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Using a 'Students as Partners' Approach for Designing Student Supports

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Abstract

In this paper we argue that a 'Students as Partners' approach should be used when designing student support systems. The 'Students as Partners' or SaP framework emphasizes respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility between faculty partners and student partners. It involves working collaboratively with student partners and ceding some control over processes and outputs. We demonstrate how a SaP approach worked in practice when redesigning an academic advisory system for Law students. The SaP approach helped to ensure that we identified students' needs and expectations, as well as the barriers and challenges they faced. It also enhanced communication, respect and mutual understanding between faculty and students. This article also identifies some of the challenges associated with SaP, and reflects on both the positive and negative outcomes experienced by both the faculty partners and the student partners. The positives greatly outweighed the negatives, and we argue that SaP approaches ought to be mainstreamed when designing student support systems.

Keywords: students as partners, academic advising, collaboration, student supports, co-creating

Introduction

We argue that a collaborative 'Students as Partners' (SaP) approach is ideally suited to projects relating to the design of student support services and systems. Our case study involved applying a SaP approach to redesigning an academic advisory system (or personal tutoring system) for undergraduate students in a globally-ranked research-intensive public Law School. An existing academic advisory system had been created without input from students, and while it was

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broadly accepted amongst faculty as a key feature of legal education in the School, we had no information on the student experience of the system, or on what academic advisory supports students themselves felt they needed to support their formal learning in law lectures and tutorials. Existing mechanisms to obtain student feedback were hierarchical in nature, with class representatives presenting faculty with discrete issues or problems to be resolved, and there was no guarantee that these views were in fact representative of the diversity of student experience. For this project we needed an approach which would allow us to hear a range of student perspectives over a longer period of time and reflection, and which would allow students not just to alert us to issues, but also to formulate a solution. As academic advising has at its heart an expectation that students will play an active role in becoming increasingly responsible and autonomous, it would seem logical that students should be partners in the design of the academic advising system itself. The SaP approach appeared ideal for this purpose.

Anticipating some of the challenges which have been identified in the SaP literature, we designed our project around customs and culture, institutional barriers and inclusivity. We applied the SaP principles of respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility. The SaP approach allowed us to better identify student needs, and to identify gaps and shortcomings in the existing provision of academic advisory supports. As a direct result of the students' input, we were able to identify flaws in the existing academic advisory system; open clear channels of communication between faculty and students; re-align expectations on both sides, and ultimately re-design the advisory system. In addition, both student partners and faculty partners found the SaP approach to be rewarding.

Although there is a significant amount of literature on the concept of Students as Partners, or related concepts such as student engagement and student ownership, there is a gap regarding the use of the SaP approach in relation to academic advising. Our case study demonstrates that academic advising is an area where the SaP approach is particularly useful. In particular, the SaP approach provided space for students to open up about wider issues relating to legal studies and careers, such as concerns about the balance of power in an academic advisory relationship where the member of faculty is also (or is perceived to be) a member of the legal profession, or is perceived as having links to the legal profession. Our project design also attempted to address some of the deficiencies and challenges identified in previous literature, for example by ensuring an inclusive recruitment strategy, securing payment for students'

time and hiring a research assistant to help students with practical issues and to act as an intermediary between faculty and students, particularly in the early days of the project. This paper contributes to better understanding of the potential of SaP in legal education and in particular for academic advising and personal tutoring.

Literature review

Scholarship increasingly refers to 'Students as Partners' or SaP as a way for academic faculty and other academic staff to collaborate with students. It is increasingly considered to be 'a matter of good practice' in the scholarship of teaching and learning.[1] SaP is described as a 'reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis.'[2] Cook-Sather et al refer to the essential principles of SaP as being 'respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility in learning and teaching.' These principles underpin all interactions and processes between partners. SaP is not something to be considered in a vacuum; as Healey, Flint and Harrington point out, it is a concept 'which interweaves through many other debates, including assessment and feedback, employability, flexible pedagogies, internationalisation, linking teaching and research, and retention and success.'[3] It can be used for the co-creation of materials, systems and processes and for identifying common objectives and aspirations. Healey, Flint and Harrington identify four overlapping areas of engaging through partnership: learning, teaching, and assessment (co-teaching); curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy (co-design, co-creating); subject-based research and inquiry (co-inquiry); and scholarship of teaching and learning (co-researchers).[4] We also suggest that, beyond the curricular context, SaP can be used to evaluate and design support systems for students.

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[1] KE Matthews, 'Rethinking the Problem of Faculty Resistance to Engaging with Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education' (2019) 13 International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning 2, 1.

[2] A Cook-Sather et al, *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty* (John Wiley and Sons, 2014) 6–7.

[3] M Healey, A Flint & K Harrington, *Engagement Through Partnership: Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (The Higher Education Academy 2014) 7.

[4] Ibid, and M Healey, A Flint & K Harrington, 'Students as Partners: Reflections on a Conceptual Model' (2016) 4(2) Teaching & Learning Inquiry 8.

