**Students as Partners**

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**Introduction**

This chapter considers an institutional scheme to encourage students and staff to work in partnership on projects to enhance the student learning experience. The scheme exists in the context of the university’s commitment to students becoming full partners in the future of the institution.

The concept of students as partners is a political one and I consider how this is positioned in opposition to the concept of students as consumers. Students as partners has benefits for staff, helping them to practice in ways that are meaningful and effective for student learning. It also has great benefits for students, improving attainment and well-being. Yet partnership work is not without its challenges, not least in terms of the students we reach, who we represent and the extent to which partnership is achieved.

**Background to students as partners at UCL**

UCL has placed students at the heart of its UCL2034 vision. It states that one of the university’s objectives is to “ensure that our students, at every level (UG, PGT and PGR), feel that they are a key and integral part of our university community, and that their opinions and suggestions are valued and acted upon, as full partners in the future of UCL” (UCL, 2014)

UCL ChangeMakers is UCL’s flagship student engagement initiative and sets the tone for the relationship between staff and students in terms of the responsibility each has for education at UCL. It began in 2014-15 as a pilot, where students could propose and carry out their own educational enhancement project. That year we supported 24 students to carry out 10 projects.

A year later, we massively expanded the programme. We firstly brought staff educational enhancement projects under the same programme, changing the requirements for these such that they had to be conducted in partnership with students. Twenty-three projects initiated by staff were funded in this way and the number of student-initiated projects were expanded to 29. At the same time, we introduced a ‘scholars’ scheme, whereby students worked with departments with lower student satisfaction than the university mean to enhance their assessment and feedback practices. Twenty such projects were supported (Marie, Arif and Joshi, 2016. Marie, Azuma, accepted).

2016-17 saw a further diversification of the opportunities available, with the piloting of ASER facilitators, who worked with the Student Academic Representatives and staff of departments with lower student satisfaction to ensure strong student input into the department’s annual development plan. It also saw the pilot of students acting as partners with staff to help them reflect on their practice and how it could be further enhanced; with students inputting through physical and virtual teaching observations and looking at an assignment brief.

**Student as partners: the rationale**

Since the introduction of student fees of up to £9000 in the UK in 2012, students are being increasingly talked about as customers. The UK’s National Student Survey, which final year students complete, is becoming ever more important in the choices that students make about where to do their degree and will form an important part of the UK’s Teaching Excellence Framework, which will affect the level of student fees a university can set.

While a strong student voice can be seen as long overdue, the transactional model of student-university relationships is neither desirable nor inevitable. In the UK the National Union of Students is resisting this model, along with academics (Wenstone, 2012). Universities support students to learn - students cannot passively receive graduate knowledge, skills and attributes with no effort on their part except for paying a fee. Students must invest more than just money to get the most out of their time at university. What they get in return should be better than a product off the shelf - it should transform both their ways of thinking and their lives (Mezeriow, 2000).

Universities should be actively working against the transactional model of education by educating our students about it and by providing environments in which students are treated as partners in their education, as opposed to customers - so that they adopt this mind-set. Change projects do just that. One of the students who completed a UCL ChangeMaker project in the first year was very explicit that doing the project had changed his relationship with UCL:

*“Whereas before, I think I was very content to be a consumer more than anything of education here at UCL, the ChangeMaker projects has allowed me to conceive myself in a producing role.” (CALTADMIN, 2015b)*

Students as partners can be a political concept, which challenges the influence of neo-liberal politics in the Higher Education sector. However, regardless of the politics, there are great benefits in working with students as partners for both the students themselves and the work that is undertaken.

***Benefits for students taking part***

*Student Attainment*

Student/staff partnerships have many benefits for students. Not least because students who do not hold a transactional model of their relationship with university are likely to take responsibility for their own learning and thus have higher attainment rates.

The majority of the students who completed the 2015 UCL ChangeMakers evaluation (85%, with a 33% sample) said that it had improved their experience of being at UCL. They wrote that it did so by enhancing their sense of community and of being valued. These are indicators of their sense of belonging and, as one of our UCL ChangeMakers projects established (CALTADMIN, 2015c), as well as being a powerful good in its own right, particularly for student welfare, a sense of belonging is also a predictor of attainment. As one of our scholars wrote following their work with their department:

*“I genuinely feel more involved with the department and my academic studies.”*

While being involved in partnership work may take up students’ time, it is thus still likely to benefit their attainment through preparing them to be active, responsible learners, increasing their sense of belonging and because completing a project develops a range of skills, such as project management, team-work and communication, which are important not just for gaining employment but also in academia.

