

# **A whole cohort approach to working in partnership between students and staff: problematising the issues and evaluating the outcomes**

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## **Abstract**

Staff and students working together in partnership is now commended as excellent practice which offers many benefits to both parties, as well as enhancing authentic student engagement. We investigate a 'whole cohort' approach, offering and practising multiple forms of partnership to all 600 students across the setting of a single degree in a research intensive university; including whole class (in the curriculum), role based and project based partnership. We critically evaluate if the purported benefits are realised and to what extent, by the different forms. The lenses of engagement, empowerment, sense of collaboration and trust, and learning and development are used to assess benefits. The rich accounts of the students interviewed present a complex and nuanced picture as their personal perspectives are diverse and unique to them. There is not one singular form of partnership that is guaranteed to deliver the most powerful benefits and development. Instead we note how the same, or very similar experiences have manifested different benefits and challenges for each individual. We suggest that offering and engaging in multiple forms of partnership over a longer duration, deepens benefits. We note both tensions and flipsides e.g. to greater autonomy and empowerment. However overall, the benefits outweighed any negatives, and enabled transformation for some students, and in more inclusive ways than in only one form of partnership practice. We commend the whole cohort approach to partnership although it is not easy, and requires both perseverance and continuous reflection, and consideration and care as well as investment and effort.

## **Keywords**

Partnership; whole class; whole cohort; inclusivity

In this paper we seek to investigate the approach of students and staff working together in partnership. Partnership covers a broad range of practices (Bovill, 2019a) and has many terms used to describe it (Dunne, 2016). An early definition is: "...a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the ability to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways..." (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten, 2014 p6-7). Another definition that captures the radical nature of good partnership process is (quoted from a student participant in the study by Lubicz-Nawocka, 2017, p37): "Where you don't know who is the staff and who is the student."

We draw on a context where an attempt has been made to establish a partnership learning community involving as many staff and students as possible. In the context of a multidisciplinary degree at a research intensive university, a broad range of 'partnership' opportunities inside and outside the curriculum have been introduced over a ten year period. These opportunities, are open to all the students on the degree (150 students had taken them up from 598 total students in the year the study was conducted) and all staff working on the degree (10) are involved in partnership working with students. This might be described as a 'whole cohort' approach to partnership or at least an aspiration towards that. In this particular university such practices are not the norm, indeed the normative values and goals of many students and staff do not, initially at least, chime with such an objective and the alienating forces proposed by Mann (2001) are very much present, e.g. performativity and degree 'utility', student as 'other'/outsider, and conforming to the disciplinary power of the teacher. This study investigates the perspectives of student participants and critically evaluates what the outcomes, beneficial or not, have been for them through experiencing 'partnership'. We seek to give centre stage to their voices, expressed through 12 interviewees, and offer the richness and diversity of their perspectives. Our aims:

- Investigate the outcomes of a more holistic, inclusive and accessible strategy towards partnerships – the whole cohort strategy.
- Evaluate the benefits to the individual (student) of engaging in different modes of partnership and to evaluate if there are additional/stronger benefits in engaging in multiple forms of partnership and/or for an extended duration.

## Introduction

Arising from all the recent focus around the world on student engagement (Bryson, 2014, Tanaka, 2019) there has been promotion of the concept and practice of 'partnership' between students and staff. This draws on ideas from critical and radical pedagogy and is based on an ideology which counters the positioning of student as consumer (Neary, 2009; Wenstone, 2012; Wijaya Mulya, 2018). The intended goal of partnership is 'becoming not having' as an outcome of education (Fromm, 1976). Proponents of partnership contend that this approach addresses too the recent critique of student engagement policies. For example, McFarlane and Tomlinson (2017) argue that the student engagement movement, like so much of policy and practice in contemporary Higher Education, has been appropriated by neo-liberalism, with its focus on performativity, and diminishes learning and student freedom. In response to this, the advocates of student-staff partnership contend that the partnership approach is both inclusive and ethical and seeks to promote transformative learning – arguably the true purpose of Higher Education (Johansson and Felten, 2015). There is an emphasis on the educational experience being exemplary to the notion of a society where equity, social justice, and citizenship are primary values.

