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Paper submission form

The following paper was presented at the Forum in the form of a workshop and subsequently submitted.

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Students as Partners in Teaching & Learning: Extending findings from the evaluation of a Student Intern Scheme across 8 Irish Universities

Abstract:

From 2019, the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) project hired more than 25 student associate interns to work with project staff in each of the seven IUA universities (Dublin City University, Trinity College Dublin, Maynooth University, University College Cork, University College Dublin, University of Galway, and University of Limerick) in creating digital resources to support teaching and learning. Interns had to be actively enrolled as students in one of the partner universities at the time of their internship.

Using a qualitative approach, we conducted qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with student interns and project staff to understand student-staff partnership in teaching and learning based on their experiences in the project. The findings of this paper describe the EDTL internship model, students' contribution in the project, student-staff collaborations, barriers to working with students as partners, as well as recommendations for best practices in involving students as partners.

Key words: Student as partners, digital skills, student voice, internship, collaboration

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No

1.0 Introduction

Teaching and learning is a process that involves both students and staff (teaching and support staff) of a higher education institution. Whereas it is common to look at staff as key drivers of a teaching and learning process, more often students are excluded from this equation even though they are key stakeholders and are equally as important as the staff in actualizing the process. This is a process that should be looked at as 'symbiotic' and where each party contributes and benefits from the system to a certain extent of equality. Can we imagine a learning environment without students? The teaching and learning environment has evolved and it is becoming more common to engage students as active stakeholders in the process of knowledge co-creation hence giving birth to the concept of students as partners (SaP). Student as partners is a pedagogical approach that acknowledges students' participation in their own education and it simply implies staff (academic &non-academic staff) working in partnership with students to improve their learning experience and tapping into students' unique perspectives, with the objective of making a better learning experience (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). It can also be defined as a process where 'all involved' such as students, professional service staff, faculty, student leaders etc. work together in making a better learning experience (Healey et al. 2014).

Following a similar model of involving students as partners in teaching and learning, the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning in Irish Universities Project (EDTL) (whose results we present in this paper) hired student associate interns with the objective of incorporating students' perspectives in the development of digital teaching and learning materials. The project ran in 7 Irish universities (Dublin City University, Trinity College Dublin, Maynooth University, University College Cork, University College Dublin, University of Galway, and University of Limerick) from 2019 to 2022 and was funded under the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) Transformation programme. During this period, the project hired students in an internship programme to work in partnership with a project member of staff in each partner university. These interns had to be currently enrolled in one of the partner universities and were paid at an hourly rate of €13.91 (working flexibly for 60hours per month).

Towards the end of the EDTL project, we evaluated the internship scheme using qualitative research methods which contributed to the findings of this paper. With the aim to document

our model, we set out to understand: (i) how students contributed and benefited from being involved in the internship, (ii) what staff thought of working with students as partners, (iii) barriers and facilitators to involving students, and (iv) key recommendations for working with students as partners. The results are as described in this paper.

2.0 Methodology

Using qualitative research methods and case study research design, we interviewed student associate interns (both former and current) and project staff in 6 of our partner universities and conducted one focus group discussion with student interns with the objective of documenting student-staff partnership in digital teaching and learning, focusing on their experiences in the IUA EDTL project.

1. In-depth qualitative interviews with student associate interns focused on exploring the role of students as partners in digital teaching and learning through capturing individual intern's experiences in their role in the EDTL project.

2. In-depth interviews with the project staff in each of the participating universities focused on the perspectives of these staff on the contributions of their respective student associate interns to the project as well as their experiences working with students as partners.

3.0 Findings

Based on the experiences that we captured through our qualitative study with our project being a case study, we present (i) contributions of students in the project, (ii) benefits that students got from being involved in the project, (iii) staff thoughts of partnering with students, (iv) barriers to involving students as partners, and (v) recommendations from lessons learnt. These are described in depth in this section.

3.1 Students' contribution in the project

Student interns in the project were initially hired with the co-objective of assisting in developing digital teaching and learning materials for the partner university. Over time and especially during the priod of the pandemic, we observed a natural evolution of students' involvement in the project mostly focusing on bringing their authentic voices in teaching and learning mostly surrounding the struggles that they faced during the pandemic. The project allowed flexibility and creativity among the interns and allowed each student to capitalize on their skills to contribute. Students mostly contributed by developing digital teaching and learning resources that resonated with the current life of a student at that time.