SaP has been described as having 'the potential to be transformative, developmental and fun.'[5] It is well established that collaboration between faculty and students is an effective way to achieve not only learning outcomes, but also student engagement, satisfaction and development.[6] The beneficial outcomes of engaging in partnership are emerging in published literature. Cook-Sather et al describe the main benefits for both faculty and students as engagement, awareness and enhancement.[7] Felton et al suggest that 'including students as partners … enhances student (as well as faculty) motivation, confidence and sense of intellectual agency, both within the immediate process and in wider academic settings'.[8] Bovill et al and Werder, Thibou, and Kaufer describe an increased sense of leadership in, responsibility for, and motivation around the learning process for students and staff engaging in partnership.[9] Lexis et al, in their study involving SaP in a multi-disciplinary STEM and liberal arts project, describe students as viewing the experience as 'overwhelmingly positive and meaningful.'[10] The most commonly-cited positive outcomes for students in the literature are increased student engagement, motivation and ownership for learning; increased student confidence and self-efficacy; increased understanding of the experience of the 'other' (e.g. students understanding staff experiences, and vice versa); enhanced relationship or trust between students and staff; increased student learning about their own learning (meta-cognitive learning, self-evaluation,

[5] K Gravett, IM Kinchin NE & Winstone 'More Than Customers': Conceptions of Students as Partners Held By Students, Staff, and Institutional Leaders' (2020) 45(1) Studies in Higher Education 2574, 2586.
[6] VL Baker & KA Griffin, 'Beyond Mentoring and Advising: Toward Understanding The Role of 'Faculty Developers' in Student Success.' (2010) 14(6) About Campus 2.
[7] Cook-Sather et al, *Engaging Students* 100.
[8] P Felton, J Bagg, M Bumbry, J Hill, K Hornsby, M Pratt & S Weller, 'A Call for Expanding Inclusive Student Engagement in SoTL.' (2013) 1(2) Teaching and Learning Inquiry 63, 63.
[9] C Bovill, G Aitken, J Hutchison, F Morrison, K Roseweir, A Scott & A Sotannde, 'Experiences of Learning Through Collaborative Evaluation from A Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Education' (2010) 15(2) International Journal For Academic Development 143; C Werder, S Thibou B & Kaufer 'Students as Co-Inquirers: A Requisite Theory in Educational Development' (2012) 26(3) Journal of Faculty Development 34.
[10] L Lexis, B Julien, B Loch, M Civitella, B Keogh, M Boffa, T Jelley, F Sawyer, S Ramadan, P Pokhriyal & J Carpenter 'A Multidisciplinary STEM and Liberal Arts Students-As-Partners Project Promoted The Development of Employability Skills and Embodied Partnership Values' (2023) 7(1) International Journal For Students as Partners 71, 80.

self-awareness) and raised awareness of graduate attributes or employability skills or career development.[11]

Negative outcomes are occasionally reported for both faculty and students in SaP literature. These can include reinforcing pre-existing power inequalities, and feelings of vulnerability and increased stress/anxiety. The following negative outcomes for staff were also mentioned, albeit infrequently, in the literature review conducted by Mercer-Mapstone et al: decreased motivation for teaching; inhibited trust between students and staff; challenges maintaining quality control of output and failure to achieve engagement from all students.[12]

The SaP approach, which focuses on staff-student collaboration in furtherance of common goals, stands in stark contrast to the idea of 'students as consumers'. It requires students to actively participate in decision-making and creation, rather than passively accept materials, systems and processes which have been created by staff or faculty. SaP also differs from the 'sage on the stage' conception of teaching and learning, because it assumes a level of parity or equality between partners.[13] Matthews et al describe SaP as a 'counter-narrative that challenge[s] traditional and neoliberal views, creating space for relational narratives about learning, teaching, and higher education'.[14]

Watkins and Canto-Lopez describe a project which involved working in partnership with law students to create educational materials for children.[15] The authors of this study note that while it was contemplated that the phrase 'Students as Partners' 'would adequately describe the process through which students would be engaged in working alongside academics in extra-curricular outreach activities … this proved to be an underestimate of the extent to which the project would create a genuine engagement between staff and students in pursuit of a common educational goal.'[16] They describe the impact of the SaP approach as 'positively disruptive' on the traditional hierarchical relationship

[11] L Mercer-Mapstone, LS Dvorakova, KE Matthews, S Abbot, B Cheng, P Felten, K Knorr, E Marquis R Shammas & K Swaim, 'A Systematic Literature Review of Students as Partners in Higher Education' (2017) 1(1) International Journal For Students as Partners 1, 11.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Cook-Sather et al, *Engaging Students* 7.
[14] KE Matthews 'Students as Partners as The Future of Student Engagement' (2016) 1(1) Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal 1, 4.
[15] D Watkins & M Canto-Lopez 'Working with Law Students to Develop Legal Literacy Materials' (2015) 50(2) The Law Teacher 195.
[16] Ibid 205.

between students and educators. While this study has a number of parallels with ours, they are distinguishable because Watkins and Canto-Lopez's students were creating legal literacy material for use by children, whereas our students were designing supports for their own peers.

SaP is related to, but distinguishable from a number of similar concepts and theories. SaP is, for example, distinguishable from the broader idea of 'student engagement', which tends to be more focused on what students do at university, both in and beyond the classroom[17]. Healey, Flint and Harrington warn that the concept of 'student engagement' is ambiguous and contested.[18] They suggest that there are two dimensions to student engagement in teaching and learning: first, 'the way in which students invest time and energy in their own learning', and second, 'the ways in which students are involved and empowered by institutions to shape their learning experiences.' They note that 'all partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership.' Matthews suggests that 'the language of engagement is outcomes focused while students as partners is process and values orientated'.[19]

Although engaging with students and partnering with them are often treated as distinct in the literature, in reality there is significant overlap between these approaches. Zacharopoulou and Turner, in a project involving first year law students, use the Developmental Model of Student Engagement (DMSE),[20] which was identified in the UK Higher Education Authority's *Framework for Action.*[21] They note that this model, *inter alia,* 'locates students as partners in a learning community, and is based on constructivist notions of learning such as the co-creation of knowledge by learners and teachers'.

