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Making the Language of Assessment Inclusive – Reflections on Staff-Student Partnerships

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Abstract: A key feature of the QAA funded collaborative project “Making the language of assessment inclusive” is its commitment to staff-student partnerships in carrying out our research. These partnerships are formed both within each participating University, and cross-institutionally, with staff and students forming collaborative workstreams, which change and develop to meet research needs throughout the life of the project. In this paper, we turn the spotlight upon our processes for collaborative working, and the challenges and successes of these partnerships in the first six months of the project. We explore our methods for creating and sustaining a culture of partnership between the cross-institutional project team, informed by Healey et al’s (2014) framework for engaging students as partners. Finally, we share our approach to evaluating the extent to which staff and students genuinely share power and control of our cross-institutional research using a Ladder of Participation model (Arnstein, 1969; Feeney et al, 2020).

Paper: The “Making the language of assessment inclusive project” is part funded by QAA as one of its 2021 Collaborative Enhancement Projects, with the majority of this funding financing the recruitment of students at each institution to act as co-researchers on the project. From the start of the project, the partner institutions have committed to the principle that for students to be genuine co-researchers, this requires staff researchers to share power on the project with the students, thus placing the students at or near the top rung on a Ladder of Participation model of engagement. Arnstein’s (1969) concept of a Ladder of Participation has been recently adapted as a method of evaluation of student engagement in Irish Higher Education (HEA, 2016; Feeney et al, 2020) in the context of the influence that students have over the governance and direction of travel of their institutions. Here, we are extending this model as a means of evaluating the extent to which students have true control over the direction and output of our research project. However, we are mindful of Feeney et al’s (2020) caveat that the ladder metaphor did not capture the richness of the staff and student experience of the partnerships developed in the course of creating Ireland’s first Technological University, nor the strategies used by the student bodies in exercising this control. Therefore, our use of the ladder of participation will be augmented by asking staff and students to reflect upon their experiences of working together.

In order to create a culture of partnership within the project, underpinning values identified by Healey et al’s (2014) framework for student partnership such as reciprocity, trust, respect, courage and empowerment, will be embedded throughout the project’s methods. University of Brighton’s

(2018) resources for facilitating student-staff collaboration - informed by Healey et al (2014) -will be used to facilitate meaningful discussion between all staff and student partners throughout the project. Resources will be used to guide mutual partnership introductions; exploring values of partnership working and establishing project ground rules and shared values; prompting reciprocal developmental reflections, and empowering students in collaborative academic writing for dissemination. The project builds upon ideas from Mercer-Mapstone et al (2016) who highlight the significance of reciprocity in partnership working. The use of the resources was intended to challenge the more common one-directional and unbalanced communication between staff and students during inductions and professional development contexts where students are the focus, thus preventing mutual exchange and the building of trust.

We will explore the challenges experienced by both students and staff in the early months of the project and how our relationships have evolved and adapted as the project has progressed. We will examine the ways in which we have sought to pool our different skills and benefit from the positionality that each researcher will necessarily have in relation to the project. We sought to disrupt the typical HE power dynamics present between staff and students, and uphold the notion of student expertise (Bovill et al, 2016) by prioritising time to explore and build upon the previous education experiences, discipline-specific knowledge and skills of the student partners when co-creating the project and the student researchers' roles. Were staff ready to cede control of student focus groups to student researchers in order to create a more reassuring environment that would encourage focus group participants to share their thoughts more fully? How were the student researchers empowered to contribute their ideas in a meaningful way?

Drawing upon recent literature on the increasing tendency for students to play an active role in educational research (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2016)), we discuss how the concepts of power and authority impacted upon staff-student partnerships within our own institutions, and further, how the cross-institutional nature of the project affected this. Was it easier for staff from one institution to share control of the research with students from another institution than to collaborate fully with their own students? Do students feel that they co-own the research project? How have the research teams overcome fears around confidentiality that may arise by giving students access to the output from staff focus groups?

We will explore these questions from both the staff and student perspective, and compare experiences across our respective institutions. We will conclude with some reflections on the values of partnership working implemented throughout the project's methods used, and the effectiveness of the Ladder of Participation as a measure of student power in research projects.

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