to allow two members of the group with more experience in academic writing, a postgraduate student and the EDTL project lead, to guide, but not to dictate, the

process. In our meetings, we openly talked about existing hierarchies and how they might affect the writing process. These conversations created a space for us to reflect on each of our needs and wishes, and to ensure that they were heard and met. More specifically, we discussed how we were going to bring nine different voices into one coherent narrative without disregarding or misrepresenting their individuality.

2.4.4 Collaborative decision-making.

NStEP (2021) note that collaborative decision-making is crucial for student-staff partnership. During the writing process we consciously aimed towards establishing conditions for collaborative decision-making. In our meetings each of us took space and time to articulate how they felt about academic group writing. People expressed some worries and concerns, such as feeling insecure or unsure about “*proper academic writing*” due to their lack of experience. Talking openly about these concerns in a group setting allowed us to find ways to acknowledge and address them and through that encourage a transparent work atmosphere. After the conversation, we agreed that the best way to write this article was to create a shared document, in our Microsoft Teams site. Since some members of the group had more experience than others, they were made responsible for creating a coherent narrative out of all individual accounts. As is common practice amongst other co-authored papers, we used the review bar and track changes to give feedback and suggest changes or edits to each other’s writing instead of merely changing it. Our strive towards equality throughout the process of writing this paper manifested itself in the most unexpected ways. For instance, later in the year we reflected on the process of finding meeting dates, which up until this point had been usually left to one person who pre-selected a few dates, created a doodle-poll, and sent out the link to others so they could indicate their availability. However, our strive towards equality made us realise a more democratic way for deciding on a meeting date, namely, through rotating the responsibility for pre-selecting a pool of dates and times. The more we explicitly valued equality as a core value of our group, the more we seemed to almost organically recognise the smallest changes we could make to establish fairer decision-making processes.

2.4.5 The challenge of power dynamics.

Through the process of writing this article, we learned more about the ways in which power manifests within a mixed student-staff group. In conversation with each other, we realised that our first aim to eradicate power-imbalances was misguided. This meant that we would never be able to escape its influence. We had to acknowledge the fact that knowledge and experience

were unequally distributed within the team. In that way, we acted according to the NStEP guidelines:

“The recognition of inherent power imbalance and the impact of power dynamics is required to recognise meaningful pathways to build the capabilities of students and staff to work together to influence and inform change.” (NStEP, 2020, p. 11)

At the same time as becoming aware of inherent power-imbances, we came to learn how people’s skills and resources can be applied such that they benefit everyone. We learned how to transform power into action. Throughout the whole process, open communication was crucial. Again, NStEP highlight that open dialogue is integral to meaningful student-staff partnership:

“Engagement that can meaningfully lead to partnership between students and staff requires a dialogic approach, open and transparent relationships, the nurturing of connections, and the development of a sense of belonging. Dialogue denotes communication that is multi-directional and responsive to concerns and ideas, underpinned by recognised processes of providing feedback and taking actions that close the feedback loop.” (NStEP, 2020, p.11)

In our conversations it was important to ensure that everyone had an equal chance to express their perspectives and feelings, and that each member of the group, regardless of their role, was equally valued. At the same time, we also recognised that with power there comes responsibility; for instance, if those members who had more expertise with academic writing were to simply change other’s work without their consent, then this would undermine the equality of the partners, and thus the intended partnership as a whole. This then would potentially impact the whole writing process, and through that, the final output. Pursuing meaningful student-staff collaboration required us to become sensitive for all the nuanced and hardly visible ways in which pre-established power-dynamics manifested themselves within the team. Certainly, power-dynamics manifest differently depending on the context. Writing this article in partnership gave us a different perspective on the challenges and benefits of student-staff partnership than we had acquired by working together in other contexts. However, the insights we gained through the process of writing this paper in collaboration feeds into our future thinking about the essential values and requirements for meaningful partnership more broadly such as, for example, effective communication, equal opportunity and responsibility and the most importantly, recognising the unique skills and perspective every member brings to the partnership.

