

# Student-Staff Partnerships in SoTL

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*We cannot radically reimagine the student experience without forging an active partnership between students and teaching staff. (NUS 2014, 10)*

### Defining students as partners

*Partnership is framed as a process of student engagement, understood as staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement... It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself. Healey et al., 2014, p. 7*

Strictly defining *students as partners* is difficult because approaches cover a wide range of activities. As Healey and colleagues (2014) suggest, successful approaches leverage shared engagement between students and academics seeking to learn together and enact changes to enhance student learning alongside academic teaching.

*Partnerships are based on respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility between students and faculty (academics). These qualities of relationship emerge when we are able to bring students' insights into discussions about learning and teaching practice in meaningful ways – ways that make learning and teaching more engaging for students and ourselves. Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, p. 1*

### References

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- Dunne, E., & Zandstra, R. (2011). Students as change agents—new ways of engaging with learning and teaching in higher education. London, Higher Education Academy.

**Case studies:** Sourced from [Kelly Matthews' Fellowship](#) and [Mick Healey's work](#).

**Have a case study to share?**  
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***Case study 1: Students as Partners on Teaching & Learning Grants, Faculty of Science at The University of Queensland, Australia***

The UQ Faculty of Science Teaching and Learning Committee offers an annual grants scheme of approximately \$400,000 to advance innovative teaching practices in the sciences. The application requirements have always required a section on evaluation with the expectation that students will be a source of data in determining the effectiveness of funded innovations. Recently, the Faculty of Science Teaching and Learning Grants scheme policy has been revised to encourage greater student involvement, moving students from being a source of evaluation data to being more active participants in the development, design, and implementation in teaching and learning projects. The new policy begins from 2016, and reads: *Student Involvement: The faculty wishes to encourage increased student involvement with teaching and learning projects, so projects which incorporate student participation in project activities may be given priority. Potential examples could include students partnered as consultants on the design of new innovations, student advisory groups or students as named collaborators. Funding could include student scholarships and catering to encourage student participation.*

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***Case study 2: Students are engaged as partners in shaping and leading their own educational experiences through the 'students as change agents' initiative at the University of Exeter, UK***

The key concept is that students themselves take responsibility for bringing about change, based on their own research on aspects of learning and teaching. The approach enables students to be actively engaged with the processes of change, often taking on a leadership role. They are engaged deeply with the institution and their subject areas, and the focus and direction is, to a greater extent, decided by students. A small amount of funding was originally available from the University's learning and teaching budget to support this initiative, but it is now largely embedded and funded within Colleges with support from a centrally-based Student Engagement Manager. There are no payments directly to students. The most important aspect is the focus on research, and building change on evidence-based foundations. Students from across the university have contributed to this initiative, carrying out a series of research projects on their learning and teaching environment, selecting concerns raised through student-staff liaison committees, and providing recommendations and solutions to improve their experience. Students work as apprentice researchers; their research methods include focus groups, informal interviews and questionnaire surveys. Outcomes have been presented at annual student-staff conferences, resulting in institutional engagement with key research findings. Around 500 projects have been undertaken since 2008 though, overall, thousands of students have been involved. Student research has driven organisational change, contributed to student engagement in shifts of policy and practice within the University, and supported students' graduate skills in the areas of research, project management, presenting outcomes, leadership and understanding of organisational development. For example, student projects in the Business School on the benefits students have gained from implementation of technologies in the classroom have contributed significantly to streamed video being now far more widespread, and 7,000 voting handsets being distributed to undergraduate and Masters students. A project on well-being developed by Psychology students has led to changes in student support and has informed the Personal Tutor system.

*Further information:* Kay et al. (2010); Dunne and Zandstra (2011); Sandover et al. (2012a); Kay et al. (2012); Dunne and Owen (2013a); Annual Reports of all projects 2013/4 and 2014/5 at <https://issuu.com/studentsaschangeagents/docs>

***Case study 3: Students undertake educational development projects as academic partners with staff at Birmingham City University, UK***

Launched in 2009, this partnership between Birmingham City University and Birmingham City Students' Union aims to integrate students into the teaching and pedagogic research communities of the University to enhance the learning experience. Staff and students are invited to propose educational development projects in which students can work in an academic employment setting in a paid post at the University, on a more equal footing with their staff partner. Students negotiate their own roles with staff and are paid for up to 100 hours of work. Each project is designed to develop a specific aspect of learning and teaching practice. Typically, these may result in new learning resources, developments in curriculum design or the evaluation of innovations and changes that have already been made. It is key to the scheme that students are employed as partners not assistants, co-creators not passive recipients of the learning experience. Some projects are initiated and led by students. The Students as Academic Partners (SAP) scheme is part of a wider University initiative to create a greater sense of learning community at the University in which students and staff view it as the norm, not the exception, that they are engaged in academic discussion about the nature of their courses and the way they are taught. The University supports up to 100 projects each year and this internal quality enhancement mechanism is now seen as a staple of the university with bids being received at three points across the academic year. SAP also now offers a mentoring arm through our Student Academic Mentoring (StAMP) programme. *Further information:* Birmingham City Students' Union (2010); Brand et al. (2013); Curran and Millard 2016; Freeman et al. 2014; Nygaard et al. (2013); <http://www.bcu.ac.uk/about-us/celt/student-engagement>

