

CASE STUDY

Student Partnership Impact Awards (SPIA): Recognising and rewarding students as leaders

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ABSTRACT

In 2022, the Staff Educational Development Association (SEDA) developed the Student Partnership Impact Award (SPIA), providing students and recent alumni with an opportunity to be professionally accredited for their leadership abilities through partnership. SEDA is a professional association for educational developers based in the UK. The SPIA award aims to expand SEDA's community of educational developers by reaching out to other national and international students and staff working in partnership.

SEDA's development team, of which I am part of, carried out a review of the award procedures for quality assurance purposes. The review process found a lack of leadership narrative in unsuccessful applications. This stemmed from applicants not being ultimately responsible for a project and, as a result, these applicants subsequently seemed unable to claim any leadership, which set the tone of applicants being subordinates to the staff project lead. These findings raised for me and the development team further questions about students' exposure to leadership skills development and students' ability to recognise their own leadership skills as part of their employability skills development.

This case study explores thematic factors affecting students' ability to confidently articulate themselves as leaders in a student partnership setting and what we can do as staff to support students in developing those graduate attributes. It also provides reflections and ideas for colleagues considering putting students forward for professional accreditation or potentially developing their own awards scheme.

KEYWORDS

award scheme, professional recognition, employability skills, student leadership

The SPIA awards were first informed by the literature, the development team noted that student partnership has been a developing concept that was originally observed in teaching and learning in higher education (HE), but in more recent years has extended to a wide range of areas across institutions (Lowe & Moxey, 2024). In parallel, the extent of student participation in partnership has expanded through different opportunities moving from staff-controlled decision making, to

student-controlled choices in prescribed areas, and then to partnership, where students have a substantial influence on decision making (Bovill, 2020). Martens et al. (2019) identify that to establish a student-staff relationship as a partnership it is essential that there is reciprocal respect; a feeling that students can influence decision-making, and student autonomy, commitment, ownership, and responsibility. However, Matthews and Dollinger (2023) believe that there is an entangled and overlapping discourse of what student partnership means to institutions, potentially blurring the true meaning of student partnership. Peters and Mathias (2018) discuss the importance of maintaining clear inclusive principles of what can be defined as student partnership. Otherwise, as echoed by Matthews and Dollinger (2023), there is a risk of partnership working becoming diluted into no more than student consultation within established staff-led power structures.

Student partnership has become an overarching term for a broad range of institutional partnership practices. It has also become a relatively complex term because it is often influenced by specific institutional contexts, which affects the dynamic nature of partnerships and partnership working (Holen et al., 2021). To unify these different contexts and practices, students as partners (SaP) is more regularly used terminology in the literature for how staff and students work together to create and extend learning and opportunities (Holen et al., 2021). “Creation” is also a regularly used term in student partnership but again can hold marginally different meanings. For example, co-creation is typically based on the value of partnership activities developed, whereas students as co-producers contribute to the production of activities by bringing their knowledge, skills, perspectives, and experiences as their expertise to the activity (Smith et al., 2021).

Largely there is a positive view that HE globally is working more inclusively with their students, not only to develop and enhance different facets of the student journey but also to evolve the working relationships between students and staff (Matthews, 2016). Traditionally, hierarchies in HE position students as passive consumers of their education, which for some teaching staff, have manifested into entrenched identities and norms where an education is given to the student rather than with them (Bovill, 2019). Deconstructing these hierarchies by implementing student partnership as part of institutional decision making has revitalised institutional ethos to be more student-centred (Bovill, 2019; Cook-Sather, 2022; Healey & Healey, 2019; Strudwick & Johnson, 2020). This has provided HE staff not only with new insights into the student journey, but also gives students more agency, responsibility, and opportunities outside of their programmes of study to develop their social capital and employability skills (Stephen & Fru, 2023).

Developing employable graduates is an integral part of the student journey, and an important component of that is formally accrediting their efforts and achievements to evidence their contributions to prospective employers (Lewis, 2017; Office for Students [OfS], 2024). There are many institutional examples of in-house award schemes that promote student effort and achievements in partnership. For example, Queen Mary University of London has rolled out the Student Enhanced Engagement and Development (SEED) Award, which rewards their students for their partnerships to co-create solutions which have an impact on education. The criteria of the award are based on [Advance HE’s professional standards framework](#), focusing on teaching and learning. Similarly, University of Queensland initiated the Students as Partners Program Design Project to inform the scaling-up of students as partners as a whole-institution strategy to

enhance the student learning experience. Notably incentivising and rewarding students for their efforts was listed as a priority in achieving this strategy (Coombe et al., 2018).