Several commentators have used the phrase 'student ownership' when describing high levels of autonomy, agency and control for students, particularly in the context of collaborative group projects. Gilder et al describe 'student ownership' as working hand-in-hand with, inter alia, peer learning and enquiry-based learning in the context of law students collaborating

[17] Matthews, 'Students as Partners'.
[18] Healey, Flint and Harrington *Engagement Through Partnership* 15.
[19] Matthews, 'Students as Partners' 3.
[20] A Zacharopoulou & C Turner 'Peer Assisted Learning and the Creation of a "Learning Community" for First Year Law Students' (2013) 47(2) The Law Teacher 192.
[21] Higher Education Authority, Framework for Action: Enhancing Student Engagement at the Institutional Level (2010).

externally.[22] In a different disciplinary context, Wood suggests that 'psychological ownership is a key part of success in student learning.'[23] Pierce et al describe this as feeling 'as though the target of ownership (material or immaterial in nature) or a piece of it is "theirs"'.[24]

Alongside theories of student ownership are the ideals of student empowerment, which can be important tools for ensuring inclusivity. O'Connor, for example, used a system of reverse mentoring in order to facilitate positive staff/student relationships and to hear authentic student voices.[25] In common with the Students as Partners approach, this reverse mentoring was student-led and was a means of sidestepping traditional hierarchies in higher education.

Despite the nuances between these various theories and concepts, at their heart they seek to further students' active involvement and autonomy in the higher education space.

Our project involved taking a Students as Partners approach to the development of academic advising or personal tutoring. Advisors help students learn to make the most of their college years, not merely by completing requirements toward a degree but also by growing intellectually and developing all aspects of their identity. Hemwall and Trachte argue that academic advising supports 'the centrality of the academic curriculum.'[26] Darling describes how 'College and university leaders are realizing how central quality academic advising programs are to student success, and the pressure is on for advisers to show how their work can impact higher retention and graduation rates and students'

[22] A Gilder, M Bentley, AM Nasir, N Antoniou & D La, 'Peer Learning and Student Ownership in an International Environment: A Student-Created Website on Human Rights And Peacebuilding' (2022) 3(1) European Journal of Legal Education 49.
[23] CM Wood, 'The Effects of Creating Psychological Ownership among Students in Group Projects' (2003) 25(3) Journal of Marketing Education 241, 241.
[24] JL Pierce, T Kostova & KT Dirks, 'Toward a Theory of Psychological Ownership in Organizations' (2001) 23(2) The Academy of Management Review 298, 299.
[25] R O'Connor, '"It Makes Me Feel Empowered and That We Can Make a Difference": Reverse Mentoring Between International Students and Staff in Legal Education' (2022) 3(1) European Journal of Legal Education 95.
[26] MK Hemwall & K Trachte, 'Learning at the Core: Toward A New Understanding of Academic Advising' (1999) 19(1) NACADA Journal 5, 7.

future careers and employment.'[27] As articulated by the National Academic Advising Association in the United States,

> Through academic advising, students learn to become members of their higher education community, to think critically about their roles and responsibilities as students, and to prepare to be educated citizens of a democratic society and a global community.[28]

Johnson suggests that student engagement is an important aspect of academic planning, with the focus on each student's individualised academic pathway.[29] In the model she describes, the development tends to be educator-led rather than student-led; academic advisors are described variously as 'shepherding' students or as 'co-constructing' plans with them. Other models of advising or personal tutoring are framed in terms of 'coaching'.[30] Wakelyn describes it as a 'tutor-led relationship.'[31] Indeed, McIntosh, Steele and Grey have pointed out that 'the student voice is largely absent from discussions about the impact of academic advising and tutoring on student success.'[32] So, while the student voice, student engagement, student empowerment and student as partners approaches are increasingly to be found across various domains in higher education, there is clearly a gap when it comes to the development of personal tutoring and academic advising. It is this gap which our case study seeks to address.

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[27] R Darling, 'The Academic Adviser' (2015) 64(2) The Journal of General Education 90, 91.
[28] NACADA (National Academic Advising Association) (2006). The Concept of Academic Advising. https://Nacada.Ksu.Edu/Resources/Pillars/Concept.Aspx.
[29] ML Johnson, 'Engaging First Year Students in Academic Planning' in JR Fox & HE Martin, (eds) *Academic Advising and the First College Year* (University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition and NACADA, 2017).
[30] D Lochtie, E McIntosh, A Stork & BW Walker, *Effective Personal Tutoring in Higher Education* (Critical Publishing, 2018)
[31] E Wakelin, 'Personal Tutoring in Higher Education: An Action Research Project on How to Improve Personal Tutoring for Both Staff and Students' (2023) 31(5) Educational Action Research 998, 998.
[32] E Mcintosh, G Steele D & Grey, 'Academic Tutors/Advisors and Students Working in Partnership: Negotiating and Co-Creating in "The Third Space."' (2020) 5 Frontiers in Education 528.