Advocates have proposed a wide range of benefits to both students *and* staff though working in partnership in learning and teaching (Cook-Sather et al, 2014, Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2017, Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017). These benefits are less about employability skills and more about criticality and ‘acting well’ for the benefit of others. We present a summary of these benefits later in this article as they underpin our framework for analysing our study findings.

There are some concerns, though, about this claim. The first is that evaluation in much of public dissemination of partnership in practice frequently seems to rely on evaluation from participants who self-select because they have positive views of the partnership. They tend to be those participants who got most involved and/or for a prolonged period. That is likely to favour positive outcomes being reported. Mercer-Mapstone et al (2017) note that 74% of the 65 studies they reviewed claimed only positive outcomes for students, perhaps unsurprising when so many case studies and examples of practice tend to focus on ‘what works’ and gloss over problematic issues. They tend to report ‘success’ rather than ‘failure’ (for an example of the latter, see Bryson, 2017). Given that most dissemination is done by those who are enthusiastic proponents, this is hardly surprising.

That position is starting to change to some extent as more studies evaluate practice and evidence in more critical ways. However, it is challenges and barriers that are identified rather than negative outcomes. Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard and Moore-Cherry (2016) propose resistance to change, navigating institutional structures, practices and norms and inclusion as key challenges. Lubicz-Nawrocka (2017) identified an additional challenge of staff not letting go of control, both because they found this so difficult and that students wanted staff ‘to lead’.

One emerging and very difficult challenge is inclusion (Matthews, Dwyer, Hine and Turner, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill, 2019). Which students want to take part and which students actually can take part, and thus gain the potential benefits? On one hand, Cook-Sather (2019) made a compelling argument that in the hundreds of partnership projects over a ten year period in her college, “co-creation of teaching and learning can combat structural inequalities and contribute to increased equity and inclusion in higher education” (p13-14). She argued that under-represented groups particularly benefitted from developing co-respect for others and themselves. However, that only can occur for students who take part. Marquis, Jayaratnam, Lei and Mishra (2019) explored motivations for students to participate in partnership and barriers to those that did not. Some of the motivators and facilitators of participation were very much linked to acquired social capital. Conversely, barriers identified are likely to impact more on particular, already under-privileged, groups in HE.

A particular issue regarding inclusion is the selection of student partners. Much of partnership work is project based – a small group of staff and students form a collaborative group to tackle an issue or enhance practice. That could be initiated by the student(s) (self-selected) but more frequently by staff (and students will then be selected to join the project). Whether students come forward voluntarily to participate, or they are selected by staff, the opportunity favours the already privileged (Mapstone-Mercer and Bovill, 2019). In other words, it is likely that the selected students have self-identified or been identified as sharing some, if not all, the values (presumably held by the staff here too) discussed earlier.

Bryson, Brooke, Foreman, Graham and Brayshaw (2017) recognised this problem in a typology they developed to distinguish modes of partnership, an elaboration of what they first described as Model A and Model B (Bryson, Furlonger and Rinaldo-Langridge, 2016). The

former mode, 'selective', has exactly the problematic features noted above and privileges the already 'very engaged' with the most social capital to become the 'super-engaged'. The benefits for these students are profound (Furlonger, Johnston and Parker, 2014) but others miss out. The latter mode, 'universal', is intended to include all students. A universal approach seeks to create opportunities that are accessible to all students and avoid or minimise selection/voluntariness in any form. One fruitful way forward is partnership within the curriculum, as all students are included in this. The universal partnership mode has been endorsed by a number of writers, who use the term 'whole class' to signify that it is about staff working with the entire group of students to codetermine at least some aspects of the course (Marquis et al., 2019, Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill, 2019). Bovill (2020) offers some excellent examples of 'whole class cocreation' and suggests a host of beneficial outcomes for students. She offers two cautions, noting that staff attitudes and behaviour are key, and that it is more difficult to 'get it right' when working with a diverse group: "we need to overcome the idea that within any class that students must participate at the same level and in the same way and at the same time" (p9).

There is one other issue to consider when exploring how engaging partnership might offer benefits or otherwise. In project-based partnership students come forward voluntarily to participate – they are 'willing' partners, and perhaps likely to be predisposed. In other words, they find the concept attractive and are likely to share some, if not all the values (presumably held by the staff here too) discussed earlier. That is not the case in universal/whole class partnership. This raises the question about the extent to which all students are willing to become partners? There is debate about this issue. Seale, Gibson, Haynes and Potter (2015) albeit in a small study, found a large proportion of students just did not want to participate in their partnership based, enhancement project. This contrasts with Matthews, Groenewndijk and Kinduri (2017) who found a significant majority of students (also across a single degree cohort) considered it 'important' to involve themselves (hypothetically) in a range of partnership activities.

