Preparing for student-staff partnerships:

A toolkit for staff

Table of Contents

[About this toolkit 2](#_Toc161216278)

[Who is it for? 2](#_Toc161216279)

[How to use it 2](#_Toc161216280)

[Student-staff partnership across the sector 3](#_Toc161216281)

[What is student-staff partnership? 3](#_Toc161216282)

[Aligning values with process 3](#_Toc161216283)

[Inclusive partnership 3](#_Toc161216284)

[Key themes for successful partnerships 4](#_Toc161216285)

[Setting Expectations 4](#_Toc161216286)

[Watch the video: Setting Expectations (opens in YouTube) 4](#_Toc161216287)

[Questions to prompt thinking about setting expectations. 4](#_Toc161216288)

[Trust 5](#_Toc161216289)

[Watch the video: Trust (opens in YouTube) 5](#_Toc161216290)

[Questions to prompt thinking about trust 5](#_Toc161216291)

[Empowerment 6](#_Toc161216292)

[Watch the video: Empowerment (opens in YouTube) 6](#_Toc161216293)

[Questions to prompt thinking about empowerment 6](#_Toc161216294)

[Impact 7](#_Toc161216295)

[Watch the video: Impact (opens in YouTube) 7](#_Toc161216296)

[Questions to prompt thinking about impact 7](#_Toc161216297)

[References and further resources 8](#_Toc161216298)

[References 8](#_Toc161216299)

[Further resources 8](#_Toc161216300)

[Contributors: 9](#_Toc161216301)

# About this toolkit

This toolkit is the outcome of collaborative research involving four universities as part of a QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project. Led by the University of Sussex, in partnership with the University of Brighton, UCL, and the University of Salford.

Despite the importance of establishing the conditions for a successful partnership, to date, little attention is given in sector guidance or literature to approaches to ensuring staff preparedness for such partnerships. Our project set out to find common themes, which if considered by staff in advance of partnership activity, can improve outcomes for all involved.

Our research identified a number of themes four of which we have highlighted in this toolkit; setting expectations, trust, empowerment and impact.

## Who is it for?

This resource is primarily aimed at staff members involved in student-staff partnership activities. Whether you're hesitant about starting a project, currently in the middle of one, or evaluating an existing partnership, this information is relevant to you. Additionally, students interested in this topic are also encouraged to explore and benefit from the content provided.

## How to use it

Each theme has a short video and a series of reflective prompts or questions. Whilst these can be used at any stage of partnership, they’re most effective when used proactively. There is no strict order, so begin where feels right for you. Reflect, watch videos, and take small steps.

An example use case might be to use these at the beginning of a partnership as part of an activity, to facilitate discussions on how to overcome some of the challenges. You could pose the questions to the group after having watched the videos. Or you may simply choose to reflect individually in advance of bringing a partnership together.

There are many other factors to consider when working in partnership with students, the themes picked out in this toolkit are designed as a starting point. It is not an exhaustive list, nor is it a checklist.

# Student-staff partnership across the sector

## What is student-staff partnership?

A broadly accepted definition of partnership is that it is “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all partners have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, investigation or analysis” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6–7)

For a guide to navigating the terminology and the importance of student-staff partnership work, we recommend you check out [A Guide to Working with Students as Partners](https://www.chester.ac.uk/media/media/documents/guides/University_of_Chester_Students_as_Partners_Guidance.pdf) (Healey, 2023). The guide ‘explores why working with students as partners is worthwhile; what is meant by working with ‘students as partners’; and offers a framework for how you might approach partnership practices’.

## Aligning values with process

In [The partnership co-creation process: Conditions for success?](https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v5i2.4772) (Smith et al, 2021), the authors offer a framework for embedding partnership values, aligned to the stages of partnership activity. By interacting closely with the established values of staff-student partnerships, the process offers an approach through which the traditional hierarchies of higher education are dissolved.

For those involved in staff-student partnerships, motivations are authentic rather than profit based or instrumental. The process offers a practical approach to framing partnership work from the inception of the project, thereby reducing anxiety and developing a shared understanding of the partnership process, and to how the partnership maps to underpinning values, ensuring they form part of the dialogue throughout. This makes the process accessible to a broader range of staff as an approach.