Materials and methods

Context and background

This project took place in a publicly-funded research-intensive university in Ireland. More specifically, it took place within a law school with approximately 1,000 undergraduate students across a number of law degree programmes. Under-funding in the third level system in Ireland has led to high faculty-student ratios even in research-intensive institutions. The ratio in this law school was approximately 30:1 at the time of the project, placing a strain on resources, particularly when it came to the annual intake of around 290 new undergraduate students.

First year students were expected to quickly develop a number of essential skills and competencies. Coming into law school straight from secondary school presented them with various challenges, both academic and personal. They had little opportunity to interact with members of faculty outside of large-group teaching settings. To ease the transition from second-level to third-level education, to facilitate faculty-student interactions at a more individualised level, and to provide a mechanism whereby first year students could receive formative feedback on written work during their first trimester, an academic advisory system was established. In other academic contexts such systems are often referred to as personal tutoring systems or schemes. It is worth noting that in the Irish context, personal tutors or academic advisors are not externally mandated.

Each first year law student was assigned a member of law school faculty as their academic advisor. Formally, they met twice in the first trimester of the student's first year – a group meeting with all of the advisors' advisees (c. 12–15 students), and a one-on-one meeting. Informally, the relationship was supposed to continue beyond this, with the academic advisor acting as a first point of contact for academic queries and later providing written references and letters of recommendation when the student needed these for internships, traineeships or masters' programmes. This academic advisory system was integrated into a core first year skills module, and students were awarded credit for meeting twice with their advisor. The advisor was also responsible for grading two short pieces of the student's written work, and for providing formative feedback on the first of these in the one-on-one meeting.

After four years of operation, we found that the aims and objectives of the academic advisory system were not clearly understood by faculty, support staff or students. Implementation was patchy, and the student experience varied depending on the faculty member to whom they were assigned. We also found, anecdotally, that some students found the system (and particularly the meetings with their advisors) to be a source of stress rather than support. It was evident that the system required re-evaluation and a re-design.

Our question was: How can we design (and re-design) an effective academic advisory system that addresses students' needs? Academic advising is a core part of the educational experience, whereby students are supported by faculty in making appropriate choices from a wide range of opportunities towards achieving realistic academic and professional goals.

In the context of our project, we realised that one of the major problems with the existing academic advisor system in our department was the lack of mutual understanding between faculty and students. Put simply, this system had been designed to help students, but it was designed from the perspective of faculty. There had been no student input into the original design. It was becoming increasingly evident that there was a mismatch between what we considered to be the essential supports needed by students in their first trimester of university, and what the students themselves considered to be most beneficial, in terms of both content and mode of delivery.

Although SaP can be (and is frequently) used in the context of curriculum design, we considered it to be even more appropriate as a framework for designing a student-focused support system. It would allow students' expertise and experiences to inform both the evaluation of the existing system and the design of the new one. Therefore, we took a SaP approach in order to better identify student academic advising needs; to identify gaps and shortcomings in the existing provision of academic advisory supports; to discover how to communicate and deliver relevant supports to those who need them, and to learn more about students' perceptions of academic advisory supports and their interactions with academic faculty.

This project formed part of a wider university initiative to inform and improve academic advising. As part of this initiative, funding from the Irish Higher Education Authority and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education was made available. Following a

competitive process, funding was awarded for our project.[33] This article focuses not on the substantive content of the academic advisory enhancement programme, but on the application of the SaP approach.

After the project had concluded and all institutional reporting had been completed, the student partners were surveyed about their experiences. They were asked a number of multiple-choice and open-ended questions via an anonymised online form. The anonymity was to ensure that students felt comfortable giving honest and frank feedback, particularly given our concerns about power dynamics. The questions were:

(i) Why did you apply to work on this project?
(ii) Did anything surprise you about working with faculty on this project?
(iii) Please tell us what you enjoyed most.
(iv) Please tell us what you enjoyed least.
(v) Did you add your work on this project to your CV?
(vi) Please tell us 2-3 skills you developed while working on this project.
(vii) Overall, did you enjoy working on this project?
(viii) We hope to work with students as partners again in the future. Have you any advice for us?

The response rate for this survey was 50%. We anticipated a low response rate because several of the student partners had graduated by the time of the survey. As well as this formal, anonymous feedback, on several occasions we also gained feedback anecdotally and through informal discussion, either directly from the students or through the Research Assistant.

Challenges with SaP

There are challenges which might present themselves in taking a SaP approach. Bovill et al identify three broad categories of challenge, which we adopted as a framework. First, higher education customs and culture can make it difficult for students and faculty to take on new roles and perspectives. Second, institutional structures, practices, and norms typically present practical barriers to the kinds of collaboration and shared power involved in partnerships. Third, establishing an inclusive approach to partnership can be challenging; yet

[33] 'Evaluating, Enhancing and Expanding Academic Advising in the School of Law'. Project summary available at www.ucd.ie/teaching/showcase/academicadvisingintheschooloflaw/.

inattention to this issue risks leaving out already marginalised students and staff.