***Case Study 4: The Winter Research Scholarships for Teaching and Learning, at The University of Queensland, Australia***

The Institute of Teaching and Learning Innovation (ITaLI) has started hosting students for a Winter or Summer Research Scholarship – leveraging an [institutional scheme](#) that offers scholarships for students to be involved in research projects. The goal of the project is to explore the topic of *students as partners* by involving students themselves in teaching and learning projects. This approach was specifically designed to uncover points about student interaction that might not be immediately obvious to academic staff and other non-students. In 2015, five students were involved. Each of the students set out to explore a particular niche subject, such as employability of international students, which included drafting a survey to find out more about the students' perceptions on employment in Australia. Similarly, the problem of low response rates to course evaluations was explored, with special interest in uncovering personal motivations behind why students participate in these surveys as a way to increase overall response rates. Personal motivation was also taken into account when looking at how to involve students in improving teaching and learning at UQ, especially when it came to representing the student voice and improving staff-student communication. Likewise, the student-supervisor relationship was considered in a study on how students look for potential supervisors and how this process can be improved. Finally, the issues surrounding dual degree students such as lack of general support, issues with skill transfer and lower perceptions on their graduate learning outcomes were explored in detail. In practice, the idea behind the project is simple. Involving students personally leads to new insights as well as personal motivation for the students involved. This can manifest itself in many ways; as part of this project, suggestions were placed before the Bachelor of Science Review board and a manuscript is being prepared detailing this particular work.

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***Case study 5: Engaging students as full partners at the McMaster Institute for Innovation and Excellence in Teaching and Learning (MIETL), Canada***

Students are more than the beneficiaries of MIETL's work in advancing teaching and learning at McMaster. They are core partners who are involved not at the margins of MIETL's efforts, but at the heart, at a level and with expectations that surpass those of normal student engagement programs. Approximately 50 undergraduate and graduate students were engaged as student scholars in the mission and work of MIETL in 2014-15 in ways both central to the processes and meaningful to the students. They were employed on average for 10 hours a week, but may volunteer to engage further if they wish on a voluntary basis.

Four goals are identified in the Strategy for this aspect of MIETL's work:

1. Build capacity for the meaningful engagement of student scholars in MIETL's work in educational development, technology, research and advocacy.
2. Identify teaching and learning projects led by student scholars who are first authors, presenters, designers and educational leaders.
3. Engage student scholars as active collaborators in core aspects of MIETL operations
4. Support student advocacy for teaching and learning issues on campus, regionally, nationally and internationally.

*Further information:* MIETL Strategic Plan 2014-19 (2015-16 update)

***Case study 6: Students co-led a research project on inclusive practice and ran an appreciative inquiry faculty development session at University of Worcester, UK***

A team of three academics and three students led a collaborative project using appreciative inquiry (AI) on what constitutes good inclusive practice in the Institute of Education (University of Worcester). The students collected data on the positive things about the experiences of the Institute from both year cohorts and disabled students, analysed it and presented it at a staff development day. The impact on staff has been particularly powerful because students collected and presented the findings and because AI is a strengths-based approach. Feedback from staff was overwhelmingly positive. For example, they reported AI was a motivator to further develop their strengths and to develop an appreciative tone in meetings. Experience over several projects at Worcester using AI is that there is particular power in hearing students report participatory research which conveys appreciation of work undertaken by academic staff. So far this seems to be a win, win, win situation; with students gaining from their experiences of researching and presenting their findings, educational developers achieving greater staff engagement, and, academic staff feeling empowered to drive their practice forward.

*Further information:* Chapman (2011); Snell et al. (2012)

***Case study 7: Students consulting on teaching (SCoT) at Brigham Young University, USA***

Like the Student Observer Program at Carleton, SCoTs are trained students interested in making a contribution to the Brigham Young University (BYU) learning experience. They have been taught to serve as excellent feedback resources to instructors, supplementing student evaluations and peer reviews. SCoTs, who come from different departments, can serve in any of the following roles:

1. *Recorder/Observer*. The SCOT records, in writing, what went on in the classroom and gives the record to the instructor.
2. *Faux Student*. The SCOT takes notes as if he or she were a student in the class and returns the notes to the instructor.
3. *Filmmaker*. The SCOT films the class and creates a DVD for the instructor. The instructor may invite the SCOT to watch and discuss the video.
4. *Interviewer*. The instructor leaves the classroom for fifteen minutes while the SCOT conducts an interview with the class. The SCOT asks the students to respond verbally and in writing to questions: What helps your learning? What hinders your learning? What suggestions do you have?
5. *Primed Student*. The SCOT meets with the professor prior to class to receive instructions on what to watch for (e.g., How often are students getting involved in the discussion? Which activities are most engaging?)
6. *Student Consultant*. The instructor asks the SCOT for feedback and suggestions about classroom activities or particular areas of interest.
7. *Other*. The SCOT can assist with classroom research, reflective teaching, action research, etc.