## Inclusive partnership

Student-staff partnerships have a huge role to play in empowering under-represented and marginalised students by amplifying their voices, needs and ideas and demonstrating we value the diverse knowledge, expertise and experiences our students contribute. Student staff partnerships have been shown to improve student confidence, belonging and resilience, develop critical thinking, leadership and communication skills which means they have the potential to enhance outcomes for historically minoritised and under-represented students (Mercer-Mapstone, Islam & Reid, 2021; Cook-Sather, 2018).

Barriers can be overcome through strategies such as, embedding opportunities within the curriculum, ensuring students are remunerated or using inclusive recruitment strategies amongst other ways. For more information on creating inclusive and culturally sensitive partnerships, see UCL’s ['Creating inclusive student-staff partnerships'](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/publications/2023/sep/creating-inclusive-student-staff-partnerships) teaching toolkit.

# Key themes for successful partnerships

## Setting Expectations

“We talked about like what we could do, what we should do as well. But it wasn't very impactful. But I don't think it was because of the partnership or something that he did wrong. But like the role was quite voluntary and they didn't give like any structure. They didn't like give any, like, clear goals and stuff. So it made it hard for us to work together. I would say and it just fell apart, basically”

Student, UCL

### Watch the video: [Setting Expectations](https://youtu.be/3d0YYN-txk0) (opens in YouTube)

### Questions to prompt thinking about setting expectations:

* Managing expectations with a focus on inclusivity is a foundational element in building successful staff-student partnerships. How can you be realistic about what you can achieve?
* When both staff and students feel safe expressing their opinions, sharing ideas, they are more likely to collaborate effectively. How can you facilitate an environment that sets clear expectations to achieve shared goals?
* What are some tangible goals you can co-create with your students at the start of a project? What personal goals do you each have and how can these be embedding within the wider goals of the project? This could include setting checkpoints throughout as well as one or two larger deliverables to help keep everyone motivated and clear on what you are working towards.

## Trust

“I think, trust is that people feel like they can say what they need to say, and that's being done in within a safe environment, and that there's no judgement, and that it's okay to disagree, and that you will be able to resolve that disagreement in a proper manner. You know, you've got to trust that you can disagree because a lot of this is about having courageous conversations, and if you can't have those because there's no trust, then that's quite problematic. But I think you know fundamentally it's about also feeling like you can get it wrong and there's gonna be no repercussion to that; and I think that's the fundamental for me.”

Staff, University of Salford

### Watch the video: [Trust](https://youtu.be/a6Y1F1ug6dU) (opens in YouTube)

### Questions to prompt thinking about trust:

* Partnership working within higher education is a process in which establishing the values of partnership is critical for success. Trust is frequently identified as being fundamental for these partnerships, yet how is trust built and maintained?
* Setting realistic expectations was identified as fundamental to building sustainable partnerships within this study. How can we ensure that throughout the course of the partnership, that we are flexible as the reality of the situation may be different to what was first imagine?
* In creating a successful partnership, how can the inevitable power imbalance be acknowledged, and deliberate acts taken to counteract the imbalance.
* It is vital to establish a sense of inclusivity for a partnership to be successful. How can we ensure that partnership opportunities and working are always centred on equity?

## Empowerment

“We have this shared dialogue between students and staff that we build empowerment, that we think about allowing students and staff to have equal voices. I think having a training session all together with students and staff is supportive for staff.”

Staff, University of Brighton

### Watch the video: [Empowerment](https://youtu.be/2dVH1_iHhKw?si=G3rhOTj9zAYxugiG) (opens in YouTube)

### Questions to prompt thinking about empowerment

* Student empowerment is an essential component of any successful staff-student partnership. When partners are not able to be physically in the same space how can technologies support reducing power imbalances?
* What training is available for all participants to help them develop team working and project management skills?
* How are discussions or meetings where ideas are shared facilitated to ensure all voices are heard, or have a chance to contribute? Are there other methods of contributing?
* How can you shift power dynamics to foster a more equitable and collaborative relationship, promoting the potential for genuine engagement and mutual learning between staff and students?