We suggest that SaP involves another challenge, which can be described as relational. At its heart, all collaboration involves having functional relationships with other people. This is no less true of the faculty-student collaboration which is fundamental to SaP approaches. Matthews et al point out that:

> relationships occupy a central place in partnership practices and scholarship. Issues connected to relationships were amongst the most commonly reported positive outcomes, negative outcomes, and inhibitors for both students and staff.[34]

Elsewhere, Matthews describes the 'relational process between students and academics/staff' as '[t]he linchpin of partnership'.[35] Expressing a similar idea about the nature of collaborative relationships, Cook-Sather et al note that partnership

> involves negotiation through which we listen to students but also articulate our own expertise, perspectives, and commitments. It includes making collaborative and transparent decisions about changing our practices in some instances and not in others and developing mutual respect for the individual and shared rationales behind these choices.[36]

The kind of relationship which typically exists between faculty and students in a classroom setting (particularly in large group teaching) is not necessarily one which lends itself to effective partnership and collaboration. As discussed below, we sought to mitigate these various potential difficulties in our project design.

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[34] KE Matthews, 'Students as Partners as The Future of Student Engagement' (2016) 1(1) Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal 1.
[35] Ibid 2–3.
[36] Cook-Sather et al, 'Engaging Students' 8.

Addressing challenges

Customs and culture

The 'customs and culture' problem exists because faculty-student partnership 'is rarely automatic and can present significant challenges to existing ways of being, doing and thinking.'[37] Much of the SaP literature, for example, highlights perceived resistance among faculty to student partnership schemes, for a variety of reasons.[38] We sought to traverse the traditional faculty-student roles by communicating in an informal manner with our student partners (including encouraging the use of faculty members' first names rather than titles); by allowing them to dictate the shape of the project (within the parameters of a broad timeline); and by demonstrating our willingness to listen and act (for example by implementing some immediate changes based on feedback from our student partners). Some of the students' initial recommendations were implemented immediately, demonstrating to them that faculty were taking their work seriously.

Offering payment for students' time (see further below) also changed the nature of our interactions to one which more closely resembled colleagues working together, rather than faculty telling students what to do. As discussed further below, we also involved students directly in the internal institutional reporting on the project, although not explicitly invited or encouraged to do so by the institutional coordinators / funders.

[37] M Healey, A Flint & K Harrington, 'Students as Partners: Reflections on a Conceptual Model' (2016) 4(2) Teaching & Learning Inquiry 8.

[38] Examples include E Enright, KE Matthews, S Russell & S Sherwood, '2018 National Students as Partners Roundtable Program' (2018) University of Queensland, available at www.itali.uq.edu.au/about/projects/students-as-partners; C Bovill, G Aitken, J Hutchison, F Morrison, K Roseweir, A Scott & S Sotannde 'Experiences of Learning Through Collaborative Evaluation From A Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Education' (2010) 15(2) International Journal For Academic Development 143; A Cook-Sather et al, *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide For Faculty* (John Wiley and Sons 2014) and KE Matthews, L Mercer-Mapstone, SL Dvorakova, A Acai, A Cook-Sather, P Felten, M Healey, RL Healey & E Marquis, 'Enhancing Outcomes and Reducing Inhibitors To The Engagement of Students and Staff in Learning and Teaching Partnerships: Implications For Academic Development' (2019) 24(3) International Journal For Academic Development 246.

Institutional barriers

Institutional norms and practices can be barriers to effective partnership. The size and nature of the institution can also present a challenge.[39] To mitigate the institutional problem identified by Bovill et al,[40] we recruited a research assistant, as noted above, who would act as an intermediary between the project leads, who were faculty, and the student partners. The research assistant was a non-faculty member of staff who did not traditionally have a student-facing role and was not known to the students. However, she was an experienced administrator and project manager who had practical knowledge and experience of working on research projects of different scales. She helped students to navigate various institutional processes such as claiming their hourly payments, booking rooms for meetings and events, going through the ethics approval process, filling in various forms and generally knowing 'who to ask' in these contexts. These were matters which would be regarded as routine for experienced faculty, but which presented considerable barriers for student partners.

Inclusivity

There is a risk that underrepresented students might be left out of student-faculty partnership efforts if they feel that such projects do not speak to their interests or needs.[41] Anecdotal and published evidence suggests that certain student voices are privileged while others are marginalized in partnership projects.[42] Including multiple perspectives can, according to Felten et al, cause both sets of partners to encounter 'dissonant, contested, and troublesome knowledge, provoking them to question their assumptions.'[43] This allows for the creation of new knowledge and greater mutual understanding between the groups.

[39] M Shank & L Cruz, 'Driver's Seat: A Qualitative Study of Transformational Student Partnerships in SOTL' (2023) 7(1) International Journal For Students as Partners 110.
[40] C Bovill, A Cook-Sather, P Felten, L Millard & N Moore-Cherry, 'Addressing Potential Challenges in Co-Creating Learning and Teaching: Overcoming Resistance, Navigating Institutional Norms and Ensuring Inclusivity in Student-Staff Partnerships' (2016) 71 Higher Education 195.
[41] P Felton, J Bagg, M Bumbry, J Hill, K Hornsby, M Pratt & S Weller, 'A Call For Expanding Inclusive Student Engagement in Sotl' (2013) 1(2) Teaching and Learning Inquiry 63.
[42] McIntyre et al, 'Pupil Voice'.
[43] Felton et al, 'A Call For Expanding' 65

To ensure an inclusive approach, we began by recruiting a group of undergraduate law students to work with us – they would be designated the Student Strategy Group. We advertised these roles by directly emailing all undergraduate students in our department and we explicitly sought diversity in recruiting student partners:

> We see value in having a range of viewpoints and experiences represented on this project. Students from diverse backgrounds are particularly welcome to apply, including but not limited to students from ethnic minorities, students with disabilities / disabled students, neurodivergent students, LGBTQ+ students, mature students and students who have taken part in Access programmes (e.g. HEAR[44] or DARE).[45]

> Rather than high academic grades, enthusiasm and an ability to work collaboratively are important for this project.[46]

From the applications we received, we selected a group of six undergraduate students who represented the different backgrounds and experiences described above. We were satisfied that traditionally marginalised students were well represented in this group. In a follow-up survey of the student partners, all of those who answered the question 'Why did you apply to work on this project?' included among their responses that they felt that the faculty leads 'wanted to hear from people like me'.

