

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A student-staff partnership conducting research in higher education: An analysis of student and staff reflections

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on an analysis of reflections by students and staff following their experience of a student-staff partnership which conducted a case study exploring student mental health in higher education. During the primary project, several students commented on the benefits of the partnership. Furthermore, following completion of the inquiry, two engaged students and the principal investigator (PI) reflected on their experience of the partnership in action research cycles during the process of writing this report of the partnership. The analysis of these reflections resulted in the following categories: (a) benefits, (b) support for learning, (c) motivations, (d) impact, (e) outputs, and (f) limitations. The partnership facilitated students learning research skills, professional development, and empowerment. Staff experienced an increased ability to conduct research and the rewards of seeing students develop. It is recommended that stakeholders in higher education continue to invest in student-staff partnerships in the context of research studies and mental health inquiry to foster opportunities for positive learning outcomes for students, staff, and institutions.

KEYWORDS

higher education, student-staff partnership, mental health

Matthews et al., (2019) describe students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education (HE) as a rapidly emerging and expanding phenomenon. This differs from student engagement, which regards degrees of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion in students when learning or being taught, which influence their motivation to progress in their education (Great Schools Partnership, 2016). Engagement concerns the

extent of interaction, quantity of involvement in, and quality of effort towards learning activities which lead to persistence and completion of studies, whether this be remote, in class, or independent. It can also include ways in which students are involved in governance and decision-making.

This article explores a student-staff partnership conducted whilst the partners engaged in an extracurricular, subject-based research inquiry (Matthews et al., 2018a; Argent, 2020) at a university in the South-East of England (Payne et al., 2018). This qualitative inquiry took place between May 2017 to July 2018 and explored students' experience of support from staff for their mental health and staff's experience of supporting students with their mental health concerns.

Three staff were involved in the primary inquiry: the principal investigator (PI) (the first author), a mental health advisor, and the head of student well-being services. Five students from diverse backgrounds collaborated with staff, including two undergraduates, two postgraduates (from three schools: humanities, education, and psychology), and an alumni intern. Two students of the five just mentioned contributed to this article. Supervision and training were provided by the PI for delegated responsibilities, such as administering the recruitment of research participants, arranging/conducting interviews, transcribing audio-recordings, analysing findings, and reading report drafts.

Rather than reporting on the primary research inquiry, this article documents an analysis of the reflections on the two students and PI student-staff relationship and their experience both during the process and subsequently. The primary inquiry was entitled "Let's talk about mental health" (Payne, 2022), which became the vehicle for the partnership as a collaboration for learning and for the development of original knowledge (Blithe & Fidelibus, 2021).

Following completion of the primary inquiry, the team drafted the final report and made comments, including student reflections on the partnership. Subsequently, two students engaged in a further investigation, continuing to take part in the partnership through a conference presentation and the writing of this article. The design of the subsequent project was as an interactive action research cycle whereby the reporting of the partnership stimulated reflections on the experience of the partnership for both students and staff (PI). The question now inserted was, "what were the experiences of the partnership and what, if anything, did the partners learn?" The data was collected verbally and through the written word, as this article was being written by the authors whereby emergent thoughts were contributed. The data was analysed by noticing common and different themes as they emerged and by linking these with aspects in the student-staff partnership literature. The analysis was initially conducted by the PI but sent to the students for comment and further discussion. Limitations include the subjective nature of the data and the bias inevitably involved from both students and staff. Mitigation of the bias revolved around deep questioning, honesty, and self-awareness for all the contributors.

Student and staff reflections were informally provided to the PI and as contributions towards this article in the form of action research cycles. The drafts of this article were circulated and further reflective comments stimulated. Discussion over zoom and in email supported the process. The reflections were analysed and abstracted to deduce the following categories: (a) benefits, (b) support for learning, (c) motivations, (d) impact, (e) outputs, and (f) limitations. Examples of topics that fell within these categories include the

Payne, H., Cantwell, J., & Bristow, R. (2023). "A student-staff partnership conducting research in higher education: An analysis of student and staff reflections". *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v7i1.5122>

experience of the collaboration process, disadvantages, limitations, learning benefits, challenging experiences, possible next steps/career paths for the primary research project. From this investigation, a bigger picture organically emerged which was different from what would have resulted from solely documenting the outcomes of the primary research (Payne, 2022).

