How are staff supported to undertake student-staff partnership opportunities?

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Introduction

University strategies increasingly seek to embed student-staff partnerships as part of institutional innovation programmes (Gravett et al., 2020; Marquis et al., 2019) and quality processes to drive impactful change (Cook-Sather, 2014; Healey et al., 2014)). Whilst it is recognised that institutional terminology around partnership varies (Bovill, 2019), (for example, at the partner institutions, connectors, changemakers, inclusive practice partners), it is generally agreed that partnership working is a process (Healey et al., 2014) rather than an outcome and the success of partnership projects have been linked to effectively establishing the values of partnership working (Luo et al., 2019). Staff facilitators and their preparedness to engage in effective partnership working are therefore integral to the ability to successfully scale partnership working across institutions, extending partnership working beyond the most engaged groups of staff (Duda & Danielson, 2018).

Despite the importance of establishing the conditions for a successful partnership (Smith et al., 2021), to date, little attention is given in sector guidance or literature to approaches to ensuring staff preparedness for such partnerships. As a result, this is an important question to investigate to enable the development of appropriate resources for the increasing number of student-staff partnerships.

Literature review: how are staff supported in undertaking student-staff partnerships?

Several foundational working practices have been identified as influential to the success of student-staff partnerships (Chui et al., 2022) indicating that a facilitated space for partnerships to flourish is key. Matthews et al (2019) identify the importance of the role of academic developers as facilitators in partnership processes, from supporting the development of relationships to advocating for increased institutional attention to the potential for partnerships, overcoming resistance, offering reassurance, and promoting equity and inclusivity.

There are few (no) studies within the literature on student-staff partnership that take a detailed look at staff preparedness for partnership, despite the consensus that successful partnerships benefit inclusion agendas (Bovill et al., 2016), improved student belonging and satisfaction, cultural responsiveness (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019), and changes in thinking by students and staff about the curriculum (Peseta et al., 2016). Little training is offered to staff and where it does exist it isn't typically compulsory for those participating in partnership projects (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020) leaving them to learn on an ad hoc basis as their projects progress.

Being ready and able to work in a partnership has been described as a 'mindset' (Cook-Sather et al., 2020), and as a set of 'attitudes and intentions' which intersect thinking/mental processes (cognition), and emotions (affect) which can be strong predictors of partnership outcomes (Cook-Sather & Kaur, 2022). To embark on partnership working without any preparation, facilitation, or resources could present a serious risk to the process, to the experiences of those involved (both students and staff), and to the desired outcome – particularly as the reported challenges involve issues of power and authority, and the need to move away

from the dichotomous 'us and them' mentality (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2018) towards a more unified relationship between partners.

Increasingly a lens of equity has been applied to staff undertaking such partnership work (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). This is an important aspect to consider in the formation of student-staff partnership work. Of the limited research related to supporting staff-student partnerships a need to consider the relational aspects (Matthews et al., 2019) including the emotions that are invoked by such work has been identified (Healey & France, 2022; McConnell, 2022). Recommendations for support include peer support, reflective writing, and/or mentoring (Healey & France, 2022). In the context of an institutional partnership programme this could take the form of a community of practice (Khouri et al., 2017) supported by academic developers e.g., the community of practice established as part of a summer school provided the degree of support necessary for staff undertaking partnership work (Marquis et al., 2019).

Summary

Our literature review indicates that little attention has been paid to date on the preparation of staff for undertaking partnership work. This highlights how the current project can contribute to existing knowledge and practice related to student-staff partnerships.

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