In their review of published literature on students as partners from 2010–2015, Mercer-Mapstone et al found that only one-third of the projects they reviewed paid students for their time.[47] They point out that '[n]on-payment creates challenges for students who cannot afford to undertake unpaid partnership initiatives outside of the curriculum, privileging certain students for reasons that have nothing to do with the goals of a partnership.'[48] We ensured that students on this project would be paid for their work, so that no student would

[44] HEAR is the Higher Education Access Route: a higher education admissions scheme for Leaving Certificate students (under 23) whose economic or social background are underrepresented in higher education. https://accesscollege.ie/hear/.
[45] DARE is a third level alternative admissions scheme for school-leavers whose disabilities have had a negative impact on their second level education. https://accesscollege.ie/dare/.
[46] Recruitment email, 4 June 2021.
[47] Mercer-Mapstone et al, 'A Systematic Literature Review'.
[48] Ibid 8.

be excluded on the basis of financial barriers. The desire for paid work as a motivator for applying to work on the project was cited as a motivator by all student partners who completed the follow-up survey.

We also sought to embed inclusivity in the way that the project was run. Recognising that our student partners had work and caring responsibilities, and that some lived far away from campus, we gave them autonomy when it came to organising their regular meetings. We suggested that they could use different meeting formats and times to accommodate students' schedules and responsibilities, and the students themselves took this advice on board. One student partner later commented that they 'enjoyed the fact we could do a lot of our meetings over Zoom because we all had busy schedules.' (S1)

Relationships

Recognising the importance of establishing and maintaining good relationships between the faculty partners and the student partners, we appointed an experienced research assistant to act as an intermediary between partners. This was a key role. The student partners responded very well to the research assistant, with one later describing her as

> 'the glue of the whole group.' (S1)

Throughout the project, the research assistant remained a point of contact between the project leads (two members of faculty) and the six members of the Student Strategy Group. She also provided guidance and advice for the students, but without the kind of power imbalance which can exist between students and faculty. In the follow-up survey after the project had concluded, one student commented on the experience of working with faculty:

> 'The relationship was more relaxed than I thought it would be. (S2)

Thus the research assistant played a vital role in the project, as a practical guide for students; as a conduit for clear communication and for developing and maintaining functional relationships.

The partnership in operation

Several groups of students were involved in this project at different stages and to differing extents. Our core student partners were known as the 'Student Strategy Group', to be distinguished from other groups of students who were involved, such as student focus groups, student respondents to questionnaires, and student workshop attendees.

The student partners (the Strategy Group) organised regular meetings, managed workloads and deadlines, and decided how to communicate with the broader student cohort to seek their views on the existing academic advising scheme. The Strategy Group decided to conduct student focus groups and surveys, and the research assistant provided them with guidance on issues such as obtaining ethical approval for their research and facilitating faculty and student workshops.

The Strategy Group organised four student focus groups to ascertain their peers' views about the existing academic advising system. The Strategy Group felt that the students-only nature of these sessions allowed students to speak honestly about their experiences in the law school, and they could articulate their criticisms of the academic advising system. The Strategy Group also designed and administered questionnaires which were completed by students at all four stages across the ten undergraduate law degrees.

To obtain a more rounded picture of the academic advisory system, the Strategy Group also surveyed members of faculty. They also organised and hosted a workshop for faculty, which was an opportunity to present the results of the surveys and focus groups, and to obtain further feedback from faculty.

Applying the SaP principles

Gravet, Kinchin and Winstone describe faculty-student partnership as 'a dialogic and values-based approach to learning and teaching.'[49] We noted earlier that the SaP values or principles which underpinned our work were respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. As Cook-Sather et al point out,

[49] K Gravett, IM Kinchin & NE Winstone, '"More Than Customers": Conceptions of Students as Partners Held by Students, Staff, and Institutional Leaders' (2020) 45(2) Studies in Higher Education 2574.

student-faculty partnerships which are grounded in these principles 'are most powerful and efficacious.'[50]

Respect

Cook-Sather et al describe 'respect' in the context of partnership context as follows:

> It entails taking seriously and valuing what someone else or multiple others bring to an encounter. It demands openness and receptivity, it calls for willingness to consider experiences or perspectives that are different from our own, and it often requires a withholding of judgement.[51]

Respect between the student and faculty partners was established from the outset. Much of this was done through building communication norms. For example, students were explicitly told that their individual opinions and viewpoints were valid and welcome. They were repeatedly reassured that they did not have to agree with opinions expressed by faculty partners or other faculty. Encouraging honest and open communication also helped to establish mutual respect. One student partner later said that they had valued

> 'Having the opportunity to speak freely about what was important to me.' (S3)

By the end of the project, each set of partners had greatly enhanced their understanding of the other's experiences and views. One student partner reflected:

> 'I thought it would be difficult to express my point of view on such a topic but I was pleasantly surprised that they had created such an atmosphere that we could relay the views of the academic advising programme without any of the staff taking it too personally.' (S1)

[50] Cook-Sather et al, *Engaging Students as Partners* 3.
[51] Cook-Sather et al, 'Engaging Students' 3.