Bryson and Rinaldo-Langridge (2016) proposed that certain factors influenced pre-dispositions to working in partnership and ongoing attitudes, negative or positive, such as; desirability to belong to an educational community, perceptions of staff, orientation to HE, agency, attitude to risk, *inter alia*. Some students were willing to commit to this partnership approach rather further than others, and this degree of commitment is likely to be important in acquiring beneficial outcomes.

It is apparent that a number of issues remain unresolved and are certainly difficult to interpret across the diversity of partnership practice with its very different contexts and profound differences in intention, operation, and who it involves (Bovill, 2019b). Adding to this complexity is the point that each individual, student and staff brings their own experiences, values and goals to the table. In this study we sought to gather primary evidence from student participants in a context where a major effort had been made to offer a diverse variety of partnership in an inclusive and accessible way to all students - the whole cohort approach. As far as we know this example is almost unique across the entire international HE sector.

## **The Study**

The setting for this study is a Combined Honours undergraduate degree where students study two or three subjects from humanities, arts and social science subjects over the whole

of their degree. Ten years ago, support aimed at building coherence, identity and belonging was minimal, and voice mechanisms were virtually absent. Student morale was low as evidenced by feedback and surveys. As incoming staff to the Centre responsible for managing the degree, we began by asking the students what the issues were and what solutions they considered might work. We developed a holistic student engagement strategy (Bryson, 2010) which has evolved into a mode of partnership working that aspires towards a 'whole cohort' approach involving the introduction of an array of partnership roles and modes to foster a partnership community. Sitting at the core of this is elected student representation with a Student Staff Committee. From this group have emerged most of our partnership initiatives. There are a range of peer support schemes: a comprehensive peer mentoring scheme for first years; a Peer Assisted Study Support scheme to support academic writing development; and Peer Ambassadors for Welfare who provide pastoral support. These schemes were all initiated in partnership and continue in that mode (O'Shea, Bennett and Delehunty, 2017) and staff support them in a facilitative role. We describe this as 'role-based partnership'. Furthermore, there are several ambassadorial opportunities to represent the degree (always advertised to the whole cohort). All these aforementioned roles are voluntary and unwaged. However, there are some paid roles in the form of term-time or vocational internships to undertake a specific project. Some of these are student initiated and some staff initiated. These might be considered 'project-based partnership'. Altogether this is around one hundred roles. The great majority of these roles fit within selective mode (Bryson et al, 2017), limiting opportunities and therefore not as inclusive as we had intended.

From an initial position of all curriculum being provided directly by the particular academic subjects' students were undertaking, at the students' request and through a process of cocreation, eight modules have been introduced and run by the Centre over the last nine years. These modules permit universal mode partnership, as they are open to all the students. In each module there is significant codetermination - the students co-decide key parameters in the module with staff. This is very different from the rest of the curriculum at this university, and extremely rare in the whole HE sector. The specific modules investigated in this study were:

- A first year module; adopting an inquiry based learning approach, the students selected their own project topics, preparing individual report and working as a group to feed into an assessed debate, with some limited input into deciding assessment criteria.
- The graduate development modules available to second and final year students; based on a role (such as peer support or rep), students each identify self-selected graduate attributes to develop. They also undertake a group or individual project. Reflective learning is key. Students co-determine deadlines, assessment tasks and assessment criteria collectively, although the module leader retains the final decision.
- The independent project modules in final year (worth 20 or 40 credits); students select their topic for an individual research project and develop an output for which they can choose the format (e.g. report, film, podcast, play). Students co-determine deadlines, the content of the workshops, the weighting of marks and assessment criteria. Once the overall structure is decided collectively, students can individually decide which criteria and weighting will apply to their work.

This has created partnership opportunities for a wider body of the cohort. As some students undertook multiple activities (e.g. two roles, two modules, role and module) in total around one hundred and fifty students, around 25% of the overall degree cohort took the opportunity to engage in some form of partnership activity.