Improved attainment is also likely to be achieved due to the results of the project. In the first year of UCL ChangeMakers, students piloted oral language exchanges and anatomical drawing classes - which is likely to directly improve their academic work. They also devised a feedback rubric, identified overlaps in their course and persuaded staff to embed more Problem Based Learning (PBL) in their courses - all of which are likely to improve their and other students’ grades.

*Well-being*

Partnership work can also improve students’ well-being in a number of ways. As discussed, students gain an increased sense of value and community. As one scholar wrote:

*“it is a great way of getting to know the staff and students in the department and thereby creates a sense of community”*

Feeling comfortable with staff is important for students to be able to seek any help they need, if they face difficulties.

Well-being is strongly linked to a belief that one can improve one’s life. I believe that UCL ChangeMakers does encourage this belief. As one student said:

*“My view is that the ChangeMakers scheme is quite necessary and I cannot understand a university that would not have one because it encourages students to make a change or at least understand what changes can be made on their campus and their role in facilitating that change and it gives them the skills and the confidence that is needed to make change in the wider community.” (CALTADMIN, 2015c).*

By empowering students we teach them that they can make change in their courses and by extension their community and personal life. I remember just how liberating it was, the first time I realised that it is always possible for me to improve any situation that I am in, because I am a factor in the situation: if I can change nothing else I can change my attitude or behaviour. The quote also implies that undertaking enhancement projects helps students gain a sense of responsibility for making change. I think this comes from the increased sense of belonging and citizenship. UCL aspires to create ‘global citizens’; undertaking a project can increase students’ sense of belonging to a collective and thus of responsibility to it: be it their department, the institution, local community, humanity or the global ecosystem.

*Employability*

Graduates with good attainment, wellbeing, a sense of responsibility and belief that they have the ability to make change for the better are clearly going to be attractive to employers.

Undertaking a change project provides the opportunity for students to develop a whole range of skills, such as time management, project management, leadership, teamwork, persuasion and managing change.

Students have also spoken about the insight that they have gained into the operation of the university. As one scholar wrote:

*“What was really interesting for me was the fact that I was able to witness and directly participate in the internal workings of an university, in spite of being a student.”*

An understanding of how organisations operate is likely to put the students in good stead. In some cases the students learnt about how things operated in other departments and even got a sense of the national context.

Students also got to see things from different perspectives:

*“UCL ChangeMakers scheme has provided me with the opportunity to see the situation both from a student’s perspective, but also from that of the tutors”*

The ability to see things from another’s perspective is a key life skill, which will help with both their own well-being and their effectiveness as a change agent in future work.

***Benefits for enhancement projects***

It is commonly argued that student participation in educational enhancement projects is likely to improve the project outcomes, as students know what it is like to experience the learning environment and practices that are being developed. As Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten (2014, p.15) state:

*“...students are neither disciplinary nor pedagogical experts. Rather, their experience and expertise typically is in being a student - something that many faculty have not been for many years.”*

This is quite contrary to traditional identities at university, where the academics are the experts. However, it is in keeping with the movement that has been occurring for the last thirty years away from didactic teaching towards more facilitative and co-learning roles, founded on the andragogical principle that adult learners bring their own experiences to the learning process (Knowles, 1984).

As Cook-Sather et al. (2014, p.16) state, students should be treated as “legitimate informants on the student experience.” In other words they are authorities in what it is like to learn as a student at this institution now. Their authority to speak about what it is like as a student from their experience of being a student obviously gets weaker as we think about students with whom they have less in common - either in terms of background or type of degree. This makes inclusivity in partnership work a key value (HEA, 2014), otherwise we risk increasing the gap between students who are currently empowered by Higher Education Institutions and those who are marginalised by our structures and processes.

This is one reason why I think we might want to be cautious in describing students as experts in the student experience. They know about their own experience as a student, but not necessarily about that of all students. We should not overstate what they can be informative about: nor should we hand the label of ‘expert’ over to anyone that has experience of anything. To me, that seems a sure way of devaluing expertise, which is highly problematic in the current context in which the value of expertise is being questioned (see for example White, 2016). Expertise can come from experience but purely experiencing something is insufficient. To gain expertise one also needs to critically reflect on the experiences, to analyse them and test hypotheses about what they mean. Students are well placed to do this but they do not do it automatically. This is one reason that UCL ChangeMakers emphasises the importance of research in the projects that students undertake. In undertaking the projects, students become experts – they do not start off that way.

