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Working with students as partners in pedagogic research: staff and student experiences of participating in an institutional bursary scheme

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Abstract

This case study presents a discussion of an institutional bursary scheme (called URB@N), in which students work in partnership with staff on learning and teaching research projects. The collation of evaluative evidence over several years (via student reflective accounts, annual feedback surveys from staff and students, observations and reflections from scheme coordinators and qualitative interviews with staff and students who have participated) suggests that this model provides a valuable and impactful approach to staff/student partnership working to facilitate educational enhancement. Also discussed are emerging challenges, highlighting some of the difficulties associated with implementing effective partnership models.

Introduction

At a time when the higher education sector is turbulent and undergoing radical change, the positioning of students and their relationship to staff and their institution is the subject of much debate. With funding changes and increased marketisation of universities, students have frequently been referred to as 'consumers' of education. This metaphor, however, is problematic, owing to its connotations of passivity and one-way transmission, which find little favour with advocates of active engagement in and meaningful student contribution to the learning process (McCulloch, 2009). McCulloch presents an alternative metaphor to reconceptualise students' relationship with the university, arguing that students should be seen as 'co-producers'. He proposes that staff and students bring valuable resources to the learning environment and that there are mutual expectations and demands placed on both. Co-production emphasises active engagement, mutual learning and collaborative knowledge creation, thus progressing the long-standing debate about the research-teaching nexus, because both staff and students are involved in the (co-)production of knowledge.

This notion of co-producer, with staff and students working together to generate knowledge, resonates strongly with the current 'student as partners' movement, which is gaining widespread interest in the higher education sector. The Higher Education Academy promotes student partnerships as one of its key principles and has a growing repository of related resources and examples of good practice (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/students-as-partners>). Many institutions are seeking ways in which they can work creatively with students as partners in order to improve the student experience and the institution as a whole. The manifestation of 'students as partners' is diverse, as institutions implement a range of different models to work with students more closely and more collaboratively (Little, 2011).

Institutional bursary schemes giving opportunities for staff and students to work together on research projects have grown in popularity and provide one approach to staff/student partnerships. Many universities coordinate their own bursary schemes, in which undergraduate students work with staff on collaborative research projects for a period of time (Little, 2011). Such projects are typically discipline-based, meaning that the research

conducted develops students' knowledge and experience in their particular subject area and enables them to co-produce discipline-related knowledge in partnership with staff.

Interestingly, students have typically been absent from pedagogic (learning and teaching) research, despite its having a direct impact on their teaching and learning experience (Partridge and Sandover, 2010). Students' views may well be sought, and they are often participants in research of this kind, but, as Dunne (2011) states, there is a distinction between 'listening' to students (which implies a more passive, one-way process) and getting them actively involved in researching areas they perceive to be important in their university experience, exploring possible solutions and bringing about change (thus aligning more closely with the 'co-producer' metaphor). The growing body of literature on students as partners makes clear that staff/student partnerships can provide a real opportunity for meaningful student engagement in learning and teaching enhancement (Little, 2011). Actively involving students as pedagogic researchers could therefore be one way to implement partnership working for the benefit of the student experience.

This paper presents a case study of one institution's experience of coordinating an institutional bursary scheme for undergraduate students working in partnership with staff on pedagogic research. Drawing on evaluative data from staff and students who have been part of this scheme, a range of benefits is identified both for scheme participants and the institution as a whole. Emerging challenges are also discussed, highlighting some of the difficulties associated with implementing effective models of staff/student partnerships.

The URB@N Scheme

The URB@N scheme (Undergraduate Research Bursaries @ Northampton) provides bursaries for undergraduate students to work in partnership with staff on pedagogic research projects. Project ideas are initially proposed by staff, reflecting an area of work or research question they are seeking to investigate. All projects are related to the student learning experience and are explored through student voices. Examples include: what students want from library induction; student experience of online assessment and feedback; student use of open educational resources; factors influencing engagement in student mentoring schemes; experiences of student parents; challenges associated with being a distance learner; seeking views and experiences on employability and placement learning. Project areas are diverse and reflect the current issues and priorities across each University Academic School and central services, such as Library and Learning Services and Student Support.

Each year, staff members are invited to apply to run an URB@N project. Applications are peer reviewed against scheme criteria, ensuring suitability of the project and potential value to the student experience and confirming the amount of support and learning opportunities available to the student researcher. Available projects are then advertised to undergraduate students, who have the opportunity to apply to be researchers on a project of their choice. Students are asked to explain why they are suitable for participation in URB@N and why they are interested in that particular project. They are also typically asked to provide a curriculum vitae, which gives them useful practice at producing a CV, with the help of the Careers services as needed. Several different models of student recruitment have been tried since the scheme started, including both centrally-organised advertisement and recruitment directed at all undergraduate students and advertisement of vacancies and application-

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processing by the staff who are supervising projects. Currently, the latter approach is being taken: following a selection process (including a short interview or discussion, as decided by the individual member of staff), staff select their student researcher. Successful applicants then work with the staff member for part of the academic year (usually during the spring and summer term, from January to May) to design and conduct the research, analyse the findings, present their results and highlight implications for practice. Projects are intended to involve approximately fifty hours work for the student. On completion of their projects, students receive a £500 bursary to support the time and effort they have contributed. Further information about the URB@N scheme can be found at www.northampton.ac.uk/urban.