To cope with an increase in students taking the degree and the introduction of this curriculum staff numbers in the department rose from three to ten. We acknowledge that an issue in this scaling up is that not all the staff are as enthusiastic about the values of partnership. Even when we share the values and ethos, we may enact these in practice, in different ways, and feel more or less constrained by risk (Bryson and Furlonger, 2018) and personal limits on how radical to be (Furlonger et al, 2020).

We now present the study. In the context of the degree we sought to gain the candid perspectives of a range of participants about their experiences and perceptions of engaging in partnership (we acknowledge some may not have seen what they do as partnership). We seek to take a more critical and honest approach to evaluating the positive and negative outcomes of partnership working and the factors that influence that. Through such an approach we hope to test if partnership delivers the profound benefits claimed in the literature.

## Methods

The research team consisted of three staff, (two of whom were recent graduates of the degree), and a student undertaking a paid internship. A convenience sample of twelve students on the degree was selected on the basis that they had undertaken a variety of roles working in partnerships with peers and/or staff (all were final year apart from one recent graduate). Each student was interviewed by one of the research team, who used a semi-structured schedule of questions. Interviews were of about one hour's duration. We deliberately avoided the term 'partner' or 'partnership' in our questions so as to avoid leading the interviewee by inferring that they were indeed 'partners'. Interviews were recorded and analysed using a shared protocol. The protocol involved identifying key quotes: identified as such because they related to one of our research questions/themes; or evidenced an emergent theme; and not least, ensured the perspectives of all the student participants were included. In order to protect anonymity, the participants were given a pseudonym, and only the interviewer knew their identity and undertook the summary. Each of the research team reviewed all the summaries and we came together a number of times to discuss emergent issues and themes. Through these iterations, we reached a consensus of what evidence was relevant about each interviewee relating to the themes.

Table 1  
Student participants in the study and activities undertaken

Participant	Extracurricular (role and project based)	Curricular (whole class)
Alice	Peer support roles Scheme leadership roles Research internship	First year module Graduate Development module Final Year Project module
Amy	Peer support roles Research internship	First year module Graduate Development module Final Year Project module
Caitlin	Peer support roles Student led research project	Final Year Project module

Daphne	Student rep Scheme leadership roles Peer support roles	First year module Graduate Development module Final Year Project module
Gwen	Student rep Peer support role Scheme leadership role Research internship	Graduate Development module
Kat	Peer support role Research internship	Final Year Project module
Lana	Student rep Peer support role Research internship	First year module Final Year Project module
Martin	Student rep	Graduate Development module Final Year Project module
Reuben	None	Final Year Project module
Ryan	Student rep Scheme leadership roles Peer support roles	Graduate Development module Final Year Project module
Sally	Peer support roles Leadership role Research internship	Graduate Development module
Victoria	Peer support role	Final Year Project Module

In order to analyse the complex evidence that semi-structured interviews generated we draw from Cook-Sather et al (2014). They proposed that for partnership to be authentic the three core principles of respect, reciprocity and responsibility needed to be present in the perception of the student. They also framed the benefits of partnership into three 'clusters':

- Engagement – a process where the party takes 'serious interest in, active taking up of, and commitment to learning' (ibid:101) and subdivides further into:
  - a. Confidence, motivation and enthusiasm
  - b. Enhanced engagement in the process, not just the outcomes of learning (less transactional and becoming more conscious of their own learning process)
  - c. Enhanced responsibility for, and ownership, of their own learning
  - d. Deepened understanding of, and contribution to, the academic community
- Awareness
  - a. Developing metacognitive awareness
  - b. Developing a stronger sense of identity
- Enhancement – where students:
  - a. Become more active as learners
  - b. Gain insight into faculty members' pedagogical intentions
  - c. Take more responsibility for learning

These benefits focus strongly on learning and thus exclude broader development outcomes from students. We have adapted this as the outcomes identified by the student participants in our study were in some ways more particular and in others went beyond those detailed above. Other commentators also identified benefits that informed how we clustered our Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal

themes. Particularly Mercer Mapstone et al (2017), who created a long list drawn from a meta-analysis of 65 studies, and Lubicz-Nawrocka's 2017 study, which was based on students who had volunteered to take part on a curriculum cocreation. Our themes were engagement, empowerment, relating to others and learning and development. We recognise that these overlap to some degree.