The student-staff partnership

Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) define partnership as “essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself. All partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership” (p. 7). They identify five areas of student-staff partnership: (a) learning and teaching; (b) learning, teaching, and assessment; (c) course-design and pedagogic consultancy; (d) scholarship of teaching and learning; and (e) subject-based research and inquiry. The primary inquiry formed a vehicle for this partnership supporting a safe, low-risk learning community and a sense of belonging with the mission of engaging students with research whilst in higher education (HE) via a student-staff partnership contributing to a research-rich, research-informed environment for students and staff. Bryson (2014) states that student engagement is constructed and reconstructed through student perceptions and that meaning is made of experiences/interactions. As stakeholders and shapers of the educational context, educators can foster purposeful, constructive learning for students to realise their potential in education and society. Student-staff partnerships can do just that. Stockwell, Smith, and Woods (2020), when proposing their typology of four types of student-staff partnerships (i.e., utility-based partnerships, pleasure-based partnerships, virtue-based partnerships, and creative-based partnerships, of which the first three explore friendship), call for students and staff to reflect on the purpose of the type of relationship they are in or requested to join. Whilst the type of student-staff partnership was unclear to students and staff at entry into or during this partnership, it was thought that meaning-making from an analysis of retrospective reflections-on-practice (Schön, 1983) by a few of the fully engaged students and staff once the study was completed might contribute to the discourse on relationships in research-based student-staff partnerships and beyond.

Partnerships between students and staff can support the cultivation of an environment that values research in teaching and learning activities (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Furthermore, the literature on student-staff partnerships demonstrates partnerships can contribute to the cohesion of the learning and teaching experience (for example, Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Dickerson et al., 2016; Stockwell et al., 2020). Therefore, it was assumed that in this partnership all those actively engaged aimed to gain from the process of learning and working together in a different way from established relationships between staff and students. From the analysis of the reflections, the collaboration appeared to form a creative partnership contributing to mutual development (Maunder, 2020) as is evidenced in the production of this article and a presentation delivered by the two of the student participants hosted by the Keele Institute for Innovation and Teaching Excellence (Cantwell & Bristow, 2022).

Awareness of ethical motivations and the purpose of the partnership can emerge during the process as partners contribute equally although in different ways and through different roles (Stockwell et al., 2020). In this partnership, staff (the PI and mental health/student well-being leads) shared expertise, and students were not restricted to

solely giving advice from their lived experience of mental health but engaged reciprocally in the implementation process. For example, they promoted the study for recruitment, arranged the interviews, conducted the interviews, analysed the data, and constructed the outcomes.

Maunder (2020) proposed three roles for students comparable to the established roles of research assistant, dissertation student, and research team member. The terms “research assistant,” and “research team” were evident for this partnership, although students were prepared to occupy different roles and activities from time to time as Healey and Healey (2018) suggest.

Dickerson, Jarvis, and Stockwell (2016) acknowledge students can engage in the production of original knowledge through research. Additionally, Lewis (2017) suggests students engage in extracurricular voluntary activity, and Bovill (2020) proposes students engage in the co-creation of learning. Acknowledging all these authors, this student-staff partnership focused on the engagement of students in the production of original knowledge through research as an extracurricular activity and in the co-creation of learning. The primary research project, which was designed as an extracurricular, voluntary student-staff partnership, was intended to facilitate opportunities for collaboration between staff and students and for the co-creation of learning, which added to the knowledge, understanding, skills, and experience of students and staff according to those reporting.