Another said of the faculty partners:

> 'They are far more approachable than one may expect!' (S2)

As the project progressed, faculty partners were honest with student partners about aspects of their own work such as time pressures and resource limitations, and students were honest when explaining what they valued and what they found to be challenging aspects of faculty behaviour. At the outset, students were generally unaware of what the job of faculty in a large, under-resourced, research-intensive law school entailed. For example, they thought that almost all faculty time was spent on teaching and student-facing activities, and some felt that the low levels of engagement and poor availability of academic advisors were due to indifference. However, operating in a research-focused institution with a high faculty-student ratio meant that faculty had very limited time for engaging with students. As time went on, student partners expressed surprise at how busy and varied the academic role was. They developed a greater appreciation for the efforts of faculty to engage with students, and placed more value on their time.

A corollary of this was that faculty members at the outset had limited awareness of how stressful some students found the meetings with their academic advisors, and how this impacted on their ability to listen to and take on board the individual feedback offered to them in these sessions. Faculty partners had not considered the impact of the power differential between a first year undergraduate student and an experienced, full time faculty member. This issue was then brought to the attention of the wider faculty group in the faculty workshop, and guidance was issued to academic advisors explicitly pointing out this differential and suggesting ways to minimise its effects.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is another essential element of working with students as partners. To distinguish reciprocity from respect, Cook-Sather et al note that 'while respect is an attitude, reciprocity is a way of interacting.'[52] This is a helpful distinction. Healey et al framed staff and students as co-learners.[53] Partnership literature has also positioned students and staff as collaborators and

[52] Ibid.
[53] Healey, Flint and Harrington *Engagement Through Partnership.*

colleagues.[54] As Mercer-Mapstone et al observe, reciprocity 'inherently subverts the traditional power hierarchy between learners and teachers by re-positioning partners as learners and teachers.'[55]

Another example of how we embraced reciprocity was our approach to the interim and end-of-project reporting. Student partners were actively involved in writing up and presenting interim and final reports on the project. The interim reporting to the wider university group took the form of a short written report, a financial report and a live oral presentation. We invited the students to co-present with us, and they took responsibility for designing the slides and providing some of the oral commentary. Although a number of funded academic advisory projects from across the university presented these interim reports, our student partners were the only students invited to participate in the live oral session. We considered their presence to be an essential aspect of our partnership. As regards the written report, faculty members resisted the strong temptation to approach the writing of the final report like the setting of assignment, or alternatively to simply write it ourselves. The final report was co-written by the students and the project lead, with students contributing graphics, illustrations, and text, and being credited on the submitted report.

Shared responsibility

In a SaP framework, both student partners and faculty partners share responsibility for different aspects of the project; their responsibilities are not siloed. As Shulman and Shulman explain, when both sides take responsibility for the educational project, teaching and learning become 'community property'.[56] Both sets of partners come to a realisation that developing positive outcomes depends on both students and faculty working together. So, in the context of our project, for example, all partners had responsibility for adhering to timelines and to the broad project parameters. Reporting responsibilities were also shared, as discussed above. Shared responsibility manifested in other ways; for example, while the student partners took the lead on organising a faculty workshop, the faculty members took responsibility for encouraging

[54] P Taylor & D Wilding, *Rethinking The Values of Higher Education: The Student as Collaborator and Producer? Undergraduate Research as A Case Study* (Gloucester, England: Quality Assurance Agency For Higher Education, 2009).
[55] Mercer-Mapstone et al, 'A Systematic Literature Review'.
[56] LS Shulman & JH Shulman, 'How and What Teachers Learn. A Shifting Perspective' (2004) 36(2) Journal of Curriculum Studies 257.

colleagues to attend and participate. A similar shared responsibility of the production of materials and the delivery of events was evident in Watkins' and Canto-Lopez's work involving law students designing legal literacy materials for schoolchildren: 'though the final aims of the project were clear, the intermediate steps were to be worked out collaboratively, with students taking a leading role in determining the content and delivery of their workshops, without intervention from us.'[57]

Outcomes

We observed a number of the acknowledged beneficial outcomes of SaP in our study. Overall, the student partners described their experiences in positive terms; one student reflected:

> 'There wasn't really anything I did not enjoy.' (S1)

The individual student partners from different programme cohorts got to know one another over the life of the project and new friendships and networks were formed. The student partners socialised together outside of the parameters of the project, ie on their own time. They gained experience in a range of areas including project management, collaborative working, presentation and communication skills, and report writing. Reflecting on their contribution to the project, student partners identified having enhanced their teamwork, communication and organizational skills. One also mentioned having gained confidence in public speaking (S3). All of the student partners who responded to the follow-up survey said they planned to list their work on this project on their CVs (resumés), indicating that they placed a high value on the experience and felt that it enhanced their professional profiles.

Students also gained considerable research experience and developed an interest in academic research. One said that they valued

> 'being able to drive the direction of the research.' (S3)

When student partners organised events such as workshops and focus groups, they were surprised at the lack of engagement from fellow students; this was not something that they had anticipated. This gave them better insight into

[57] D Watkins & M Canto-Lopez, 'Working with Law Students to Develop Legal Literacy Materials' (2015) 50(2) The Law Teacher 195, 206

some of the challenges faced by faculty members who seek to provide timely and relevant information to students. When students do not take up the opportunities provided, faculty become frustrated and disinclined to make subsequent similar efforts. While the current project provided only a minor insight into this phenomenon, repeated use of SaP in a department or institution could help to cascade such knowledge and lead to greater widespread understanding among students about faculty workloads, time pressures and motivations.