STUDENT PARTNERSHIP IMPACT AWARD: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENTS

The literature exploring SaP in HE evidently values the importance of incentivising, recognising, and rewarding the efforts of their students, which is demonstrated in different ways including bursaries, paid employment, grants, and certification with award ceremonies (Lowe & Moxey, 2024). However, the SEDA development team identified an informed gap for providing students with the opportunity to showcase their graduate skills, developed through student partnership, to an accrediting external organisation (Tredinnick et al., 2015). In 2022 a core team of HE colleagues, including myself, and including a postgraduate student affiliated with Staff Educational Development Association (SEDA) began the development of the [Student Partnership Impact Award \(SPIA\)](#) in partnership with the Joint Information's Systems Committee (Jisc). SEDA is a professional association for educational developers based in the UK. The SPIA award aims to expand SEDA's community of educational developers by reaching out to other national and international students and staff working in partnership. The scheme invites current students and recent alumni (who graduated in the last 12 months) who had a leading role in SaP projects to make an application. Successful applicants are certified and included in SEDA's online wall of excellence, recognising student roles and efforts in supporting and leading educational change.

The priority for the development team, based on what we had understood from the literature, was to ensure that SPIA was designed to be inclusive, both in terms of the application process and of different working practices and projects taking place across the sector. This echoes some of the ongoing findings relayed in Mercer-Mapstone et al.'s (2017) systematic review of students as partners in different contexts in HE. An inclusive application process was essential for us to enable as many undergraduate and postgraduate students to apply. Therefore, the development team set up a student steering group consisting of five students who came from three UK based universities to advise the development team and co-devise the application process. Process considerations were informed by established in-house institutional award schemes (El-Hakim et al., 2016; Queen Mary Student Union [QMSU], nd), which included deliberation of a suitable application deadline in the academic year, word length of applications, application types, terminology used to facilitate best responses, and pricing structure for applications to cover administration costs.

The undergraduate student steering group trialled the application process and submitted their own applications online for review, which were subsequently used as exemplars for prospective applicants. The development team and student steering group co-created online guidance which was provided on the SEDA website to support prospective students in making an application. Student partnerships across different contexts are accepted so long as they promote the enhancement of HE through educational and professional development, which is in line with SEDA's mission and core values. Examples, as identified in the literature, may include student partnerships with academic teams, the student union, digital and library information services, student and wellbeing services, and university leaders (Lowe & Moxey, 2024; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

The novel aspect of the SPIA scheme requires students to reflect on their co-leadership roles within a partnership and evidence the impact their leadership skills have had on staff, students, and educational development. Examples of leading and impacting educational development may include improving pedagogical practices, leading staff workshops to develop more inclusive institutions, and building stronger collaborative communities. Currently, as part of the initial pilot, and in conjunction with different formations of student partnership highlighted in the literature (Holen et al., 2021), there are two types of written application routes available. This includes a team-based application where students who were part of a larger project consisting of up to 12 student partners may wish to submit a collaborative response. Otherwise, there is the individual application if students wish to submit separately or were part of a smaller partnership. In line with the protocols of other professional organisations, such as AdvanceHE's *Professional Standards Framework* (2023), applications undergo a quality assurance process; each application is reviewed by two volunteer SEDA members based in HE who must undertake an introductory session and annual calibration training before they can review. Applications undergo a double-blind marking process, and moderation is managed by the SEDA development team. Applications are submitted once per year and the award is advertised through relevant HE mailing lists and through Jisc and SEDA conferences.

APPLICATIONS PROFILE

There have been two submission rounds since SPIA was developed in 2022 with applicant numbers improving each year. The first application deadline in August 2023 received 45 student applications mainly from the UK. There were also a small number of applications received from the US (2) and Asia (1). Out of 45 applications received, 11 of those were unsuccessful. In May 2024, SPIA nearly doubled the number of applications with 89 applications and, like the previous year, applications were predominately from the UK. However, the international reach was wider on the second round, with one application from Australia, one from the US, and two from Asia. Out of 89 applications received, 22 of those were unsuccessful. Disappointingly, only three applicants resubmitted from the first round. This was surprising as applicants are offered a free-of-charge resubmission and are requested to contact the SEDA development team for resubmission support. All three resubmissions submitted were successful. On average there has been a consistent rejection rate of 24% over the past 2 years, which suggests robust alignment of marking processes and holding applicants to good standards. However, there remains a relatively high number of unsuccessful applicants, which needed further investigation.