The authority students have to speak about what it is like to be a student at their institution today certainly commands a strong rationale for consulting students on changes and giving them an input on decision making. At UCL we have a strong Student Academic Representative (StAR) system, which is based on just this. However, does this rationale constitute a case for involving students as active agents of change? I think a case can be made that any development project involves a number of decisions throughout its lifetime and that each of these should be informed by a student perspective. This is far more likely and feasible if students are on the project team. Students have a vested interest in the outcomes of the project as key stakeholders and a willingness to participate in them. Alongside the many benefits that students gain from participation, I think there is a strong rationale for their involvement.

The student perspective is often the one that is most neglected in educational development. However, it is not the only relevant perspective. In empowering students we have to be careful not to alienate staff or cause them to feel that their expertise is being challenged.

*The importance of staff*

Partnership is important for ensuring that enhancement projects are as successful as possible. Staff ensure that students understand what can be done in the context of their university department. As one of our project students said of their experience:

*“So we started with this very big idea...and then slowly as we talked to various members of staff about it we realised that actually the project was going to be … almost impossible… Our staff partner… was really helpful when we met up with him to … talk about the hierarchy of UCL and how change happens within it and who to speak to and how different departments within UCL have different goals and visions.”* (CALTADMIN, 2015a)

When asked if they were confident that the change they had worked towards would take place, students tended to be more confident when it fitted into institutional strategy and work being taken forward by staff.

*“...because this idea coincides with both parties it makes the change more likely that it’s going to happen.”* (CALTADMIN, 2015a)

A study of the impact of the pilot year UCL ChangeMakers projects a year on also revealed the importance of staff input into the projects for their medium-term success and sustainability (Marie and McGowan, submitted).

**The Challenges**

*Who do we reach?*

If student change projects have such huge advantages why don’t all universities have them? One of the major challenges for student partnership projects such as UCL ChangeMakers is reaching the students that are disengaged. They are the very students who could gain the most from UCL ChangeMakers - in terms of attainment, well-being and future employability. If we don’t reach them we don’t really create a community in which students are integral part. Therefore the question arises, how do you ensure the inclusion of students who are currently excluded by our structures and processes in ways of which we may not be fully aware?

It may seem a little banal to state but it is important to take the time to listen. I suspect that we are told what some of the barriers are but it is difficult and time consuming for us to take them seriously and find ways to overcome them. Twice recently, students have told me that they would love to take part but they are away on research trips. One I managed to accommodate. The other I could not, although I would have dearly loved to. Yet, I have not systematically considered whether taking part in UCL ChangeMakers conflicts with research students’ study trips or excludes year abroad students. If we want to be inclusive, we need to identify the different ways in which we make it hard for some to participate and what we can possibly do to make it a little easier. By showing willingness to adapt, we make it far more likely that other students will draw other barriers and inhibitors to our attention.

The question of who we reach and how to engage them is being addressed by the sector, through the REACT project (REACT, *n.d.*). At UCL, we are using this as a framework to query who we are reaching and to try to determine the barriers to student engagement at UCL.

*What do we support?*

UCL ChangeMakers has framed itself to be about developing students’ learning experiences. In doing so, we have taken most political projects out of the equation. However, would we have supported a project such as the Post-Crash Economics Society? (Post-Crash Economics Society, *n.d.*) For those unaware of it, students at the University of Manchester campaigned for changes to the economics curriculum following a conference at the Bank of England in 2011, which considered whether undergraduate economics curriculums were fit for purpose in light of the financial crisis beginning in 2008. The changes were strongly resisted by academic staff at the university, who were not experts in the alternative forms of economics that students wished to be taught.

At a meeting of the UCL ChangeMakers steering group we addressed the issue of to what extent the projects can challenge departmental practice. Some were in favour of requiring departmental sign-off of student-initiated projects before they were accepted. This has the merit of ensuring that the department have some ownership of the project, which makes it more likely that the project will have a lasting impact on the student learning experience. Eventually we decided not to require departmental sign-off: the point of many of the projects is to persuade staff that they should change, by establishing the student-demand and the pedagogic benefits of the proposed change.

So would we have supported the Post-Crash Economics Society? Possibly, but initiatives such as ours cannot afford to support projects that challenge the university in ways that could be perceived of as unhelpful because we are not a separate entity in the way a Student Union is. The major concern that staff tend to have of UCL ChangeMakers is that students may make unhelpful or unnecessary suggestions for change.