There were also positive outcomes for the faculty partners, which we discovered through self-reflection and purposive discussion. Overall, the faculty leads enjoyed working with the student partners. We found that they approached their work with serious purpose; they cared about the subject-matter of the project and they wanted to produce work of a high standard. Another positive outcome was that we learned things about academic advising and about the broader student cohort that we would not have otherwise discovered. Tangible outcomes are evident in the fact that our School's revised academic advisory system will be better informed and more grounded in the student experience. Furthermore, while some changes involve further planning and resources, others were implemented very quickly. This revised system will affect all incoming law students across ten undergraduate programmes, so the impact of the student partners will be significant. Another positive outcome we perceived for faculty was the enhanced engagement with the wider student population during this project, which resulted directly from the actions of our student partners. Improved mutual understanding between students and faculties was also a very positive outcome from this project.

In our project, few of the negative outcomes of SaP were observed, but from a faculty perspective, working with student partners could be challenging at times. This mainly stemmed from students' lack of experience, and such difficulties were overcome and we recognised them as being parts of the process. As one student later reflected,

> 'I had never done a job like this before so it could be said everything surprised me as well (in a good way).' (S2)

Examples of some of the difficulties encountered included the students' written and visual presentation of results and data, their understanding of empirical research methodologies and concerns, their familiarities with the wider

institutional context and policies, and their understanding of the role of faculty. Sometimes adhering to timelines and deadlines could be a challenge, as some students tended to leave things to the last minute, or under-estimate how long certain tasks would take. However, important deadlines were ultimately met. The research assistant played an important role in this regard, helping the student partners with planning, time management, running effective and efficient meetings.

The student partners also experienced some challenges. Some suggested that working on the project was harder and more time-consuming than they had expected. While the faculty partners were heavily involved in the initial set-up of the project, we then stepped back to empower and encourage the student partners to take the lead. The student partners were surprised to find themselves with such autonomy. While they enjoyed the student-led approach to a certain extent, they later sought more faculty input and support, which we were able to provide. The research component of the work required the student partners to learn about empirical research processes, something which they had not encountered on their undergraduate degree programmes.

Discussion

Surveying the student partners about their experiences on the project was important and illuminating. We suggest that post-project feedback should be built into any project design which uses SaP, to reinforce the partnership aspect. Discovering what motivates students to participate in this kind of work will help to inform the design of future partnership projects. This can be viewed as a sort of virtuous circle of engagement.

We envisage working in a SaP context again in the future. Having gained practical experience of working in this way, we will also implement some of the lessons learned in future partnerships with students.

The three most commonly-cited reasons for students applying to work on this project were a need for paid work; a desire for work experience for their CVs, and simply because the work sounded interesting. These were cited in all of the responses to the survey. Two-thirds of respondents said that knowing or liking the faculty members who were involved was a driver. Of lesser importance, but still cited as reasons by one-third of respondents, were the responses ‘I had very strong views about the subject matter’ and ‘It sounded like they wanted to hear

from people like me.' It would appear from this very small sample that the desire for new experiences and paid work are strong motivating factors for students to get involved in partnership projects. This further underlines the need to ensure that student partners are paid for their work, and that financial barriers do not prevent them from participating.

While some of our student partners' recommendations were implemented, it was not possible to effect all of the changes which they suggested. Often this was because of factors outside of faculty control, such as resource limitations. We produced an internal report which (i) identified the main issues with the existing academic advising programme arising from the surveys and focus groups and (ii) made 21 recommendations to improve the academic advising programme in the department. These recommendations focus on the need for clarity regarding the purpose of the academic advisory programme; clearer communication about the programme for both staff and students; guidelines for meetings between students and academic advisers; a greater emphasis on the holistic nature of the role and greater awareness of the diverse nature of the student body and different support needs of students. These recommendations were presented internally and form the basis of a new departmental academic advising policy (currently a work in progress).

Matthews et al's characterisation of SaP is as a 'counter-narrative',[58] challenging 'traditional and neoliberal views'. Without taking a SaP approach to this project, it is unlikely that we would have given due weight to the issues of power which are inherent in all student-faculty relations and interactions. Many of us, as academics, struggle to understand these interactions from a student perspective, and we argue that a SaP approach helps to mitigate against hierarchy-blindness. Further work in this area could address student perceptions of power and hierarchies.

The SaP approach has been used in a variety of teaching and learning contexts and is increasingly mainstreamed as a way of co-creating and implementing change. We argue that it is particularly well suited to the evaluation and design of student support systems, including academic advisor schemes. Such systems are generally intended to provide relevant and timely supports for students at key junctures. Taking a SaP approach helped us to identify both the nature and timing of the supports needed and the optimum mode of delivery. We were

[58] Matthews et al, 'Enhancing Outcomes'.

able to better identify barriers experienced by students, as well as challenges experienced by faculty advisors. Two of the most important factors in the success of our project were the inclusive approach taken to recruiting student partners, and the appointment of a research assistant. We suggest that further work focusing on the nexus between academic and advising and Students as Partners could help to develop novel approaches to designing student supports which have students' views and experiences at their heart.