Initially, on reflection, the focus was on the utility of the partnership. Role descriptions were circulated for comment and agreement. Two undergraduate students from education and psychology and one from journalism were recruited. Two more students were employed as research assistants (an undergraduate from humanities and postgraduate from psychology). All joined the advisory committee alongside staff. This advisory committee met face to face via skype and over email when contributing to various technical aspects of the study, such as question design, interviewing, analysing, reading, and commenting on the report sections and other relevant activities making the project collaborative. Ideas flowed, challenges were addressed, hopes and fears elicited, and students’ goals for participating were explored. All subscribed to a confidentiality agreement. Sharing ideas helped to overcome obstacles such as recruitment of participants for the study. Gathering recruits and data collection can be energising, interesting, and pleasure-based (Stockwell et al., 2020) since it involves briefings/interviewing students and staff—a rewarding social experience. The data analysis phase could, at times, be taxing, but the student and PI pushed through together to draw out themes. Although the topic and methodological design and ethical approval for this research study was decided beforehand by the PI, students had input on several aspects including approaches to recruitment, the advent flyer, and dissemination. They also participated in hands-on, active learning throughout the delivery of the research milestones. The PI coordinated the team and the activities of the research project in the role of project manager. She has a background in psychotherapy and considerable research experience, acts as principal supervisor and examiner for doctoral students, and had involved students for other smaller projects, but this was the first student-staff partnership with which she had engaged.

The partnership emerged from the relationships between the staff and students rather than being identified as such at the outset of the primary research design. The partnership was a process of developing these relationships, and in the PI’s view had underpinning values such as inclusivity (to include cultural diversity), equality,

empowerment, trust (between students/students and staff), respect, and recognition (Bobeve et al., 2020). Thus, outcomes from the partnership were emergent rather than prescribed at the outset. Despite this, the shared purpose and responsibility for successful completion, which could contribute to the discourse within student mental health, was especially important in these times of rapid change in higher education due to the pandemic (Ellis et al., 2020). Studies demonstrate the significance of learning spaces as environments that promote healthy attitudes and partnerships; for example, staff and students being mutual stakeholders in the role learning environments play in well-being (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Furthermore, as highlighted by Matthews, et al., (2018a) environments which steward staff-student partnerships can cultivate mutual accountability for student mental health and spur the facilitation of sustainable student well-being.

Analysis of the reflections on the partnership

The following is an analysis of students' and staff reflections (N=4/8) on the partnership experience categorised as: (a) key benefits, (b) support for learning, (c) motivation, (d) impact, (e) outputs, and (f) limitations.

Key benefits

Staff and students felt strongly about student mental health, which benefited group cohesion. The shared purpose (Fagen et al., 2020) of in a student's words investigating student mental health and the support for it by academics in his view, seemed to have "helped bring the partnership together as a team. There appeared to be a shared vision described by the students to "improve the care offered to students," and to "eventually support the teaching staff" to become more "effective in delivering the support for the mental health needs of students." A joint student-staff presentation (Ribchester et al., 2020) at an internal conference "took the partnership further.in the PI's view" The research activities, such as participant recruitment, collecting and analysing data, and disseminating outcomes, appeared to the PI to have "led to a sense of completion," and these "explicit tasks performed held the main contributors in the process" as she expressed in her reflection.

One student explained they "gained insight into the realities of conducting a research project, as well as into the veracities of staff supporting students with mental health concerns, and students' experiences of such support." Another reported they "benefited from learning about the difficulties of data collection, the organisation required to ensure all goes to plan, and what to do when it does not," as inevitably happens in research.

Several students from the team thought the project gave them "the opportunity to gain greater insight into the experiences of students and staff in this essential area," another noted the project had "increased understanding and knowledge of the incidence of poor student mental health," and another said they understood "the confusion academics encounter when supporting such students." There was a shared appreciation of both the challenges faced by students with mental health concerns and those of the staff supporting them. From the PI's perspective, there was a sense of "shared values, purpose, and activity, and an understanding that this sort of partnership was valued by the institution."

Shaping support for learning

This partnership aligned to the creative-based partnership as in Stockwell et al., (2020) who refer to the contribution of the partners' joint activity to promote the greater good of others; that is, in this case, the raising of mental health awareness in the student population as well as the needs of staff supporting students with their mental health, and anticipated recommendations for improvements from the research study.

