

Two Sides of the Same Coin: A University and Student Union Perspective on Partnership and Risk

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Introduction

The University of Winchester and Winchester Student Union prioritise working together in partnership. The strength of this partnership has provided the foundations for many collaborative projects to succeed and flourish, such projects include the institutions' partnership initiative the Student Fellows Scheme. The degree to which partnership is possible between the Student Fellows and their staff partners has been previously discussed using the concept of balancing partnership see-saws (Lowe, Shaw, Sims, King and Paddison, 2017). The topic of this paper will instead explore the experiences of partnership and risk between the university and student union more holistically. The authors of this paper will speak from their own experience and are an academic from the Learning and Teaching Development team at the University and the President of the Student Union. We have both worked together in partnership on multiple occasions, but in this paper we will provide personal reflections on the experience of partnership working between the two institutions. There will always be an element of risk in working in partnership between any university and student union, in this paper we will explore these risks using two distinct themes: sharing responsibility and changing priorities. This paper will initially outline the risks encountered by most university and student union partnerships, before reflecting on our own experiences and thoughts. We will discuss the elements of partnership, this paper will refer throughout to the eight values of effective partnership, as described by Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014); responsibility, inclusivity, reciprocity, community, authenticity, empowerment, challenge and trust.

Sharing Responsibility

Working in partnership often suggests there will be an attempt to share responsibility as evenly as possible between the two parties. However,

equality of responsibility can be difficult when considering university and student union partnership. There are distinct resourcing differences between a university and student union; be that time, people, finances, energy or student relationships, which are considerations for any institution when initially hoping for a balanced scale of responsibility. What can be committed by either party will differentiate according to the individual partner's role within their institution and what they have available to commit. Being inclusive in this approach to partnership means that the unique and different characteristics of each institution, including resource differences, are celebrated. Respecting and celebrating difference is an essential step towards alleviating potential barriers to their engagement in the partnership. The risk of assuming the scales of responsibility can be equally balanced, could lead to at best disappointment and at worst a deep fracturing of the partnership relationship. To overcome this risk, both parties must agree on the aims of the project, with an aspect of reciprocity for both parties, and be honest about what they are able to contribute. This can change between different projects, but is a key discussion that needs to take place in order to develop effective partnerships. Each party must be willing to admit what they can offer to the partnership, take responsibility for that, and work together in consistent communication to show how they are taking responsibility for that aspect of the project. Such a conversation around responsibility and reciprocity would enable clarity over the risks for both parties and how these risk can be mitigated.

A partnership project at Winchester that clearly highlights the sharing of responsibility is the co-ownership of the Student Fellows Scheme. This scheme is co-funded and co-directed between the University of Winchester and Winchester Student Union and provides 60 students with the opportunity to work in partnership with a member of staff on an educationally developmental or student experience enhancing project and are awarded a £600 bursary for their commitment (Sims, Lowe, Hutber & Barnes, 2014; El-Hakim, King, Lowe & Sims, 2016). Both parties have a shared commitment to the aim of the scheme; the aim of improving the student experience through the Student Fellows projects. Alongside this, the university and the student union have to be honest and take responsibility for what they are able to contribute to the Student Fellows Scheme. They both bring a different but equally valuable set of

skills and attributes to the scheme, evoking a partnership community. Both parties share responsibility for funding, both parties share responsibility for the direction and design and both parties share responsibility for the promotion and engagement of students on the scheme.

The university, however, has the weighted resource of staff members able to be dedicated to the scheme, whereas the Student Fellows Scheme is a fractional aspect of a much larger role within the portfolio of the officers of the student union. Due to this area of imbalance, the university takes responsibility for the administrative aspects of running the Student Fellows Scheme, because the Student Union lacks the resource in time to maintain the administration of this particular project. The Student Union, however, offers bountiful opportunities for marketing the scheme and the ability to directly communicate with the students, as their representative body. They are in constant communication with the students and are able to engage with them at all points of their role. Without the authenticity and honesty in the dialogue on this partnership project, there is a risk of the partnership becoming fractured and dysfunctional. We have both witnessed fractures in partnerships between Union and University staff where these conversations have not occurred and caused frustration on both sides. Key to the success of the Student Fellows Scheme's co-direction, and many other partnership workings, is the ability of both institutions to remain in continuous, honest and open dialogue in what they can contribute and an understanding of the risks associated with partnership. Both parties have to have a willingness to work together towards a shared aim, which in this case is the aim of continuous university enhancement.

Changing Priorities

The non-fundamental priorities of the student union and university are constantly changing, presenting a partnership risk to both institutions. These priorities can be loosely attributed to elected student union officers' manifesto priorities, strategic redirection of the university and national pressures forcing emphasis on new areas, such as 'assessment and feedback'. This means that the institutions can both be at odds with each other and their own individual drivers and needs. Each year the student union changes its sabbatical officers through the process of

democratic elections. This means the partnership link has to adapt each year with a new officer, as their interests and passions could be completely different to that of their predecessor. The constant change, in sabbatical officers and priorities, does have its benefits for each institution, insofar as it provides a unique opportunity for both the student union and university to be empowered to challenge each other and their current practice. Such moments materialize at points where the status quo are challenged and both institutions are provided with an exciting blue skies opportunity for redesign and development. Examples of changes brought about because of the blue-skies approach that new, bright-eyed and bushy tailed, sabbatical officers include additional funding for welfare provisions across campus and the introduction of a new engagement strategy aimed at engaging third years in their final year of study. More specific to the Student Fellows Scheme, each year there has been new ideas and suggestions from sabbatical officers, such as changes to the way in which students review and disseminate their projects throughout its course.