URB@N has been running since 2009, with over seventy pedagogic research projects undertaken since its initiation. There is an annual cohort of approximately fifteen running projects, each with a student researcher working on it. As it has grown in reputation and popularity, the scheme has become embedded into the university through inclusion in the learning and teaching plan and sustained commitment to funding it. A key aspect that has contributed to the continuing institutional support for URB@N has been the growing evidence of its success (Butcher and Maunder, 2014). The following sections consider how the scheme has been evaluated so far and what the emerging themes are in relation to its benefits and outcomes.

Evaluation

In order to track URB@N's progress, learn from experiences and improve the scheme, evaluation data from a range of sources has been collated over a number of years. All students who participate in URB@N as student researchers are asked to write an account of approximately 500 words at the end of the scheme, reflecting on their experience, identifying strengths and challenges and saying what they feel they have learned from it. These accounts provide valuable first-hand insight into students' experiences and the areas they choose to mention and highlight. In addition, staff and students who have been part of URB@N have completed anonymous voluntary online feedback surveys comprising both quantitative and qualitative questions about various aspects of the scheme (such as the application process, scheme information and support, the student-staff relationship, project outcomes, benefits and challenges experienced). A series of semi-structured interviews with current and former URB@N staff and students has also been conducted, in order to understand experiences in depth. Alongside this, the author, as scheme coordinator, has reflected upon the process and made personal observations about it, drawing from interacting with scheme participants each year, hearing about how projects are developing, dealing with teething troubles, joining in informal 'corridor discussions' and receiving feedback from senior staff. When all of this data is brought together and analysed thematically, a number of patterns, which are discussed in the following section, can be identified.

Emerging themes

The analysis and interpretation of the collated data gathered over a number of years highlight the following perceived benefits of the URB@N scheme:

- **Research skills**

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Students consistently report the value they gain from undertaking the research projects in terms of the research skills and experience obtained. Whilst many students study research methods as part of their degree course, they highlight how much they learn by 'doing it for real' and experiencing what it is like to be part of a real-world research project. Several students have talked about being ahead of the game by participating in URB@N, because they got the chance to learn about and use research skills and techniques that some of their course peers had not yet encountered. The URB@N research often complemented curriculum material students were studying as part of their course, helping to embed it and develop the students' knowledge and understanding. For example, one student explained how he was learning about qualitative research techniques on his degree programme at the same time as he was undertaking an URB@N project (which involved his collecting qualitative data and analysing it). This parallel experience enabled him to consolidate his knowledge and feel more confident.

Although URB@N is open to undergraduate students across all years, second year students form the most common pool of student researchers. For these students, their URB@N experience helps to prepare them for their final year dissertation – something that is frequently mentioned by both students themselves and the staff who supervise them. In addition, students and staff have frequently commented about how the research experience gained through URB@N provides skills and know-how relevant to postgraduate study and plans for careers in research or related fields.

- ***Employability***

Another benefit reported by students is the valuable employability skills they obtain. It is common for them to refer to URB@N as 'valuable CV material'. Whilst this may seem unsurprising, it is interesting to see the varied ways in which both staff and students are able to draw out and identify the applied and transferable skills gained. For example, when working as URB@N researchers, students are involved in steering the direction of the project, monitoring progress, using their initiative, managing time to ensure the project is completed within the prescribed time scale, juggling their own study commitments alongside those of the project, interacting with different parts of the university and with people who have varying levels of seniority, writing reports and presenting work. All URB@N students design and present an academic poster of their projects at the end of the scheme in a poster presentation event (akin to a poster session at an academic conference), which is attended by colleagues from both inside and outside the university. Students frequently highlight this in particular as being a valuable learning experience. Several students who were involved with URB@N in previous years have also reported that they were able to obtain subsequent employment and postgraduate study places as a result of the skills and experience they gained through the scheme.

- ***New relationships***

Staff and students who have been part of URB@N often talk about the value of closer staff-student relationships. Students have explained how they have enjoyed working with staff members as if they were colleagues and have been able to present their ideas and work collaboratively in a different way from the typical learning and teaching situations they are used to. Staff too have reported that they value the closer contact with students, getting to know them better and learning more about their experiences and ideas. These views overlap

with those reported by Freeman et al (2014) and highlight the benefits that can be achieved when staff and students occupy a shared space and are given the freedom to work together creatively.