Our student participants did identify skills that they had practised and developed through the extracurricular roles and the modules they had undertaken. In most cases these skills have little to do with or arise from, working in partnership. They are very similar, if not identical, to skills development that would take place in any role of responsibility or traditional curriculum based on experiential or research-based learning. Therefore, we have omitted these from the findings reported except where it is clear that the skill developed is directly related to working in a partnership mode.

## **Findings and analysis**

### ***Engagement***

All students agreed that the extracurricular activities they undertook enhanced their sense of engagement to their student experience. Some felt they had tended to over-commit themselves earlier in their degree. This was a cause of conflict with academic studies (Reuben), stress (Caitlin; "quite demanding": Alice; "dividing my time between very mixed roles": Gwen struggled to find time in competition to other responsibilities) and sometimes a misfit (Amy did not find common ground to relate to fellow interns; for Lana the emphasis on the social in her first role "invaded [her] personal space"; and for Victoria lead to conflict with other students).

The way the extracurricular roles were set up in Combined, as collaborative with peers and staff, and the role of staff in mitigating tension and providing support, did much to alleviate such concerns and make the students feel valued and part of something collective. This contrasted with extracurricular roles outside Combined, where partnership was not present, and students felt much more on their own.

For most, getting involved in the first place was the pre-cursor to more involvement, and feeling a genuine sense of belonging to Combined. With experience, they were able to focus on roles and issues that most engaged them (Sally, Caitlin, Alice, Lana) because that focus felt authentic.

Daphne took a different path in the first half of her student experience. Despite taking on no less than four roles in Combined in her first two years, she did not feel engaged. She explained that she felt "totally disconnected". She did not desire the identity of student and in her own view was very self-centred and transactional – seeing her degree as a means to an end, to getting a good job. Her aim was to "get [her tasks] done as quickly and efficiently as possible". But much of the time she felt frustrated and angry (e.g. with mentees and fellow reps). During her Year Abroad she realised she needed to change. She took just a single peer support role in final year and changed her outlook and approach markedly.

The first year module had socially integrated the students (Lana: "great to have CH students all in the same room": Alice: "it really brought us together"). Amy and Alice found the module engaging. Alice said:



*Trying something new. It was more challenging because it involved research- we had not done that at A level.*

Amy said that it was “very different to everything else – it was a break from normal modules”, and that she felt like an equal to the other students and staff in the room. She also said that the staff:

*Actually value what you are contributing where you can speak out at any point in a Combined module whereas in a lecture you can only speak if you are spoken to.*

But Lana although she liked the learning approach, felt patronised by her tutor:

*There were too many prescriptive elements that frustrated me despite being able to choose my own project.*

A distinction emerged clearly between the graduate development and independent project modules in terms of engagement. In the former the students formed strong bonds (Alice: “it allowed me to get to know staff and other students...combine the learning with the social”) and a different, constructive classroom dynamic (Gwen: “everyone is encouraging each other, and we all get a better mark, helping each other”). For Ryan partnership really worked well in this module:

*The graduate module - being co-designed - is tailored to what students really need... The stronger the partnership the more you feel engaged, and confident in what you are doing.*

Ryan made the insight that because the students doing this module were already working in partnership mode in their extracurricular roles, and these roles were the basis on which they drew for their work in the module. Thus they were already aligned to work in partnership.

For Daphne, graduate development, which she took on her return from a year abroad, was “the best thing ever”. Through emphasising reflection and giving her space and support, and allowing students to develop their own graduate attributes framework, her understanding of herself was transformed. That fed back into her peer support role too and for the first time, she genuinely felt she was doing the role well: “It’s nice to know you are doing a good job”. She felt part of a collaborative community and discovered that she liked identifying as a student.

Our participants were highly positive about how doing the independent project module really engaged them, all ten agreed wholeheartedly:

*My favourite module. This module allowed both of my passions- being creative, mental health, creative writing... put it all together. I am really proud of what I produced. Other modules are limiting [Alice]*

*Opportunity to show my prowess as an academic in a different format was so appealing to me. [Reuben]*

*The freedom was great, independence, still supervision – I could do loads of stuff within the limits [Victoria]*

In large measure this was due to the freedom to choose their own topic and form of output. Such a pedagogy and curriculum offer students greater autonomy, choice and responsibility. But the extent of these freedoms also gave rise to concern for some. The harmony and accord between students and peers, and students and staff in graduate development were not so

universal here. Ryan, Daphne and Martin desired more specific expert advice on the content of their projects. Daphne took on a topic which so challenged her at some points that she felt totally lost. She felt like an imposter, “challenging the work of real scientists”. But unlike graduate development she did not trust the staff or seek out help she might have gained, in part because she wanted it to be “[her] project”, and she did not want to hear advice to change the focus. This was a massive learning curve and although at the end she did well she said, “I still don’t feel an expert...but I have learned to be sceptical about what I read”.