3. Perspectives on partnership.

Student-staff partnership not only supports democratic values such as inclusivity, equality and participatory decision-making, but it also contributes to the individual personal growth of students. For example, one student Intern, who had previously also been an MSU Academic Representative, appreciated the value of gaining insight into the educator's perspective. This Intern, in reflection, recognised that she had been quite narrow-minded before her involvement in this project, and had felt disempowered. Gradually, during her time working as a student Intern, she began to feel increasingly empowered, especially, in moments when she came to experience the direct rewards and effect that she had on university decision-making processes. Moreover, she felt that being part of our partnership had allowed her to experience an incidence of respectful collaboration, and she was surprised of the level of confidence she gained when speaking and sharing her ideas with the team, while she also practiced being open to constructive criticism and feedback. Our student-staff partnership, to her, felt co-operative, because each member held an equal stake in the group, decisions, and their outcomes. For instance, student Interns were regularly consulted about their needs concerning digital skills, and they had even had the chance to be actively part of discussions around the development of university lecture recording guidelines. Never before did she have the opportunity to participate in high-level discussions about university operations, and she was both surprised and happy to be treated as an equal stakeholder and a valued and full member of the team. Other Interns have had similar experiences. For example, a different intern was a first-year student who joined the team most recently. On reflection, he remembered how happy he was to find out that the partnership decided to create a team that represents each Faculty, which he found was essential to promoting inclusivity. The novelty of this student-staff partnership approach was apparent; he was amazed to experience that his first-year student opinions were sought and valued on topics such as academic integrity and other university operations. Student Interns not only came to learn about the nuanced ways in which authentic student-staff partnerships can enhance their own learning experience, but they also experienced their positive effects on the teaching approaches of staff. The benefits of introducing staff to the perspectives of students were frequently confirmed by interested questions, conversations and compliments by members of various local and national university communities, including lecturers, library staff, and educational technologists.

Seeing the importance and effect of their work reflected so clearly seemed to positively

encourage and empower student Interns in their practices. In continuous discussions and conversations around the meaning of partnership, students agreed that the EDTL project felt like partnership, because they were able to voice their opinions and contribute their student perspectives to university decision-making processes. One Intern explained that the regular meetings on MS Teams contributed heavily to their flourishing partnership, and she recognised the importance of continuous and successful communication for partnership. In these weekly meetings, members were able to bring in their own ideas and discuss them openly without any hesitation. These continuous interactions and knowledge-sharing between students and staff allowed students to understand situations from the staff-perspective, which made them also aware of the limitations and constraints that staff might experience. Student Interns explained that they did not feel as if they were at the bottom of a hierarchy, which was a feeling that some of them had experienced in other partnership projects before. Finally, student interns also found that they gained important and new skills from working in the various projects, such as improving their public speaking, developing digital content, and social media management.

For the institutional EDTL project lead, working in partnership with students has been an enlightening and transformative experience. She has worked in various roles in relation to HE staff development and student support for several years, with the aim of this work being to positively impact on student learning and the student experience. While she had worked directly with undergraduate and postgraduate students in this context, this contact with students had generally been limited to developing resources or support workshops, attending meetings where students were participants, or engaging with students via focus groups. Working in partnership with students has enabled her to understand the perspectives and lived experiences of students much better. This, in turn, has impacted her own practice, and has enabled her to feed her new perspectives into her work with teaching staff and with students. For example, in respect of academic integrity, collaboration and dialogue with students has allowed her to build the perspectives of students into workshops and resources aimed at staff, while co-designing and co-delivering workshops with students has had a transformative effect on her practice.

We also had an MSU staff member as part of the group. Their role was to support and assist the VP Education and the other student representatives while bringing their own knowledge and experience to the table. Having a staff role such as this within the group can assist in keeping student representatives up to date should they miss meetings and provides a constant presence that can help the handover process when students roles move on. Through working in a Students' Union, they were used to working alongside students on a daily basis. What was new

for them in this initiative was experiencing the University, the Students' Union and students all collaborating on one project and working to be equal partners. This was particularly energising and enlightening for them. This staff member has since moved on to a position within the University and will carry with them the partnership lessons learned and look to embed them in other projects.

