

Students as Partners: Building capability in staff and students

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Abstract

Student engagement initiatives often focus on the benefits for students, the service or the institution, ignoring the potential for staff to build capability and gain from the experience themselves. This initiative is an innovative example of building capability in staff and students through engaging in genuine partnership to share skills, knowledge and expertise. Partnering with students systematically and consistently allows us to develop the trust required to move away from traditional hierarchical models of expertise and truly achieve reciprocal benefits. Focusing on reciprocity allows all participants to learn and grow, while also improving core Academic Skills service offerings. This session aims to help participants reflect on opportunities to implement such an initiative. It will provide the chance to ask questions and hear staff perspectives on key successes, learnings and future goals.

Interest in Students as Partners (SaP) initiatives has burgeoned in recent years, with a growing body of literature highlighting benefits and challenges of such partnerships and providing frameworks for implementation (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; HEA, 2015; Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). This work differentiates *student partnership* from *student engagement* arguing that the former should be viewed as a mutually beneficial process, rather than an outcome.

While benefits of partnership initiatives for students are well documented, reciprocal outcomes for staff were identified as one key area for further research by Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017). To address this gap, in semester 1, 2020 the University of Melbourne Academic Skills (AS) Team launched a student partnership initiative using the Higher Education Academy (2015) 'Framework for student engagement through partnership'. This initiative represents a shift in our approach from *listening* to students to *partnering* with them in a more systematic and reciprocal way. Previously, most AS student voice initiatives were ad hoc and as an extra-curricular, central service it was a challenge to engage a large and diverse group of students. In this new program, Academic Skills Student Partners (ASSP) work with the AS team throughout the semester to create resources and services to support students in developing their academic, English language, and intercultural communication skills.

Initial results indicate that both staff and students benefit from participation. Key gains reported by staff include: enhanced trust between staff and students; a perceived shift from traditional hierarchical models of expertise; deeper understanding of the student experience; and increased motivation. The main benefits reported by students included: development of professional skills such as teamwork and project management; exposure to new perspectives; greater sense of connection with other students and the university; and being able to 'make a difference'. Importantly, this approach results

in authentic, credible and relatable AS content for students as we are able to draw on a range of experiences and incorporate greater diversity of perspective.

Partnering with students to exchange skills and expertise is an effective way of building individual and team capability to reflect on practice, mentor others to help them reach their full potential and improve our responsiveness to students' needs. Qualitative data from staff and ASSP surveys and focus groups will highlight how to apply this approach in a way that develops mutually beneficial, sustained relationships. These findings will be useful for any institution or team considering implementing a SaP initiative.

Question for discussion

The notion of reciprocity or equal benefit to all parties is central in SaP initiatives. How do you ensure and measure outcomes for staff?

References

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