Students have developed great resources for us and the good thing is that they do it a lot from the top down bringing in their perspectives (Staff)

Students also ideated and led webinars where topics such as assessment during the pandemic, resuming on-campus teaching and learning, experiences with various virtual learning environments among others were discussed. Similar topics were captured in our newlsetter where students were the major contributors and which was led by one student intern as the editor. Data from our archives indicate that by November 2022 a total of 8 webinars were hosted by students and staff reaching 279 live attendees while attracting 1727 playback views on our website and 768 on Vimeo. These resources are still available on our website that will be kept live until 2025 as well as in the Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education website.

In addition, our research indicates that students contributed in project research and dissemination of research findings through various forums such as workshops and conferences both at the local and international level. Such work was also published either as reports or peer reviewed academic papers.

We contributed at different conferences and presentations as well as the fortnightly IUA webinars. We were also at a library event where we spoke and gave student perspectives regarding the library and ways that it could be improved. (student)

I was involved in student surveys where I was responsible for sorting the data. (student).

One of the roles staff played was the development and various modules that targeted students in their individual universities. Our interns played a key role in providing feedback in those modules as well as bringing on board their perspectives.

I was responsible for reviewing the materials put together by staff from various departments and giving the student perspective and experiences as a student and my feedback was received positively by staff and they were willing to incorporate in campaigns that they were working on. (Student)

As the project was keen on digital content, the student interns founded and led the project instagram channel where they shared digital teaching and learning resources as well as marketed the project activities.

> *The other major part that I suppose is graphic design and social media management have been two major areas of work for the Interns, I might have established a social media account, but essentially, I would have passed over what is put up onto the social media account to our intern. (Staff)*

Overall, it emerged strongly that having student interns in each university provided an extra hand that brought a lot of value and authentic assistance to the staff from perspectives that genuinely represented students' views.

3.2 Students' benefits from the project

Whereas the initial plan was for the students to contribute to the project through bringing their authentic perspectives on digital teaching and learning resources it also emerged that they benefited a lot from the internship. From the qualitative interviews, students reported to have benefited from the project in several ways. Most of them thought that their involvement in the project helped them to gather useful work experience that they would need after their college or while applying for jobs in the future. Some former interns said that they were hired in their current jobs because of the skills they got from the EDTL internship.

> *When I joined the project, I did not have any work experience, to be honest I would never be in the job that I am in right now if it hadn't been for the EDTL internship position. That gave me the interest in the academic stuff to go on to do this job. (Student)*

Students also developed their digital competencies and acquired new skills from their involvement in project activities. Such skills included hosting webinars and podcasts, managing websites, editing newsletters, developing resources using tools such as Canva, among others. These skills came from on-job involvement as well as targeted project training.

> *I suppose well one of my main roles that I was required to do was to review this Microsoft office course that my university provided and then I had to promote it to the student body and as a result I had to do the course myself before I could review it and*

then promote it. That was a major benefit, taking that training and then upscaling my personal skills (student).

As part of the project, we received a lot of technological training as I said we got training in Canva, Amazon Web Services, video editing and so many other different things like that. (Student)

While joining the project, some of the students reported to be shy and had never had the experience of interacting with staff and fellow students at such a level outside the usual classroom environment. The internship helped them to improve in their social skills due to the many collaborative activities with other students as well as with staff.

I definitely felt the webinars gave me confidence when it came to public speaking even though I wasn't bad before, and now, I'm so comfortable just doing a webinar and being involved it definitely improved my confidence (Student).

My soft skills improved during the year, as I said at the start of the year, I was afraid to give my input that was at meetings and or over email, but I got better in expressing my own input and expressing my voice and getting heard throughout the year (Student).

During the project period, students were required to participate in making several presentations (mostly in webinars). From the interviews, they reported that such activities enhanced their presentation skills and confidence to speak in events such as webinars and workshops.

