



13th European Quality Assurance Forum

Broadening the scope of QA

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Call for contributions: paper submission form

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Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Short bio (150 words max): Tina is Assistant Principal Academic Standards and Quality Assurance and Professor of Financial Services Marketing and Consumption at the University of Edinburgh. Tina joined the University in 1993 and continues to maintain an active academic role in the Business School. She has had overall responsibility for the University's quality assurance framework as Assistant Principal since 2009. She has been a member of the QAA Scotland External Institutional Review Advisory Group, was a member of the Steering Committee of the European Quality Assurance Forum 2016-2017, and is a current member of the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee. In 2017, she was appointed as a TEF Assessor for the UK Government's new Teaching Excellence Framework, and in 2018 she was appointed as a TEF Assessor to the Business and law Subject Panel for the subject-level pilots.

Proposal

Title: Broadening the Scope of QA through Partnership with Students

Abstract (150 words max):

The importance of student involvement, student engagement and the student voice to quality assurance and the enhancement of learning and teaching is widely recognised. However, whilst students are now included in mainstream quality assurance and enhancement processes, critics argue that their involvement is still predominantly driven by a student-as-consumer view, rather than treating students as equal partners. This paper discusses the notion of student partnerships, characterised by collaboration, joint decision-making, and joint ownership of the process and outcome. The paper outlines the University of Edinburgh's development of a Student Partnership Agreement, the basis of the partnership working with students and the ways in which partnering with students achieves a broadening of the scope of quality assurance.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details. No

Text of paper (3000 words max):

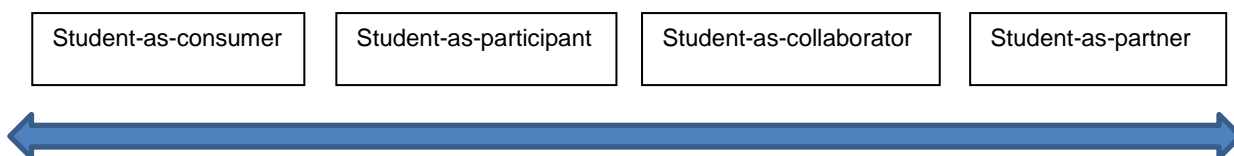
Introduction

The importance of student involvement, student engagement and the student voice to quality assurance and the enhancement of learning and teaching is widely recognised, not least in the European Standards and Guidelines (2015). However, whilst students are in the main included in mainstream quality assurance and enhancement processes, critics argue that their involvement is still predominantly driven by a student-as-consumer view, focused on inviting students to give feedback on their experiences and to respond to staff/institutional agendas.

The student-as-consumer discourse is increasingly being challenged, not least by students themselves. A former UK NUS (National Union of Students) president argued that genuine enhancement in higher education depends on strong student-staff collaboration built on 'communities of practice' rather than a 'consumer-provider model' (Streeter and Wise, 2009).

Such collaboration is best achieved by working in partnership. According to Healey et al. (2014) 'partnership is a relationship in which all participants are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together' (p.7). Partnership sits at the far end of a continuum of student engagement and participation (see Figure 1). 'All partnership is student engagement but not all student engagement is partnership' (HEA, 2014, p.2). The key questions are: who decides? who takes action? and who benefits? Partnership is thus characterised by collaboration, joint decision-making, and joint ownership of the process and outcome (Levy et al. 2011). Crucially, both parties stand to benefit from the outcome.

Figure 1: The Spectrum of Student Engagement



This recognises that students are not merely passive recipients of their learning or the student experience, but are instead active and are experts in their learning experience. As such, students should be treated as 'legitimate informants on the student experience' (Cook-Sather et al. 2014).

Using the University of Edinburgh as a case study, this paper discusses how, through partnership with students, the scope of quality assurance can be broadened to the benefit of both students and institutions alike. In addition to the involvement of students in the standard QA processes and procedures, we embarked on the development of a Student Partnership Agreement to identify aspects of the students experience that were seen as key priorities for improvement by both students and the university, and to actively work together to co-create potential solutions.

Student Partnership Agreements were first outlined in the Scottish Government's 2011 paper, *Putting Learners at the Centre – Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education*, which, amongst other things, proposed the development of a document setting out how students and their institutions interact. Sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland) subsequently published guidance in 2013 for the development of student partnership agreements for universities. A number of Scottish HEIs have since developed Student Partnership Agreements or are working towards their development. Edinburgh has developed a unique approach to partnership working that is unique in the Scottish Sector.