FINDINGS: STUDENT LEADERSHIP AND POWER DYNAMICS

One significant factor that came from a review of unsuccessful applications was students' ability to illustrate a leadership narrative in their applications, especially those applicants who were working on staff-initiated project-based partnerships. This has created debate within the SEDA development team and its reviewers about what is affecting students' ability to deliver a leadership narrative. Questions raised include: is students' ability to provide a leadership narrative a possible factor in low resubmission applications and how can the development team

facilitate better student support through its online resources that can be accessible for students and staff?

One possible reason for a lack of leadership narrative has been students' inexperience with writing an application of this nature to an external organisation. Possibly the closest students have come to writing such an application is their university personal statement, which has somewhat similar expectations in that it requires a persuasive account of a student's ability to present their strengths and values. Employability skills and students' effectively evidencing those skills for a job application have become an academic responsibility in recent years. However, Cotronei-Baird (2019) has identified that there are inconsistencies in what employability skills are being assessed and delivered through the curriculum, noting that skills that cross academic and industry lines are more consistently assessed, such as analysis and evaluation skills, whereas teamwork and collaboration skills are only sometimes explicitly measured through assessment tasks. Leadership opportunities and skills in HE have typically been associated with specific student leadership programmes and extra-curricular activities even though there is significant literature, typically from the United States, showing that leadership activities embedded into the curriculum will help students to have a well-organised and responsible attitude to their studies (Blackwell et al, 2007; Hilliard, 2010; Holcombe et al., 2023; McClellan, 2013).

Based on this literature, there is argument that limited understanding and exposure to leadership skills can cause students to doubt their roles and credibility, which is then reflected in their unsuccessful applications. For example, the lack of leadership narrative in the main application seems to stem from not being ultimately responsible for a project and subsequently seeming unable to claim any leadership; or because students don't feel they have background expertise in a particular context, which sets the tone of applicants being subordinates to the staff project lead. However, the applicants' context statement providing a brief summary of their partnership background clearly identifies them in a leadership role. Evidently unsuccessful applicants are lacking agency in the partnership process; therefore, as staff, we need to be clear with students that student partnership is collaborative leadership and facilitate students to realize that their communication, relationship-building, creativity, and problem-solving skills create impact (Cook-Sather, 2021).

A second possible reason for applicants not confidently articulating their leadership skills is potential power dynamics between students and staff attempting to work together in different contexts which originally were not inclusive of student voice or representation (Cook-Sather, 2021). There is a wealth of literature in the field of student partnership that discusses power struggles as one of the major hinderances of full student partnership in HE (Bovill, 2017; Murphy et al., 2017; Scoles et al., 2021). Full student partnership is based on the extent student participation and collegiality is established between staff and students (Bovill, 2017). Lowe & Moxey (2024) comment that "perhaps colleagues only allow or facilitate partnership in safe project spaces, where staff still have control, and limitations can be set before the 'partnership' begins" (p. 36). Interestingly, Healey and France (2023) discussed how these boundaries can come from a place of staff vulnerability based on a lack of confidence in student partnership working. They raise a crucial point that "partnership disrupts traditional role identities for both students and staff, so to enable effective partnership practices, opportunities for honest

communication, support and tools to develop student-staff roles and relationships is paramount to its sustainable future” (p. 655).

WHAT IS STUDENT PARTNERSHIP?

A second significant factor related to unsuccessful applications was student perceptions of what student partnership means. A working definition for SPIA of partnership is that it is based on students and staff who are equal partners sharing leadership and authority to determine together new ideas and interventions, delivered through professional and educational development, to achieve a mutually beneficial goal (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Peters, 2018). In some submitted applications, applicants discussed very simplistically their role as student representatives based purely on an official governance role where they provided student voice on behalf of a community cohort, which is positive, but with no evidence of stakeholder engagement or collaborative partnership to initiate leadership or deliver tangible change. This echoes Peters and Mathias's (2018) work highlighting student partnership being less inclusive in some institutions and restricted only to student voice and representation.