My presentation skills really improved, and it is something that the staff I was working with mentioned to me. She said that at the start of the year I was quite a nervous speaker during the webinars, but I developed confidence during the year, and I felt more comfortable towards the end of the year. (Student)

3.3 Staff thoughts of partnering with students

In the project, every university had a project staff who worked directly with a student intern at their specific university. Through the qualitative interviews, we also sought to find out what staff thought of the internship model. It came out clear that staff generally appreciated the value that the students came with in the project both at their local and national project level.

In their experience, hiring students to work directly with them in the project brought authentic student voices into the project.

I delivered a workshop in collaboration with one of our interns. I have done that workshop many times over the years but when I delivered it in conjunction with the student, it was completely different for the better, because she was able to bring much more of a nuanced perspective to the workshop (Staff).

Involving students has really brought the authentic student voice to the project activities and has helped us to shape the project. (Staff)

In addition, students' involvement in the project brought in perspectives that would have never been captured by staff such as students' own lived experiences in that context that the project was being implemented. Students highlighting issues that affected them from their own understanding such as challenges with assessment, blended learning, and using different virtual teaching environments among many more.

The staff aren't getting inside a real insight into how students are experiencing things. And to be completely honest sometimes when the students came together and discuss those and allowed us to get that insight, to hear them speaking, to talk about the impact that was having on them in brought out different perspectives. (Staff)

As the project had at least one intern in every partner university, staff reported that having interns working directly with them made their work more convenient as the students were easily to bring their perspectives as well as assist with other project related work.

3.3 Collaboration in the project

Collaboration was a bigger part of our project; even though students were initially hired to collaborate with staff, as the number of student interns grew, we observed a natural growth in the number of activities that students collaborated among themselves either within their local universities or across partner universities.

Students mostly collaborated in the development of digital teaching and learning resources with other interns in their respective universities, reviewing of training tools developed by project staff that were going to be used for other students as well as with interns in partner universities. This is as captured in these quotes:

We had a lot of different things going on. It was always different for us, certainly, we were working on both online learning lesson that I mentioned, and a number of and initiatives we were trying to get out to our website, or Student Union social media. Sometimes I would be designing like infographic kind of things to put on the SU page to let people know about what we're doing (Student).

One particular thing we were trying to do, especially towards the end was promote blackboard ally, which is a tool for blackboard the VLE and which allows more accessibility for content that's posted online (Student)

In addition, these collaborations saw students run and contribute to the project's bi-monthly newsletter as well as founding and managing project social media pages such as Instagram which they used to market project activities and resources.

We did campaigns on Instagram that were collaborative. The idea generation weas collaborative and then some people will take on the different responsibilities of developing the graphics. For me the students I met from the EDTL project like on a weekly basis were from the Instagram team so that is the most part we collaborated on (Student).

They also collaborated in the conceptualization, mobilizing, and hosting project webinars through moderating and presenting.

The webinars definitely we did a couple actually per semester of student-led webinars. So, we each collaborated like on the slides and the content of what was going in, who will do what. (student)

On the other hand, students also collaborated with project staff which was the initial objective of hiring student interns in every partner university. From the staff's perspectives, engaging these students brought in a lot of value that they would have never otherwise achieved. Mostly, project interns were involved in reviewing, piloting, and promoting teaching and learning resources that had been developed within the project.

In some cases, staff have asked students to review tools or training opportunities for students or perhaps to engage in the organization of focus groups and engaging in developing and local resources. They have also been asked to engage in kind of spreading the word of the project on campus (Staff)

The previous intern did quite a lot of work on promoting the Microsoft office courses. She wrote a copy for me, she liaised with various units to get the information out there, she helped me with the analysis from the student voice campaign. She did all the tagging on this. She has helped me review some materials going up to the students (Staff).

Additionally, they collaborated with staff in the creation of teaching materials that resonated with current students' needs. Students also collaborated with staff in the ideation and running of workshops both at the local, national, and international level.

More recently, we collaborated as our staff and students to develop a program of activities for academic integrity week. And as part of that we delivered some workshops in partnership between staff and students. We designed them together and, in many cases, we delivered them together (Staff).

3.4 Barriers and Facilitators to working with students as partners

In the research, we also asked students and staff to say what would be barriers and facilitators to engaging with students as partners. The following four emerged as barriers and facilitators:

Student-staff power dynamics: Overall, we noted that students are more willing and comfortable to engage and partner actively when the power-relations are reduced. As staff are most of the time in more powerful positions than students, students are more likely to be intimidated and withdraw or participate passively.