- ***Promoting pedagogic research***

The URB@N scheme has promoted pedagogic research across the institution and encouraged staff to engage in it. Having a scheme such as this demonstrates the institutional importance placed on pedagogic research and research-informed learning and teaching practice and stimulates activity aligned to these priorities. In a university such as Northampton, which is seeking to develop its research profile, this has been one way in which staff are encouraged and supported to be research-active and several URB@N projects have led to tangible research outputs, including national and international conferences and peer-reviewed publications. This has been beneficial for the university, for the staff members themselves in terms of career progression and also for the students, who were often part of these dissemination activities and thereby gained the experience of attending and presenting at academic conferences and writing for publication.

It is important to note here that a scheme such as URB@N can provide value for money at a time when finances in higher education are under strain. At Northampton, a relatively small amount of money has provided seed funding to initiate a large number of research projects and encourage staff to get involved. The funding provided to support the student researchers has given staff members a small but very valuable resource, enabling them to get many projects off the ground and – in several cases – lead to further work and development. Whilst not all institutions may be able to fund such initiatives, the Northampton experience does highlight how much can be achieved with relatively little financial input, as long as it is available.

- ***Authentic insight***

The collaborative work of students and staff has opened up the projects and ensured that the questions being asked are appropriate for and relevant to students. For example, staff have mentioned how the student researchers have been able to take the project in new directions and suggest things that they themselves wouldn't have considered. In addition, as student researchers, the URB@N students are frequently involved in data collection; this typically involves interacting with other students to access their views and experiences on a particular issue. A key benefit reported by staff is how the URB@N students have been able to provide unique access to the student voice through their position as peers. Students interviewed seem to have been more open, honest and relaxed when talking to a fellow student researcher than they might have been when talking to a member of staff, resulting in perhaps more reliable, accurate and authentic data. In addition, to embed students in the projects and make them integral, both as researchers and participants, is to demonstrate a genuine, non-tokenistic commitment to valuing the student voice. This highlights how useful and important it can be to have meaningful student involvement in pedagogic research, as opposed to primarily staff-driven approaches (Partridge and Sandover, 2010).

- ***Enhancing the student experience***

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Perhaps one of the most crucial aspects to draw out from the evaluative data is the evidence of real impact emerging from the URB@N projects. Directly resulting from them are many instances of notable changes to practice with the potential to enhance the student learning experience. Examples include: the overhaul and re-design of library induction for all new students, in response to student feedback; the review, based on project findings, of the structure and approach of a student mentoring scheme; changes to support for distance learning students; embedding of online 'Welcome' sites for new students; enhanced support for students who are parents. These demonstrate that the impact of URB@N projects goes beyond the staff and students who are directly involved and changes the learning experience of students at the institution more broadly.

Challenges

Despite the overwhelmingly positive feedback received about URB@N and its benefits outlined above, some challenges identified along the way should be mentioned. Though anticipated operational issues, such as health and workload, have affected completion of some projects, there have also been some struggles in staff/student researcher relationships which have adversely influenced project progression. For example, on occasion, an apparent disparity between staff and student expectations has led to relationship strain and miscommunication. Projects have functioned in different ways and the relationships established between staff and students have varied accordingly. Whilst diversity in approach in itself is not necessarily problematic, a genuine partnership may not occur equally in all projects. Little (2011) has discussed the role of power relations in staff/student partnerships, whereby the traditional hierarchy between staff and students can be difficult to break down, presenting a barrier to true partnership. Reflections on URB@N corroborate this. For example, a few students have felt that they haven't had as much input into the direction of the project as they expected, sometimes reporting limited collaborative discussion with staff or 'being given' work to do. Alternatively, some staff members have reported that their URB@N students have become over-familiar, making it difficult to establish appropriate boundaries if they also interact in classroom settings with other students. There have also been occasions where staff have under-estimated student ability and competence, with the result that students have felt talked down to, or over-estimated them, which has meant that students have not been provided with appropriate training and guidance or staff have been unhappy with the quality of work produced.

Student partnerships can be played out in multiple ways (Little, 2011) and there has been some discussion about what 'partnerships' mean and how individuals construct their own contextual interpretations (Freeman et al, 2014). However, this is an area that has perhaps not received as much attention in the literature as is needed, given the current sector-wide enthusiasm for working in partnership. Interpretations of partnership and how these are created in practice are forming a core part of the continuing research into the URB@N scheme.

It is important to note that the challenges outlined above are in the minority; most feedback from participants on the scheme is exceptionally positive. That said, the challenges should not be ignored, for they provide valuable insight into how successful staff/student partnerships may be developed and sustained.

Concluding remarks

The University of Northampton's experience of establishing and coordinating the URB@N scheme has been overwhelmingly positive and has enhanced the learning experience both for the student researchers who have been involved and, more widely, for the student body, benefiting as it does from the changes to practice resulting from project outcomes. Whilst there are challenges to be overcome, these overlap with existing literature that indicates issues common to higher education establishments and not unique to the Northampton institution, whose experiences in this respect contribute to the growing body of knowledge about facilitating and achieving effective higher education staff/student partnerships.

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