Having said this, universities are becoming braver themselves. UCL has taken on the ‘Why is my curriculum white?’ campaign (UCLTV, 2014) and is attempting to address it by liberating the curriculum through the Connected Curriculum initiative (see McConologue, this publication). One of the difficulties that academic staff face in providing an education that is not white-western-male-heterosexual-centric is that they are not experts on other traditions. They, like the economics academics in Manchester have been educated in a tradition other than the one students are now demanding. Where initiatives such as UCL ChangeMakers can be helpful is in helping staff to meet the challenges that this poses. Students are likely to be as much experts in these traditions as staff - they can suggest what alternative texts could be and perhaps explain the cultural thinking and mind-set behind them to staff. Staff retain the disciplinary expertise by judging their merit in the disciplinary context.

*How successful are we at partnership?*

UCL ChangeMakers is still transitioning towards partnership. Our student-initiated projects are very much student-led. One of the students who had undertaken one of these came and spoke to me recently. She said that she had heard that UCL ChangeMakers was supposed to be about student/staff partnership and she wondered if she had done something wrong or missed out somehow, because her project had been mainly led by her and some other students. She said that she had had a fantastic experience carrying out the project and had not particularly felt the need for staff input. So does it matter that they are more student-led than student/staff partnership projects?

The Exeter ‘Students as Change Agents’ scheme is intended as students taking charge, determining the change project and conducting it. Dunne and Zandstra (2011) wrote of the importance of pushing past partnership, to students as change agents, because institutions tend to determine the boundaries for partnership work – they determine the projects and recruit students as partners to help them undertake them. Students (being knowable about their learning experience) are better placed to determine which projects are likely to have the biggest impact and be of most value to students. Staff may not value these and thus be less prepared to invest time and effort into conducting the project.

UCL ChangeMakers was, at least at its inception, modelled on the Exeter ‘Students as Change Agents’ scheme. It is clear that students gain enormously from the experience of undertaking the projects, as discussed, and the outcomes can be of very high quality. I do not mind if the projects are student-led but I do think we are missing a trick because the projects are likely to have less longevity and one of our aims is to create one learning community. We therefore need to find ways to support students to recruit staff on a partnership basis.

We have less data on the extent to which partnership has been achieved on the staff-initiated projects. We clearly have some examples where it worked well: one student on such a project wrote that while the staff set the parameters of the work, the students had the freedom to plan it as they wanted. On another the member of staff wrote:

*“As I wanted this project to be as truly collaborative as possible I told the students from the outset that apart from my dilemma in the form or [sic] the two above questions I have no template of how to approach them, but instead was hoping that they would work with me on designing our methodology. The other things that I did provide was a space to meet regularly…and a selection of objects from the UCL Museums and Collections that the students could explore and use as inspiration/jumping off points for our project discussions.”*

We do not know how wide-spread such success was and we created a barrier to stronger partnership by having separate application processes for student and staff-initiated projects, because that discouraged collaborative project design. Some projects were nevertheless formed in partnership and I had numerous queries about which route they should apply through. We have therefore abolished the student-initiated and staff-initiated distinction on the scheme.

*Cost-value ratio*

Students as change agent projects would become prohibitively expensive if scaled up to cover all development work. We had 72 projects in 2015/16, which is not far off one project per teaching department and we struggled to support them all with one full time manager and myself as a part-time director.

The value of the work can be strongly argued but it is harder to put into metrics. How many percentage points did doing a UCL ChangeMakers project add to a student’s final degree mark? How much more did that person earn because they did a project? How much happier were they? Over time, we could perhaps measure the difference between students undergoing one and those who did not – but depending upon how successful we are at being inclusive we will have to factor in that these were probably the students who were already going to do well. Measurements of belonging and engagement are not (yet) standard practice. It is easier to invest in something that produces a demonstrable return such as teacher training, library books, the university’s virtual learning environment and more computers and they need investment too.

Projects such as this have to sell themselves on the values that they demonstrate to potential students and through publicising the good work achieved through the projects supported. UCL ChangeMakers is an important part of the current UCL Education strategy (UCL, 2016), so it has a few years grace before the next one is formulated to demonstrate the real value it provides to the institution.

**What next?**

So what is next for UCL ChangeMakers? Each year we aim to innovate and try something new. In 2017 we are trialling students conducting observations of staff. This is something that has been done successfully at the University of Lincoln (University of Lincoln, *n.d.*)and at a number of universities in the United States. We also hope to have a project in every department by 2017-18.

Where we will be by 2034? Will students be full partners in the future of the institution? I hope so – but what that would look like is less clear. I can see pieces of the picture: students participating in enhancement projects, quality assurance, consulting on the teaching practices of staff, helping to design curriculum and being partners in the professional development of staff. What it would look like as an integrated whole is unclear to me. Perhaps that is the way it should be: Seventeen years is a long time - I hope that the future of student partnership is more than I can currently imagine.

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