

Preparing for student-staff partnerships: A toolkit for staff



I think it needs an academic or several academics to really show students that they are valued, and I think that that value, you demonstrate that by generating the ideas together and really taking their feedback.

Image credit: Lizzie King, University of Salford

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



We maybe need to meet with students a bit more and say look these are the things we are working on as an institution.

What projects do you think you could feed into that or what projects do you think would add value to your experience within this context? So maybe that's the scaffold and that's the approach that we take forward.

Image credit: Lizzie King, University of Salford

- What is student-staff partnership
- Aligning values with process
- Inclusive partnership

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](#) (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?](#) (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’](#) teaching toolkit.

Key themes for successful partnerships



So as a member of staff you have to show that you're going to close the loop, you need to be saying what you're going to do with the information and how you're gonna take it beyond the immediate period. So that students can see whether or not that has actually happened and it's only by seeing the whole process through, that you will start to develop that trust, because it's only when you can do that will you have any credibility and be able to move forward.

Image credit: Lizzie King, University of Salford



SETTING
EXPECTATIONS



TRUST



EMPOWERMENT



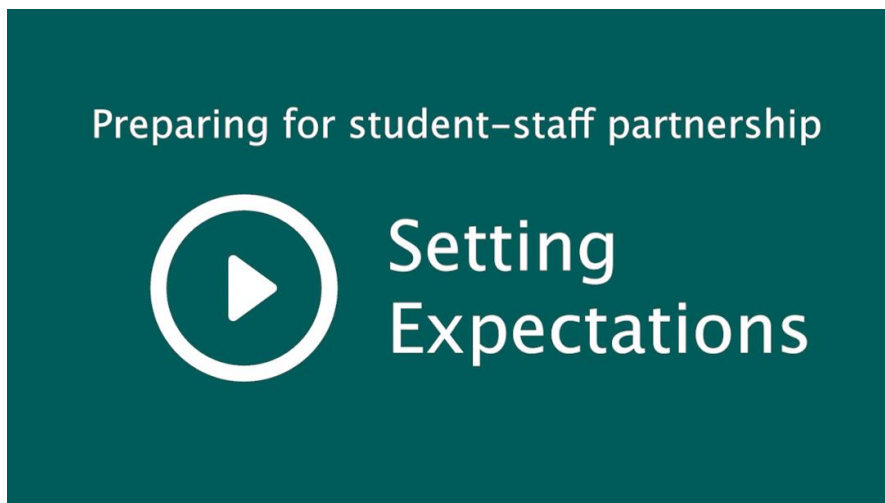
IMPACT

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:



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:



Questions to prompt thinking about trust:

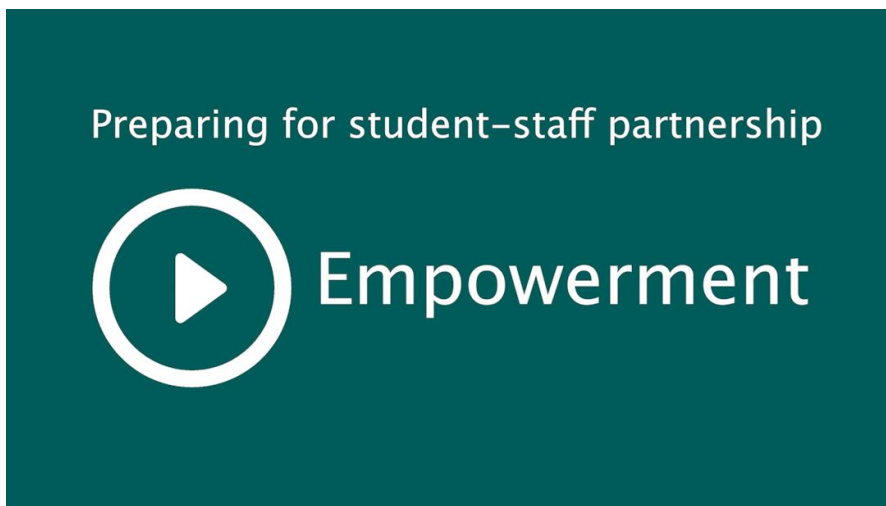
- Partnership working within higher education is a process in which establishing the values of partnership is critical for success. Trust is frequently identified as being fundamental for these partnerships, yet how is trust built and maintained?
- Setting realistic expectations was identified as fundamental 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:



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:



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.

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Further resources

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