

Building student-staff partnerships in higher education

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Impact chapter

What was the main objective of the research described in this dissertation and what are its most important results and conclusions?

The aim of this PhD dissertation was to explore student-staff partnerships (SSPs). An SSP can be defined as a collaboration between students and staff members in which students not only provide feedback to improve education, but also contribute to its evaluation, design or redesign and to its implementation. During this process, both students and staff members contribute from their perspective, experience and knowledge (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). In this dissertation we examined students' current experiences and preferences regarding SSPs, staff members' conceptions of SSPs and the prerequisites as perceived by both students and staff members. Five studies were conducted using qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods and literature study designs. From these studies we learnt that students would like to be more actively involved as partners in the process of improving education. Concurrently, we also concluded that students did not yet fully experience the level of student participation they preferred. This held true for both students who were already actively involved in improving education and those who were not. Staff members, however, stuck to the idea that students' role is to provide feedback and were oblivious of alternative ways to collaborate. What is clear, however, is that staff members were open to SSP formation as long as they would still have the final say in decisions about improving education. Overall, we can conclude that students and staff members were on the same page. Although both students and staff members did not yet experience fully fledged SSPs, they were willing to move in that direction. To render SSPs successful, certain conditions such as good communication and a supportive organisation should be met.

In what ways do the results from this research contribute to science, social sectors and to social challenges?

Traditionally, students have been involved in evaluating education by filling in end-of-course evaluation questionnaires and by serving on advisory bodies. Whilst the feedback received from students in these ways does offer staff members rich insights into teaching and the effectiveness of courses and whilst they do have the opportunity to act on it, with limited opportunities for reflection and

dialogue it does not always lead to changes in practice (Blair & Noel, 2014; Golding & Adam, 2016). By combining students and staff members' experiences and knowledge, SSPs offer a new perspective that can lead to enhanced educational practices (Abbot & Cook-Sather, 2020; Matthews, Dwyer, Hine, & Turner, 2018). We have learnt that students and staff members are willing to strengthen student participation and move towards SSPs to enhance the quality of education. Yet, stepping away from the traditional learning versus teaching roles for students and staff members, respectively, and moving towards a context in which both partners co-create teaching whilst learning from each other is easier said than done. The present dissertation has provided suggestions based on students and staff members' experiences and preferences on how to put SSPs into practice, such as having a dialogue to learn from, with and about each other by exploring each other's unique perspective.

To whom can the results be of interest/relevance and why?

The results and conclusions of the present dissertation can be of interest to multiple stakeholders. Not only can they obviously serve students and staff members, such as course coordinators, trainers, lecturers, tutors and mentors, but they can also be meaningful to management teams and policymakers. This dissertation can help these stakeholders to reflect on how they experience student participation and what their preferences are regarding the involvement of students as partners in education. Our research offers several suggestions on how to render SSPs successful that can be relevant to them, including: (1) Ensure that your organisation is supportive and has a clear vision for student participation; (2) Strengthen students and staff members' commitment to improve education together; (3) Create dialogues between students and staff members; and (4) Help both students and staff members to respect each other and take each other seriously. These suggestions can help both students and staff members who wish to participate in SSPs. In chapters 3 and 5, we have demonstrated that a supportive organisation is key, and that this is a prerequisite that should be met first before SSPs can be achieved. In this sense, a 'supportive organisation' refers to a culture in which collaboration and teamwork are valued and rewarded and students are seen as valuable partners not only when it comes to evaluating education and providing advice, but also in designing or redesigning, implementing and continuously improving education (Bovill 2019; Chapman, Blatchford, and Hughes 2013).

In what way can these target groups be involved and informed about the research results, so that the knowledge gained can be used in the future?

To reach a diverse audience, we submitted the contents of chapters 2-6 of the present dissertation to general higher education journals as well as to medical education journals. Three of these chapters (chapters 2, 5 and 6) have been published by now and chapters 3 and 4 are currently submitted to peer-reviewed journals. Moreover, we presented chapters 2, 3, 5 and 6 at national and international conferences on general education (ORD and EARLI) and medical education (NVMO and AMEE). I have also been invited by the Staff Development Task Force at Maastricht University (UM) and the Department of Methodology and Statistics at Utrecht University (UU) to present our research. Within our own institution, we frequently shared our results with stakeholders during various meetings. I have also presented the studies to student associations and have written summaries of the results to both students and staff members who were involved in the studies. Furthermore, I have shared our Students-As-Partners Questionnaire with diverse institutions worldwide. Finally, I have shared our research findings on social media platforms such as Twitter, using the hashtag *studentsaspartners*, and the student voice research and practice group on Facebook. Whilst the present dissertation has focused on experiences and preferences regarding SSPs, we did not yet put SSPs into practice. Nevertheless, the results of this dissertation can inform SSP implementation in practice and its subsequent evaluation.

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