Further information: <http://ctl.byu.edu/services/students-consulting-teaching-scot>

### **Case study 8: Implementing a Student Consultant Program at Lingnan University, Hong Kong**

“To enhance teaching and learning, Lingnan University's Teaching and Learning Center partnered with the Teaching and Learning Initiative at Ursinus College (USA) to develop faculty-student partnerships in the form of pedagogical "student consultants." Through regular classroom observations, consultation, dialogue, discussion, and critical reflection, student consultants provide faculty across disciplines with feedback from the perspective of trained students who are not enrolled in their courses. Partnerships allow faculty insight into how their teaching practices and assignments are perceived and received by their students. Through partnership, a new forum is created where students and teachers can collaborate on how they both function as teachers and learners. As the program is not formally evaluative and strictly confidential, faculty are challenged to take risks in their pedagogy and reassess the traditional roles of student and teacher. At the same time, this program offers students opportunities to participate in and take ownership of their education. This program emphasizes interactions between students and teachers in the exploration, discussion and solving of pedagogical issues and, as a result, better teachers and better students will emerge.

To implement the Student Consultant Program at Lingnan, two Ursinus College students trained four Lingnan University students to participate in the observation process. Over three days, Lingnan students formally observed various classes across disciplines and engaged in reflective discussions with faculty in the analysis of their classroom practices and experiences. The results were immediately transformative: organizers saw newly empowered students transforming the classroom and taking ownership of their education. At the same time, faculty were empowered by the affirmation of what works in their classrooms and received feedback on what could be improved. As we continue to refine a four-year curriculum that will prepare students to become global citizens, the Student Consultant Program is an innovative way of enhancing teaching excellence through dialogue and collaboration between faculty and students” (Ho *et al.*, 2014)

Further information: Ho *et al.* (2014) <http://conference.herdsa.org.au/2014/s339.php>; <http://study.ln.edu.hk/tdg/projects/tg14a3>; Pounder *et al.* (2015)

### **Case study 9: Students involved in international collaborative writing groups through ISSoTL**

International collaborative writing groups (ICWG) aim to build the capacity of participants to work and write in international collaborative groups. Eight or nine groups work at a distance to prepare a 2000 word outline for online discussion running up to a International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL) pre-Conference workshop, where groups meet for two and half days. They spend time preparing their draft paper within their groups and in discussion with participants of other groups along with some social activities as part of the workshop. Following the workshop the groups have five to six months to complete and send in their papers for submission to the Society's international SoTL journal, [Teaching and Learning Inquiry](#).

The first ICWG was in 2012-13 linked to the ISSOTL 2012 Conference hosted by McMaster University, Canada. Seventy people from 13 countries took part, spread across nine groups with each comprising at least one student member. Nine scholarships were provided to subsidize the costs of student members. The 2012 initiative resulted in eight publications in a special edition of [Teaching and Learning Inquiry](#) along with a [SoTL publication](#) evidencing the initiative's positive impact on participants. The second ICWG is associated with the 2015 ISSOTL Conference in Melbourne Australia involving 61 people from 11 countries with 9 full-time students. Fees for students were waived and all were offered free accommodation and a travel subsidy (for those outside of Melbourne).

Further information: Healey *et al.* (2013); Marquis *et al.* (2014, 2015); <http://itali.uq.edu.au/matthews-studentsaspartners>

### **Case study 10: Engaging students in action research to enhance teaching and learning practice and policy at University of Newcastle, UK**

Students who do not normally get involved in the university community were engaged by permitting development of *their own ideas*, via undertaking research to enhance aspects of learning and teaching issues, broadly conceived. We wanted to encourage action research, as the outcomes of the projects are aimed at enacting positive change to practice and policy. We recruited students from one degree initially. Two projects were supported: Project A explored the possibility of creating a language course that had a specific focus on medical vocabulary. Project B looked into creating a suite of tools to help students understand and create 'Social CVs' and utilise online self-promotion tools. The students gained internship funding which helped them keep focused and committed. They were supported by a staff supervisor throughout the project. The research phase was a valuable lesson for both students in the real-life benefits of research informed practice. Working on a more business-like project helped to reinforce the importance of rigorous research in all areas of work – whether study or business. In the implementation phase the students were operating outside their normal comfort zones; they were having to network and market their projects to attract 'investors' to help them realise the full potential of their plans; this particularly encouraged a lot of personal development. This was a useful pilot whilst noting that only a small proportion of students are likely to undertake such projects on this basis.

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