But for others the reverse was true from the start, Lana and Alice loved the independence and felt support was there when they needed it. This had given Lana the ability to say, “yes I can do this, even though I am not an expert”. Caitlin initially found the independence overwhelming, but by the end she said, “I am set up to do my masters”. The opportunity to create a product or process that was authentic to the ‘real world’ appealed too. Victoria was sad when her project ended as she got so immersed working on a project that could influence the professional world, “it was meaningful”, and she was encouraged to disseminate it externally as it presented powerful evidence to change practice. This aspect was important to Reuben and Alice too.

Adding the ingredient of co-creation and codetermination divided opinions further. For some it added to the risks in a high stakes final year module:

*[it] takes you out of your comfort zones, if you deal with that it’s really beneficial in the long term, but some of my friends did not get the gist of it, and have had a poor experience...partnership was alien to them [Ryan]*

Ryan did personally value the opportunity to co-decide such parameters. For others the codetermination created discomfort. As Caitlin noted, it “creates uncertainty ...and vagueness ... [it was] hard to choose ... it was hard but learning is difficult”. But she, together with Alice and Martin, thought on balance, it added to the experience. Lana and Amy were unequivocal supporters. As Amy said:

*It puts you on an equal par. It is nice to hear someone say that they respect that this is my work and that I should have a say about how it is sort of run.*

Daphne noted that co-deciding criteria and weighting was appropriate collectively in the graduate development module but the situation was different in the independent project module. In the latter, it was essential for it to be decided individually as it permitted each student to play to their strengths. This choice was important to her, she said it “alleviated my insecurity”, it was a “massive positive” to the module.

Rueben seemed oblivious to partnership. He did not participate in any aspect of codetermination of module parameters.

An issue which particularly emerged in the smaller version of the independent project was conflict between students in the classroom discussions. For example, deciding issues such as should there be a formal proposal that was assessed, were contentious. Loud voices from some drowned out everybody else and Kat did not want to contest these opinions despite disagreeing. But using polling systems to eventually decide allowed better outcomes (at least as far as she was concerned), so Kat felt it was resolved:

*It was a bit chaotic at first. The staff just chucked some issues out there...if you give people all that freedom, you get the loud opinionated voices that really argue against*

*or really for something. Made it fair in the end by polling...Getting the right way to do it is important, some people need policing.*

Kat noted that the high emotions seemed to stem from the pressures of final year and the salience of getting the necessary grade for desired graduate goals (when getting a job depends on achieving a 2:1 or a first). In her view, partnership approaches “are harder to work with final year students”.

There was agreement that these Combined modules offered a much more exciting and engaging curriculum than the traditional approaches taken in their other subjects. Amy said; “whereas in lectures all you’re learning about is their speciality”, and Reuben was dismissive of the “academic snobbery of essays”.

### **Empowerment**

Students gave direct examples of empowerment. Caitlin found the experience of co-presenting her own student led paper at an academic conference (RAISE 2017), “confidence building and empowering”. Ryan said:

*You’re working in partnership to determine the [module’s] marking criteria and the [assessment] weighting and stuff like that, and I find that quite empowering*

He emphasised too how that had been reinforced by the Combined modules being originally co-designed by students. He said, “even though I was not involved in [co-designing the modules], it makes me feel like it’s really tailored to what students want”.

Discussing his role as a senior student representative, Ryan contrasted the strong sense of partnership he felt with departmental staff whereas that not the case with relationships external to Combined, saying: “working in unison with the Head of School...I felt I could make a difference”, but he did not have a good working relationship with senior representatives in the Students’ Union or senior university staff. He said that this “lack of direction knocked my confidence a bit”.

In contrast, Sally criticised one of the peer roles she had undertaken. She felt it needed more structure and formality, in particular, it lacked proper recruitment and training. She “felt disempowered with the lack of this”. Daphne too, criticised an aspect of student representation (actually intended to promote co-governance) as “a waste of time”. We do note this was during the period when she felt quite frustrated and disengaged with university and her role.