Nevertheless, a frustrated partnership could easily develop where limited understanding is shown by one institution to the changing priorities of the other. Both authors have seen examples of this where the university expects the same priorities of a previous officer to be maintained, such as the expectation of elected officers to train the students involved in quality processes each year, which ceased in 2016, and when their emphasis and attention has been placed elsewhere, difficulties have arisen. In the same respect, the university's priorities are ever shifting to suit the needs of the continually evolving Higher Education landscape. Within the context of the authors' own experience, there have been bountiful developments in UK Higher Education in recent years: an increase in market competition, changes to funding, the introduction of a Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework and a changed Research Excellence Framework (Higher Education Research Act 2017:29). The university must adapt in order to meet new pressures and consider new measurables. However, be the priority shifting for reasons of interest, passion, metrics or people, this is a risk for all university and student union partnership.

To overcome this risk it is important to recognise the priority of the

partner institution in order to appreciate their drivers. As the student union and university work together in partnership, there needs to be trust in the relationship that both priorities can be understood and appreciated, as they work together towards an agreed outcome that is fair and mutually beneficial for both parties. It must also be appreciated that points will inevitably occur when both institutions reach an impasse, whereby a shared understanding of goals is not enough to allow us to agree on the best way to reach said goal. However, the trust that has been built up through previous projects, allows for the institutions to open dialogue at the point of impasse in complete honesty. An aspect that helps this is the Student Union President's ability to "say it as it is", as they are an elected representative of the student body. The honesty of this dialogue is key to progression and it is vital that communication does not get shut down despite the disagreement.

The reliance on sabbatical officers to maintain previously developed partnership relationships, alongside their ever-growing portfolio, can place a large strain on the university and student union relationship. This effect is particularly magnified at smaller institutions. At Winchester for example, only two staff members have educational support and/or representation included within their role's portfolio and both of these staff members are sabbatical officers; the President and Vice President, Education. This means that any partnership between the student union and university on an educational basis will be managed, from the side of the student union, by two sabbatical officers and will remain dependent on their own interests and passions. Smaller student unions, due to resources, are unable to provide a staff member who would be consistently responsible for educational support and/or representation. This is where the priority changes of a sabbatical officer can dramatically affect the nature of the university and student union partnership, with no additional support to ensure a continuation of the partnership.

The priorities for the university and student union will also often be shaped by the continually evolving Higher Education sector. Both institutions must be responsive to the changes within the sector and adjust their priorities accordingly, in order to adapt to the needs of students, staff, unions and regulatory bodies. An example of how the needs of an external regulatory body can affect the priority of a

University could be the originally proposed changes to the UK Quality Code Chapter B5. This original chapter in the Quality Code focused specifically on and ensured that ‘Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience’ (QAA, 2012: 6). The priority of most Higher Education providers thus became engaging students and, where possible, establishing partnership opportunities. This took the form of increased resources and initiatives that provided opportunities and initiatives for students to engage.

In 2017, however, the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assurance (UKSCQA) developed a consultation document with prospective changes to the Quality Code. This included proposed changes to the nature of engaging students as partners, which was explicitly prescribed previously in Quality Code Chapter B5. The changes would instead require ‘views and feedback from students [to be] regularly sought and acted on and providers offer feedback in return’ (UKSCQA, 2017: 5). The prospective shift in priority for the QAA, as proposed in this consultation document, could have led to an institutional shift in priority at a university. This does not necessarily mean there would be immediate and irrevocable severing of partnership working with students, as this would suggest a lack of authenticity in the partnership, but it is clear to see how changing priorities for a university can be affected by external factors. Fortunately, in our own context, student engagement and partnership would have remained an instrumental priority for both institutions. However, prospectively, if there was a strategic shift in priority at the university, caused by external factors such as a change in the Quality Code, it could significantly affect the partnership relationship between the student union and a university. This is a worst-case-prediction to the proposed changes to the Quality Code, but it is a worthy consideration to have.

Fortunately, due to the student engagement community of practice across the sector, the proposal in the Quality Code was edited and student engagement was reinstated as a core practice and expectation: ‘The provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their

educational experience' (UKSCQA, 2018: 3). Changing priorities for both the university and student union will always place the partnership relationship at risk, but this is where both institutions need to ensure they are respectful and empathetic towards these changes, so they can work together towards a mutually beneficial goal. If the Quality Code had changed to the proposed seeking 'views and feedback from students', rather than engaging students in the development and enhancement of their experience, universities and student unions sector-wide would have needed to decide together how to ensure the student voice is sought to its greatest capacity and where possible partnership working could be maintained.

Conclusion

A university and a student union working in partnership involves continually taking risks, but these risks are far outweighed by the benefits. A genuine university-student union partnership is invaluable for addressing key issues, as both institutions bring such unique and hugely valuable qualities. If you try to lessen the risks of working in genuine partnership, the partnership is at risk of becoming tokenistic, which could lead to a fractured relationship anyway. These risks manifest in moments where an institution must trust the other institution to be responsible, authentic and honest. The key to university-student union partnership is being aware of the risks both parties are taking and being flexible to find a solution that is mutually beneficial. There will always be changes that both institutions will face, there will be times at which priorities and resource responsibility will differ, but this means that the institutions need to be respectful and adaptable to find a solution that works for them both. The university and student union's fundamental priority is the students and their educational experience, they might work towards this from sometimes differing perspectives, but are always working towards two sides of the same coin.

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