Benefits of partnering with students

There are many benefits to both the institution and students in working in partnership. Among them, authors have noted:

- Improvements in student attainment
- Improved student welfare



- An increased sense of value, community and belonging
- Accountability and responsibility
- Enhanced employability. Working on projects in partnership prepares students to be active, responsible, learners and enables them to develop a range of skills, such as time-management, leadership, teamwork, managing change.

For institutions, the benefits are gaining insight into the student experience from the student perspective and working together on solutions that meet both student and institutional needs. There are many examples across institutions of working with students, including student-led projects. Student-led projects have their place, but if they are led entirely by students that run the risk of obtaining buy-in from staff, they may lack knowledge of how to implement appropriately across the institution and are also disconnected from the structures to take them forward. Purely staff-led initiatives that involve students run the risk of operating to staff agendas, whereas joint projects benefit from insights from both staff and students, benefit from the institutional support and structures to take action forward and staff involvement ensures longevity and sustainability over time.

The University of Edinburgh's commitment to partnership with students

Our commitment to working in partnership with students is articulated at the highest level in the University's Strategic Plan and the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy. Staff at the University of Edinburgh currently work in partnership with students to ensure that students are centrally involved in: governance and decision-making, quality assurance and enhancement, providing opportunities for students to become active participants, fostering collaboration between staff and students.

Since 2011, the University had in place a Student Engagement Statement that set out ways in which the University made provision for students to engage in quality assurance and enhancement processes and in learning and teaching. But we wanted to go further to build on the very productive relationship the University had with its Student Association, to foster a deeper and more embedded sense of partnership between staff and students at the University across all levels. Throughout 2016/17, we started to give serious thought to the development of a Student Partnership Agreement in collaboration with the Students' Association.

In developing our Partnership Agreement, we were clear that we did want it to become a high-level document that had no relevance to students and staff across the University. We wanted it to be a document that reflected the priorities of both sides and acted as a framework for action. By working together towards a common agreed purpose, we can achieve positive outcomes to the benefit of all concerned. The core emphasis is on *common goals and activity* rather than separating out staff and student responsibilities.

Our Student Partnership Agreement, launched at the start of academic year 2017/18, is our statement of working in partnership between the University and students. It is a living, working document that was developed jointly between students and the University and approved by both the Students' Association and the University Senate. The document is reviewed annually, with the newly elected student association officers, to agree and approve the priorities for partnership working in the coming year.

Benefits of a Partnership Agreement

A key benefit of a Student Partnership Agreement is the ability to engage and communicate with the wider student body, beyond the students' association. In particular, a Student Partnership Agreement can:

- serve to map and promote student engagement opportunities across the University;
- act as a tool to reflect on the way in which staff and students interact and any improvements;
- be used to monitor and review the effectiveness of student engagement;
- provide tangible evidence of the partnership between students and staff.

Core values underpinning partnership

Key to the partnership is setting out our values (See Figure 2). These values are highlighted in the partnership agreement.

Figure 2: Partnership Values



Partnership Priorities

The main element of the partnership agreement is the setting of priorities to guide partnership working over the academic year. We wanted to ensure that the priorities were set to meet both student and institutional priorities. Many collaborative projects between staff and students are often designed or determined by staff and students are asked to participate. We wanted students to be part of setting the agenda too.

We engaged in an extended process of conversation with students and staff throughout academic year 2016-17 to identify our key priorities. Discussions were held with students at student rep meetings, and at committees, and by reviewing and analysing the various forms of feedback we gather from students to get a sense of the key priorities for students.

The priorities were identified from:

- Feedback from students through the main institutional/national surveys
- Consultation with students via the Students' Association Reps Forums
- Consultation with staff via key committees and groups
- Alignment with the University's Learning & Teaching Strategy and the Students' Association's Strategy

A 'long list' of priorities was then circulated for discussion among students and staff which was narrowed down to three key priorities that we agreed to focus on throughout the academic year.

A small team comprising the Students' Association's Vice-President Education, a staff member from the Students' Association, a member of Academic Services and the Assistant Principal Academic Standards and Quality Assurance, led the process and developed the partnership agreement based on this process of consultation. The priorities are outlined in Figure 3. We also employed a student from the University's Edinburgh College of Art to develop a booklet to communicate the outcome of this year's partnership projects, based on the infographic in Figure 4.