Failure to compensate students for their time: From our project we experienced better retention and participation when students are compensated for their work in the project. Failure to do so, leads to disengagement as most students would opt for other part time jobs and concentrate less in partnering.

Failing to implement students' feedback or suggestions: When students decide to partner with staff, they mostly expect that their ideas will be taken into consideration. However, many at times students' views are collected and not applied at all in the teaching and learning process; this reduces the chances of their willingness to engage in the future.

Lack of knowledge on avenues of engaging with students as partners: We noted that students who engage are only those who know avenues of partnering with staff in teaching and learning. The knowledge gap of such interactions other than through the student union is a major barrier to engaging students as partners as they cannot be engaged in a partnership that they are not aware of.

3.5 Discussion

From our project we applied the students as partners model which has been successfully used in various other settings (Dublin City University, 2020) through our internship scheme and later evaluated it using qualitative research methods. We noted that both students and staff found it beneficial as whereas staff could only bring their own perspectives, it took students' active involvement to bring their experiences which came with positive impact in the overall implementation of the project.

We should however acknowledge that even though we had a great experience working with students, it is common to face challenges in any relationship (whether partnernship or collaboration) involving students and staff mosty due to the conflict that arises from power dynamics that have long existed between these two dualities in higher education (Wilkes, 2019). The relationship between staff (especially teaching) and students has for ages been 'sweet and sour' mostly with staff being in the powereful position. This has limited student participaton in co-designing the teaching and learning experience, which emerged from our interviews as one of the key barriers. For instance, our interviews indicated that some students don't give feedback to staff for fear of being penalized, judged, or reprimaded when they share opinions that might conflict with staff's opinion. It is therefore of benefit to address some of these challenges.

Involving students as partners improves the overall experience of learning as students feel that their voices are represented in the design of the learning materials and also because the materials resonate with the 'current' needs of the students. In our project, it was clear that students, needs keep changing as each student learns in a different context and under different circumstances especially considering the fact that we implemented our project within the covid-19 pandemic (Mayhoob, 2020 & Salakhova, 2022).

Whereas we would like students and staff to be more engaged in partnering to co-create knowledge and improve the teaching and learning experience, we need to provide students and staff with the avenues that stimulate meaningful partnership (Holen et al., 2020). From our internship scheme we observed very distinct differences between student *representation*, which is common in student unions, and student *partnership* which we found more beneficial. The staff agreed that having individual students assigned to work with them was easier as they were more accessible and there was less conflict of interest with other projects or departments.

Lastly, it's common that more often students engage in some sort of part-time job to suplement their current income, hence involving them in any form of partnership equally takes away their time. We noted that compensating students for the time they spend woking as partners is

important to incentivise them and retain them in this relationship. In the project, students were treated just like any other project employees and they were paid for the time they worked. However, one would argue against financial incentivisation as it might make students take partnership as their job and dilute aunthenticity. Overall, the student as partners model as tested in our internship scheme is viable but must be within a clear structure that defines 'why', 'how' and 'what' student partnership should entail.

3.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

From the lessons that we draw from out project and research, we conclude that it is feasible to actively involve students as partners. We however acknowledge that a lot of effort has to be expended to ensure effective and sustainable models of engaging with students. We therefore recommend the following:

1. The need for a structured model of involving students as partners in teaching which defines the 'how,' 'why' and 'what' of student-staff partnership other than the student union.

2. Students be compensated when they are involved to cater for the time that they spend collaborating with staff, as they would otherwise sometimes be engaging in part-time work. This will also encourage retention for a longer period and enhance their participation.

3. Training for both students and staff highlighting possible areas of student-staff partnership as well as the processes of collaboration.

4. Sensitization of students and staff on ways of giving feedback to staff without fear of being reprimanded.

5. Be diverse and inclusive as students from different backgrounds bring different perspectives when involved as partners in teaching and learning. This could include various disciplines, academic levels, age, gender, racial backgrounds, social backgrounds etc.

6. Involve currently enrolled students as it brings about a more authentic representation on issues that affect students, and their experiences change over time depending on the prevailing circumstances, such as a pandemic.

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[1] Please apply the Harvard style system (UK spelling) for text and bibliography.