This student-staff partnership was concerned with challenging assumptions about research and mental health and supporting each other to overcome the obstacles of conducting research. Working together, we were greater than the parts, as in distributed leadership, where conjoint activity enables contributors to experience synergy, stimulating latent capacities and resulting in receiving influences from each other (Woods & Roberts, 2018). This learning is reciprocal, leading to the co-construction of new knowledge and understanding, embracing cognition, emotions, social, aesthetic, and ethical growth (Woods & Roberts, 2018). Shaping the learning outcomes can include the shared joy of discovering and advancing learning for partners.

There were differing forms of engagement, including student-staff discussions on aims/objectives, conducting the literature review, formulating questions for the interviews with staff and students, engaging in recruitment strategies, interviewing staff and students, co-facilitating a staff focus group, coordinating volunteer participants applications, arranging and conducting briefings and debriefings, and assisting with transcribing interviews and the analysis. For recruitment, for example, students spread the message, recruiting fellow students who might benefit from participating in the research.

Working with students in a partnership is usually rewarding to academics. In the first author's experience, supervising student engagement in conducting research gave her benefits in seeing them learn new skills and knowledge and gain greater understanding of, and confidence in, the research process.

One student thought engaging with the project helped them "gain experience of conducting a professional study, including recruitment, collecting data through interviewing/focus groups, transcribing and thematically analysing this data." This, they said, was a "useful learning curve when they conducted research for a masters'." Two students commented that opportunities were invaluable in "building a scientific skills base, alongside respective academic courses" and that "the process had contributed significantly" to their employability. Another student reported that the project "provided engagement with work of a professional standard [and the opportunity to contribute] to a wider field of research," enabling them to "experience working at this level for the first time."

With the shared concern and purpose over a specified time period, students reflected on how they "valued the chance" feeling they had "contributed to an important aspect of student and staff experience." One described "feeling empowered" to have had the "opening to help address such a complex and urgent area as student mental health."

Motivation of partners

There are many possible motivations behind why students participate in partnerships. The literature suggests partnerships may be motivated due to a utilitarian gain by improving their employment prospects (Bell, 2016), and this was the case, in part, as acknowledged by two students. However, they also reported it was "for the pleasure the activity gave to them" (i.e., the enjoyment of being in a learning group and from jointly exploring a subject). Motivation can also be for an intrinsic gain; for example, eudemonia or Payne, H., Cantwell, J., & Bristow, R. (2023). "A student-staff partnership conducting research in higher education: An analysis of student and staff reflections". *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijasp.v7i1.5122>

flourishing, where learning is valued for itself and as a process that makes one a better human being (Stockwell et al., 2020). For this partnership, motivation centred on the shared values of “destigmatising mental health” and “promoting it to staff and students” rather than learning for itself, or to become a better human. Students did feel motivated by the “opportunity to shape the future support for students with mental health concerns, through research.”

As institutional research in HE has indicated, for productive and sustainable learning, “mutuality, reciprocity, and complementarity are of key importance in the relationship between student and teacher” (Hermesen et al., 2017, p. 3). Such qualities are also commonly featured in the behaviour of members of a group with equal status. Student-staff partnerships as a vehicle for student engagement and learning can be viewed as seeking to disrupt taken-for-granted traditional hierarchical structures in universities (Matthews, 2017). This partnership certainly aimed to adopt a distributed leadership approach whereby different roles were held by different members at different times rather than sticking to the teacher-student power differential normally experienced by staff and students in HE. Bovill (2017) noted it is not always possible or desirable to achieve full partnerships (i.e., those which require high levels of equality and contributions). This was the case in this partnership, since not all students nor staff fully participated, nor did they do so equally in their contributions. Despite this, for the remaining staff and students who did fully participate, the beneficial impact on them and the institution mirrored the findings in Bamwo et al. (2020).

Consequently, it can be argued that students’ responses to the invitation to join the study team fell into primary motivations such as utilitarian motivations (to enhance employability), pleasurable motivations (due to the social and academic collaboration), and altruistic motivations (since the study was designed to gather knowledge to improve mental health environments for staff and students).