Figure 3: Partnership Priorities

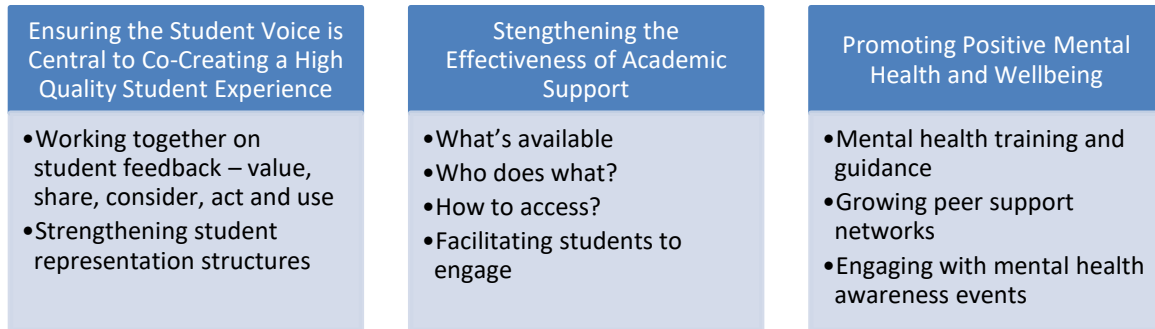


Figure 4: Partnership Infographic



Partnership in Practice

Developing the partnership agreement was just the beginning of the process. The real value comes in implementing the priorities and working together to make a difference. We were clear that we did not want this to become a static university-level document that existed only between the university senior staff and the elected student association officers. We needed the University’s three Colleges and their 22 Schools to engage with the partnership agreement and develop joint work.

To facilitate this, the University set aside funds to encourage and support students and staff to work together in schools on projects that would further the priorities of the agreement at a local school level, in ways that were meaningful to students and staff and the educational experience in those schools. A modest sum of £7,500 was made available and a process was established for students and staff to bid for funding for projects. The only requirement was that projects need to be joint between students and staff, had to address at least one of the priorities and be completed by the end of the academic year. We received a total of 27 applications from which the panel awarded funds for 14 projects.



As an example, two of the projects are highlighted to demonstrate the partnership working and the impact on the student experience.

In the School of Chemistry students and staff worked together to create a student-driven web-based resource and social media presence for disseminating useful information. A launch event was held in which students gathered opinions feedback and suggestions for website content which were categorised depending on whether they best refer to the student voice, academic support, or mental wellbeing themes. The website is fully functional and being used by students.

In the School of Philosophy, Psychology & Language Sciences students and staff worked together to develop a resource to help students maintain good mental health, as well as inform them about the available sources of help. The aim was to develop a single resource that could be used in a variety of ways across the School and potentially more widely across the University. Students developed the engaging postcards and posters 'Top Tips for maintaining Positive Mental Health' based on psychological research on wellbeing and resilience. The postcards were given out to all new students in the School starting the academic year. The team has been asked to develop the resource to make it suitable for the whole University and is being given further funding to so this academic year.

Conclusion

Working in partnership in this way has been extremely valuable. It did take a long time to consult with students and staff on the possible priorities, but it was worth putting in the time. While we were highly committed to a partnership approach, it did require a cultural shift in giving power to students to jointly decide on priorities. The enthusiasm from students and staff, through the bids for joint projects, clearly shows the interest across the University from all concerned. This adds value beyond the usual student voice mechanisms in that students are not been consulted on the staff's agenda, but instead are being asked to work collaboratively with staff to identify not only what the key issues are for students, but also what the possible solutions might be.

References:

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C. and Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*. San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

HEA (Higher Education Academy) (2014). *Framework for Partnerships in Learning and teaching in Higher Education*, York: Higher Education Academy.

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Levy, P. Little, S, and Whelan, N. (2011). *Perspectives on staff-student partnership in learning, research and educational enhancement*. In Little, S (Ed.) *Staff-Student Partnerships in Higher Education*. London: Continuum International publishing Group.

Streeting, G. and Wise, G. (2009). *Rethinking the values of higher education – the student as collaborator and producer? Undergraduate research as a case study*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

Discussion questions:

1. What, if any, are the challenges to working in partnership with students?
2. How do we engage all students in a partnership approach, especially when they may not see the benefit themselves?
3. Are there any differences in working in partnership with students in quality assurance processes and in curriculum development?



Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2018 to QAForum@eua.eu. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.