Naturally SPIA accepts applications from student representatives and certainly considers them to be in a position where student partnership takes place. In fact, in some successful applications they are the architects of impactful student partnerships. In practice, Bovill and Felten (2016) acknowledge that staff-student roles are not always equally split. However, it is essential in partnership work that we strive for shared responsibility and that ownership falls fairly between staff and students to co-create fair and workable solutions for everyone. This is advocated through SPIA's applicant guidance, which is based on principles of full student partnership. This can be less obvious from students attending governance meetings and committees, which generally seek to document and maintain the status-quo instead of advancing ongoing communication to challenge hierarchical norms. (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022).

Similarly, unsuccessful applications from postgraduate students, who situated themselves in teaching roles in their applications, did not establish how in their teaching roles they formed student partnership through collaborations with their students. Typically, postgraduate applicants referred to acting on course evaluation forms as an example of partnership working with their students, which does not demonstrate mutually active collaborative work and remains restrictive for students in that they merely give their opinion; they were not involved in the creation or implementation process of delivering change. It seemed in these instances that postgraduate applicants confused their roles with being a student themselves, which they described as students supporting students, but in this space, they had in fact positioned themselves as a staff member, changing the dynamics of who they represent in this context and how this role requires a renegotiation of how they work in partnership with students.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The aim of this case study is to provide reflections and ideas for colleagues considering putting students forward for professional accreditation or potentially developing their own awards scheme. Unsuccessful applications substantiated three significant factors that staff facilitators of

application schemes need to be aware of for the future. Firstly, we need to be reflective of how traditional hierarchies in HE impact power dynamics between students and staff in practice and their effect on how students articulate their ability to be impactful partners in their applications, including job applications, applications for further study, and accrediting applications.

Secondly, students evidently found it challenging to identify or view themselves as leaders within their pivotal roles of co-creating change. Instead, they describe the project and their involvement, normally within a supportive role to the lead staff member. Academic programmes need to be doing more consistent work on embedding and formally assessing a range of employability skills, which build students' confidence and ability to present leadership skills, whether it be in an assessment or an application (Cotronei-Baird, 2019).

Finally, in the context of building equitable partnerships between staff and students, we should be supporting student staff to understand the effects of role reversal and what student partnership means in the context of student-staff working with other students. An important starting point is staff and students having a clear understanding of the SEDA's expectation of leadership and forming a clear understanding of SPIA's working definition of student partnership to guide both students and staff managing their roles and responsibilities in partnership projects. Students' understanding their roles and responsibilities in line with inclusive student partnership principles will subsequently facilitate students' ability to articulate clear examples of advocating full student partnership.

MENTORING

Staff maintaining an informal working relationship with students beyond completed partnership projects creates a community of practice to support students, which is essential to guiding them to and through accrediting opportunities. Such opportunities in the HE sector are likely to be an unknown for students. For this reason, staff forming mentoring opportunities, which sustain a reciprocal relationship but allow students to benefit from staff experience, can guide students' professional development (Law et al., 2019). Mentoring values students and their dedication to their partnership work. It also recognises that students' experiences of partnership can be non-linear and complex, which as highlighted in this case study, can affect students' ability to situate themselves correctly in partnership work. Therefore, staff mentors can support students to process and reflect on their role and the skills they have gained in partnership, strengthening their confidence and ability to apply successfully to competitive processes (Healey & France, 2024). Something to consider for the future to provide a more equitable approach to mentoring opportunities is peer mentors who have undertaken partnership work, mentoring, and made successful applications (Seery et al., 2021).

SPIA: WHAT NEXT?

The development of the SPIA scheme has been a positive and well-received endeavour for students and staff. Moving forward, the development team would like to utilise the principles of the scheme to advocate for full student partnership across the sector, which may expand to SEDA accrediting institutional award schemes. It also aims to expand its international reach through applicant numbers and establish interest in other continents where we have not yet received

submissions. We are also exploring how we can develop successful applicants further and share good practice. One strategic direction is to work directly with successful applicants to support them in developing their applications into blog posts and journal articles for SEDA. There is still work to be done in terms of SPIA's current offer of only a written form of application, which is not fully inclusive of all its potential applicants. Therefore, offering alternative types of application which allow, for example, applicants to verbalise their skills, impact, and leadership may have a positive impact on application numbers and applicants' outcomes. Furthermore, it has been established that students are not necessarily at a stage where they know how to write a higher quality personal statement or application form and perhaps those unsuccessful applicants are those we need to be engaging with to enhance SPIA (Lowe & Moxey, 2024). Future considerations may include online support forums including symposiums and workshops.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Gemma Mansi is an Associate Professor of Higher Education at the University of Greenwich, specializing in student partnership, assessment, and pedagogy.

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