As the team worked together, there was also evidence of the creative-based partnership (Stockwell et al., 2020) in which creative change, or outcomes, emerge through the joint activities of partners. From feedback, the good of the project became an emergent outcome of the interaction, rather than the project being based on instrumental exchange. Students reported feeling “increased motivation,” “enthusiasm,” a “sense of community,” and comments reflecting deeper, enhanced learning as described by Brooman et al., (2015). One student disclosed, for example, “I really valued the opportunity to bring my own experience to the table when contributing to something that may have a positive and tangible effect on the way in which mental health is treated at the university.” This comment highlights the need for equality and the variety of individuality each student brings to a project, suggested as rationales for student-staff partnerships by Cook-Sather (2015). The partnership with students could be viewed as a professional friendship in the Aristotelian sense (Stockwell et al., 2020) that can also increase motivation.

From the PI’s perspective, there was a need to provide for inclusivity in the research team, and since students were stakeholders in the study, it seemed appropriate to include and engage with students not only as participants in the study but also as partners in the delivery of the study.

Secondly, staff wanted to respond to the challenges of engaging minority student groups such as BAME students and students with mental health concerns. Two students were from ethnic minorities and one disclosed mental health concerns. For the PI there was

the personal belief that research could be a vehicle for further informal learning and teaching and that the practical experience might transform students' understanding of research and its problems and processes. The two remaining staff were from student well-being services with motivations to learn more about student mental health concerns and to offer advice to the study.

Impact

The impact of the benefits of the partnership filtered out beyond the immediate study partnership. Students during the partnership had interacted with lecturers, communicating the real issues of student mental health concerns and building up professional relationships and connections. The inculcation of the importance of promoting student mental health and a student-staff partnership has also been encouraging to audiences. From conversations following presentations to teaching staff within this HE setting, the PI has seen a distinct rise in both perceptions and acceptance of mental health concerns and heard calls for staff training in supporting students with their mental health. It was reported by two students that "several lecturers outside the project team acknowledged and applauded student exploration of these real issues and [students] conducting research to benefit the vulnerable members of the university."

The partnership stimulated discussion in the team and beyond on mental health concerns for students, increasing knowledge and understanding. Students thought the study and partnership "raised the profile of mental health in the university generally." For example, a student reported on communicating with lecturers about current student mental health concerns because of the study. She was later informed this had "helped in the support lecturers within her school subsequently gave to students." Additionally, student well-being services have begun to implement some of the recommendations from the study.

Outputs

Students and staff noted the various outputs from the partnership. The PI, two students, and the now intern alumni from journalism contributed to a university-wide symposium at the start of the project. Students helped to design a poster and handout. Another student, the PI, and intern presented at the in-house annual Learning and Teaching Symposium, and the PI wrote—with contributions from the other staff and students—the internal reports on (a) the student-staff partnership and (b) the research study. A postgraduate student participated in a bespoke short internal film for staff illustrating their learning from the partnership project. The study enabled two of the students to present at a national conference focused on curriculum enhancement (Payne et al., 2022), contributing their experiences of the staff-student partnership to a wider network within higher education. Finally, these two students from the partnership contributed to this article in further distillation of reflections as we created the article together.

With students contributing to this study in a partnership with staff and due to the focus on student mental health, they were able to advance their careers in, for example, research or the mental health field. With reference to HE educational innovation, an intended outcome was to foster continued student-staff partnerships research into this key area of mental health.

Limitations

The partnership experienced limitations and tests along the way regarding the research study and the process of the partnership. For example, it was noted that collecting and processing data in conjunction with students' other course commitments proved tricky at times, as did coordinating student efforts toward the project to meet key deadlines. Deadlines for student assignments, especially in the summer (some students were in their final year when examinations and dissertations were to be sat/submitted), interrupted the flow at times.

A student withdrew for medical reasons—making for significant difficulties within the partnership, disadvantaging that member, and reducing the participant recruitment strategy until another student stepped in as a replacement. This 'stepped in' student, though, had the opportunity to learn how to recruit and administer appointments for interviews and participant briefings/debriefings and became committed to the project in a new way, culminating in assisting in the development of this article.