For the Academic staff member of the group, working with the group has been an invaluable experience on a number of levels: challenging and correcting pre-conceived notions about student learning and what is best practice from a student perspective; learning about the effectiveness (or not) of different practices; and frankly learning about the use of technology in the wider teaching and learning context. Students are often far ahead of most staff in terms of using technology in the best possible way to support learning: participating in this group has thus provided an important learning experience. The opportunity to be able to ask for advice and engage different positions in dialogue has been equally beneficial, especially since the experiences of students are not homogenous. Insights could be brought back for further discussion and consideration to Departments and the Teaching and Learning Committees on both University and Faculty level. Work with the EDLT group has also brought to the fore the necessity of input from students in all teaching and learning matters which is not currently being established, for example, as a permanent feature in the Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee.

4. Key Challenges and our Responses.

There are certainly challenges when working in partnership. Teaching and learning enhancement projects and initiatives are frequently initiated with a staff member or team being tasked with a piece of work, and then forming a group of staff and students to implement the project; indeed, this was initially the case with the EDTL project at Maynooth. In such contexts, from the outset someone is presented as the creator, owner, or leader, of the project. Care is needed at this point to set the course for the partnership approach. This can be done in practical terms by sharing responsibility for the management, participation, and evaluation of the project, as we have illustrated in the examples above.

A challenge as any project advances is to what extent students are empowered to work in partnership with staff and to what extent they are being directed by them. Empowerment is a key principle of NStEP's Steps to Partnership Framework, which notes that empowerment in

decision-making is required for both students and staff to realise the full potential of engagement and partnership with each other (NStEP, 2021). This was something that developed over time in our project. While initially there was direction from the staff members, this evolved over time as students were encouraged to participate as equals, identified their strengths, and assumed greater responsibility. This was perhaps best evidenced in this project through dissemination. We have presented at numerous National and International conferences over the past 12 months. While initially there was direction from staff who had previous knowledge in submitting conference proposals and participating in academic conferences, students were treated as co-creators, collaborating on the development of abstracts, presentations and delivering the presentation on the day. This has culminated also in the article you are reading today: a truly co-created and co-authored piece of work, one that has seen staff and students working as authentic partners.

5. Conclusion.

Partnership work is an underlying belief in a philosophy of abundance rather than deficit (Marie, 2020). Staff bring to the table expertise, pedagogic knowledge, and institutional awareness. Furthermore, staff may be aware of practices or institutional goals that students are not party to. On the other hand, students have first-hand and up-to-date experience, and have ideas and valuable insights to offer about their current learning journey. Students know things that staff cannot, since they are the ones currently living the student experience. Partnership occurs when these abundances of knowledge, perspectives and experiences come together to offer a more complete understanding of the university teaching and learning experience. Our work, and the learning resulting from it has highlighted the value of student-staff partnership, as well as providing a unique opportunity to gain new perspectives on digital learning and teaching. Students had the valuable opportunity to steer the process of teaching and learning in ways which they had not experienced previously. Staff, at the same time, gained beneficial and important new insights into student perspectives on their learning journey and the obstacles they face, and how to integrate, encourage, and increase student input on different levels, such as, for example, assessment, module design, and pedagogic practice.

The experiences gained in our partnership provided several important insights. For example, viewing teaching and learning from both student and staff perspectives enabled us to understand the practical dimensions of student-staff partnership, such as the important role of

planning, designing, and communication on an equal level for the creation of effective, empowering, and inclusive educational methods. Furthermore, our understanding of power-dynamics changed: recognizing that power-dynamics (as experienced, for example, in different levels of expertise) always play some role in collaborative work, enabled us to work with them and employ them in productive ways rather than working against them. The partnership approach therefore allowed us to direct these dynamics and thus experience them in a fluid and dynamic rather than a set and rigid (and therefore disempowering) way.

There are several different ways how our insights gained from this project could be developed further. One next step could be, for example, to explore the transformative potential of student-staff partnerships in different contexts, such as trialing their application in classroom settings. Here the structural limitations will provide different challenges. Some of which can be fruitfully addressed through a partnership approach. While we do not claim to have found the perfect or only way to work in context of student-staff partnership in higher education, we think that our experiences, and the ways we dealt with challenges gives a glimpse into the benefits and transformative potential of considering different members of the university community, each of them embodying different sets of beliefs and skills, as equal and valid voices who benefit from working with and learning from each other. Crucial to our success as a group has been establishing and continuously cultivating open, honest, and positive relationships between all members of our partnership.

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