We found that working in partnership boosted confidence. Alice had some difficult times working with others in her extracurricular roles. Her desire “to be liked” had challenged her being an effective leader and facilitator. Working with staff in both the extracurricular and the modules had allowed her to overcome this and now she was “a lot more assured”. She realised that she didn’t “have to make everyone happy, just ensure they are content”. Gwen too, had really built her confidence through her peer support roles and working with staff in the graduate development module, which she said,

*Really enhanced my confidence, confidence in what I am saying...[now] I won’t hesitate to answer questions (in seminars), [before I did not] in case I was wrong.*

Gwen said that her internships had also allowed her “to put my own ideas into it, making me feel more confident in myself”. Both Amy and Victoria talked about how presenting their module work at an in-house conference was such a rewarding experience. Amy came away from it “feeling good ... It felt important” and it gave her confidence to do more.

Working in partnership creates a sense of ownership. Kat contrasted the freedom of her internship with previous employment roles, saying that in her internship she “quickly learnt you don’t need to ask staff everything, you can take control”. But she was also reassured the staff were there to support to her. She was reassured knowing “I don’t have to deal with big issues on my own”. When reflecting on the Combined modules she took, Amy noted:

*It makes you feel like it is even more your own work if you have decided the weighting and the hand-in date.*

Martin stressed the importance of this dimension for his own progress (and why partnership mattered):

*Somebody dictating how you’re going to learn is not particularly that useful for a lot of students, they actually want to have a say in what they’re going to do.*

Working in partnership encourages decisiveness. Although Sally at the time was not very enthusiastic about codetermining assessment criteria, she reflected:

*Actually making decisions is a hugely important graduate skill. You are going to need to do that in the workplace. It is also a problem solving skill too.*

Working in partnership in the curriculum offers a sense of self (in addition to stronger engagement as noted in the previous section). Lana contrasted her experience on Combined modules with the rest of her curriculum:

*The big disadvantage, of course, is that the rest of the university doesn’t do it. It works brilliantly when we are in a module that does this, but when you come of it, you get patronised...In [a CH module] I write as me, in other subjects I write for them, I don’t have a voice.*

There was a flipside. Responsibility had a price. It created a sense of accountability. Speaking about her peer support role, Amy stated:

*It has the potential to have a lot of pressure because you’re helping someone with their [academic] work ... any amounts of training and you would still have that worry in the back of your head.*

Working in partnership was challenging (but worth it):

*I found it quite tough at first because we were really pushed to be creative, think outside the box and I hadn’t really done that before [Amy].*

Amy then went on to say, “now I am not going to be scared to try something new”.

Ryan also talked of the challenge of taking responsibility, in the long term it empowered him but initially it was “difficult and effected [his] confidence”.

Kat offered an insight into why students are deterred from taking on roles, responsibilities and ‘non-traditional’ curriculum and thus, opportunities for working in partnership, at an earlier stage in the degree: students are averse to risk. Lana and Gwen corroborated this.

*In first year you don't want to do anything you don't already know about [Kat]*

Not all students were deterred, for example, Sally and Daphne. Note though, that they had both accrued experience (and thus social capital) prior to university.

### **Relating to others**

A key feature of productive partnership working is collaboration and building a trust relationship. Only then can mutual respect and reciprocity flourish. Student participants noted how this had developed with fellow students. Those students doing peer support roles often formed close-knit groups and mutually supported each other.

Caitlin talked about being in a team. She said it was “really important...really nice group of people... we sit around and talk about work. The peer led and friendly part reduces the demand”. Victoria found a similar “enriching experience”, in her role with a strong level of mutual support between peers. Early in her degree, Lana found relating to others hard but through her roles found a way that worked for her, she discovered “[mutual] support not friendship”. She found her niche in being a student representative. She said it was “good to have all years together to both give and receive advice”. Gwen contrasted her first year experience, when she “was a bit of a recluse”, with her later years and the roles she had: she said these later experiences “helped me identify with university, the Combined Honours community more than anything, and make friends”. For Amy, getting involved in the roles was very significant. She said,

*Interacting with more and more people ... [helped] me understand how we are different ... My attitude in my first and second year was I don't understand and I don't care whereas because this year I've had responsibilities ... I have to care so I'm going to try and understand ... your personality and where you're from.*

We have noted (in the Engagement section) the strong bonds formed by students in the graduate development module where the students (such as Alice, Daphne, Ryan and Gwen) really formed a community of trust with peers and the staff member. As Alice said, “[in the module] everyone knew each other, we gelled- the best team project I have done, which I'm so proud of”. And Gwen said they “all become friends”.