## Impact

“But also it was quite nice… my own feedback directly going to staff so that (it) could impact the way staff operate… At that point I could really see, ‘oh, this, this project can have impact.’”

Student, University of Sussex

### Watch the video: [Impact](https://youtu.be/9FN00OpRRec) (opens in YouTube)

### Questions to prompt thinking about impact

* When staff and students feel valued they are more likely to feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and ideas and engage in open dialogue. How can you ensure that all partners feel valued, or that their work matters, during the duration of the project?
* When projects do not go to plan, how can staff communicate to students that their work may not ultimately be utilised as was originally intended?
* How can you help students articulate the broader skills and experiences they are gaining through getting involved in partnership work? How does this map to employability skills or their wider careers aspirations?
* Are students involved in the dissemination of the project? How will you communicate what has happened (or not) as a result of the partnership work to the students on your team and to the staff and student community more widely?

# References and further resources

## References

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: A Guide for Faculty. Jossey-Bass. ISBN: 9781118434581.

Islam, M., Mercer-Mapstone, L., & Reid, T. (2019). Are we just engaging ‘the usual suspects’? Challenges in and practical strategies for supporting equity and diversity in student–staff partnership initiatives. Teaching in Higher Education, 1-19

Cook-Sather, A. (2018) Listening to equity-seeking perspectives: how students’ experiences of pedagogical partnership can inform wider discussions of student success, Higher Education Research & Development, 37:5, 923-936, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2018.1457629

Healey, R. L. (2023). A Guide to Working with Students as Partners. Centre for Academic Innovation and Development, University of Chester. Retrieved from <https://www.chester.ac.uk/media/media/documents/guides/University_of_Chester_Students_as_Partners_Guidance.pdf>

Smith, S., Akhyani, K., Axson, D., Arnautu, A., & Stanimirova, I. (2021). The partnership co-creation process: Conditions for success?. *International Journal for Students As Partners*, *5*(2), 48–66. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v5i2.4772>

## Further resources

* University of Reading. (2020). Guide on Giving Quality Feedback. Retrieved from <https://sites.reading.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/35/2020/10/Guide-on-Giving-Quality-Feedback-May-2020.pdf>
* University of Cambridge. (2020). Working with Students as Partners Guidance and Resources. Retrieved from <https://www.cctl.cam.ac.uk/files/students-as-partners-guidance.pdf>
* Bovill, C. (2017). A Framework to Explore Roles Within Student-Staff Partnerships in Higher Education: Which Students Are Partners, When, and in What Ways? International Journal for Students as Partners, 1(1), 10–14.
* Chiu, T., Murray, Ó. M., & Coispeau, M. (2022). Student-staff partnership: what is the key to success? Advance HE. Retrieved from <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/student-staff-partnership-what-key-success>
* University of College London (UCL). (2023). Creating Inclusive Student-Staff Partnerships. Retrieved from <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/publications/2023/sep/creating-inclusive-student-staff-partnerships>

# Contributors:

University of Sussex

* Dan Axson, Learning Technologies Manager
* Oindrilla Ghosh, Student Reseacher
* Abby Ryanto, Student Researcher

University of Brighton

* Juliet Eve, Head of the Learning and Teaching Hub
* Dr Catherine McConnell, Head of Student Academic Success
* Pippy Stephenson, Student Researcher
* Venkata Subnarao Vallapaneni, Student Researcher

University College London

* Annie Hata, Student Researcher
* Abbie King, Student-Staff Partnership Lead
* Professor Susan Smith, Deputy Director for Student Experience and Professor of Accounting
* Jingshu Peng, Student Researcher
* Fiona Wilkie, ChangeMakers Manager

University of Salford

* Professor Claire Hamshire, Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor Education and Student Experience
* Elizabeth King, Student Researcher
* Dr Kevwe Olomu, Student Researcher (now graduated and working as a lecturer)

This toolkit is an output from a Collaborative Enhancement Project supported and funded by QAA Membership. The project is led by the University of Sussex in partnership with the University of Brighton, University College London and the University of Salford. Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the QAA website.