The PI was appreciative of the student involvement and their willingness to help, especially when times were tough, for example, due to time limitation, recruitment difficulties, and absence. She underestimated the time required to train and supervise students in their activities and responsibilities, however. There were periods when the project was fragmented, and students needed holding in tangible and individualised ways. There appeared to be enough trust and belief in the shared purpose, which helped in the PI's experience to motivate and sustain engagement, ensuring completion within the time frame.

After gaining ethical approval, the next milestone was recruitment. Unfortunately, recruitment became delayed due to the PI having to undertake an unexpected, last-minute, new-to-her undergraduate module leadership duty. Consequently, recruitment was deferred so much it was difficult to gather as many volunteers as anticipated, especially students, which was a limitation. The pace slowed enormously, delaying the project so much that it meshed with student finals/examinations at the end of the year, resulting in unwanted stress. The reports had to be completed in less than half the time previously allocated, which was also stressful. Although this proved a substantial disadvantage, without support from the student partnership the PI would not have had the sustenance required for project completion.

With reference to the limitations of these reflections-on-practice it is acknowledged that memories may not be an accurate reflection of how the partnership worked at the time. As Maunder (2020) proposed, it would have been more worthwhile to have captured experiences at the time (i.e., studying the partnership from its inception to developed stages, enabling insight into the process and how relationships between partners may shift when responding to changing circumstances). Another limitation is that students may have been reluctant to pass criticism on staff and/or felt pressure to report positive aspects of the process (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Recommendations

There are many possibilities for collaboration between students and faculty, academics, and other students in teaching and learning activities (Bovill, 2017; Healey et al., 2014; Blithe & Fidelibus, 2021). The engagement of students partnering with staff with a focus on research highlights a host of challenges and limitations but also positive outcomes

and benefits to the institution (i.e., promoting awareness of the importance of supporting student mental health).

From our experience we recommend:

- HE senior stakeholders position greater regard for the principles of student-staff partnerships when developing strategies to increase mental health awareness, provision, and to act as a protective factor for student mental health concerns in which teaching staff play an important role (Spear et al., 2021).
- Further research into significant themes in student-staff partnerships within research settings in HE.
- Student-staff partnerships within a research context be more widely employed in HE, with both undergraduate and postgraduate students.
- Acknowledgement of the time required for PIs to achieve the responsibilities involved in developing and managing a student-staff partnership within a research activity to avoid disadvantaging the completion of a study.
- Collaboration in a student-staff partnership—the PI needs an understanding of, and skills in, distributed leadership and knowledge of the possible motivations of students to engage effectively with them to cultivate a cohesive team.
- Building into the programme time to process and collect the learning from students and staff through reflection-in-action as opposed to relying solely on reflections after the experience.

CONCLUSION

The partnership engagement and contribution were maintained by the nature of the research (student mental health). From reflections, this partnership demonstrably increased, amongst other benefits, students' sense of contributing to a professional, meaningful piece of research from its potential real-life consequences for the handling of mental health issues by staff at the university. It is unclear if the same level of contribution and sustained effort would have been made if the project had centred around a different topic.

These reflections on the partnership include both an analysis of the shared concern of student mental health and an emphasis on the process of the partnership itself. Each element has inspired additional questions. For example, do student-staff partnerships and attitudes driving associations between staff and students facilitate productive mental health awareness throughout the university environment? This highlights a potential underlying benefit for all stakeholders within HE: supporting the achievement of significant mental health-orientated objectives.

It can be concluded from this case study that a student-staff partnership within a research project context can be valuable for both parties. There were benefits of the partnership for students, such as complementing academic understanding, and for staff; for example, enhancing project management skills. The riches in learning from the partnership and practical experience gained appear to complement academic understanding of research.

The study received University of Hertfordshire ethics approval from the ECDA Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, approval number cEDU/SF/UH/03132 and gained permission from the dean of students to collect data on the university campuses.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Appreciations to the Learning and Teaching Innovation Centre for awarding the grant to conduct the study which formed the vehicle for this student-staff partnership. We are grateful to all the students and staff in the research team for their contribution and to the volunteers who participated in the study.

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