Rueben did not build collaborative relationships with students on the final year project module: “I didn't feel I would have got benefit chatting to peers about the project”. But for the first time in his university experience, he did build respect and trust with staff in a module, “I've definitely learnt the benefit of collaboration”.

Victoria found that participating in the in-house conference was very successful at creating productive interaction with her peers and staff. She had been inspired by attending an earlier conference as an observer, and when she did present she gained “great feedback from staff”

and “validation from students”. She said that having them ask her questions “was great [and] made [her] project mean more”.

Sally had always valued working with others but her relationship with staff had evolved in this setting:

*The older I get the more I see myself as being on a level playing field with staff, as equals.*

She discussed how teaching staff elsewhere put expectations on to her, whereas in Combined modules there was a mutuality that was invited by combined staff: “here it is mutual”.

Trust develops from familiarity and needs time. Daphne had not met her supervisor before she started the final year project module, she asked herself “who is this person?”. This situation did not allow her to trust her supervisor or have honest conversations about the project, to her detriment.

Some students contrasted their relationships with staff inside Combined, which was largely positive, and their relationship with staff outside Combined, which were always so good. Kat described the external staff as “abrasive”, whereas with Combined staff, she felt “confident saying I don’t understand, can I have some help?” Martin was of the opinion that staff in other departments had a lower level of respect for students. In her internship, Amy found working with external staff “quite difficult”, and in her subject modules found the staff “inaccessible”. Ryan felt that he had “built very strong relationships with [Combined] staff”. He said, these relationships “meant ... when I was going through a challenging time, they could identify this clearly and support me”. He called co-presenting with staff at academic conferences “the strongest form of partnership that there is, when you are working together in this way”.

One downside to the sense of trust and respect that was created between students and staff was a sense of accountability (noted too in the previous section):

*Only negative is I always felt quite accountable, e.g. missing a meeting...letting the staff member down. [Sally]*

Victoria talked at length about this issue. Her good relationship with her supervisor was double-edged:

*It was good and bad- because I knew the person, sometimes I was afraid to say some of my ideas because I didn’t want [them] to be disappointed. If it was someone I didn’t know beforehand I would just be able to say anything.*

Victoria noted that the discussions had with her supervisor were valuable and so encouraging for her project but her supervisor’s constant encouragement and reinforcement that it was a really good project made Victoria worry she would disappoint them in the end. Although her underlying sense of confidence was strong – the responsibility and respect she felt created

an accountability and fear that she might not deliver to both her and others' expectations. Overall though, Victoria found doing the final year project, "an amazing module".

### ***Learning and Development***

There is good evidence that students did learn and develop through these experiences of working in partnership, and that learning seemed rooted in 'movement' of perspective. Working with fellow students had broadened their outlook and enabled them to see issues from multiple perspectives. Lana noted that her student representative role had allowed her to,

*learn...how the university works...get outside the bubble of my own degree... get to see what students recognise as issues.*

Ryan said that he had found the experience of recognising others' views "quite humbling". Caitlin observed that after working closely with staff (particularly at an external conference), had opened her eyes. She said, "I can now see modules and students from the student and staff view".

These experiences of partnership allowed students to develop valuable attributes – such as the ability to self-evaluate, arguably the key graduate attribute (Nicol, 2010):

*The main benefit for me is a huge development of my self awareness... [it] made me aware of my strength and weaknesses. I can accept what I am not so good at, I can accept that, and move forward. [Sally]*  
*[It] allowed me to develop my understanding of my strengths and weaknesses- so many jobs now need you to be able to self-assess. [Gwen]*

Ryan described developing something very similar to this, he called it "my emotional intelligence".

Students also felt more prepared for the next step after graduation:

*I feel more professional going into the world of work... [I had] a professional outlook in teacher training interviews. Working closely with staff is part of this. [Gwen]*

Lana, Sally and Caitlin felt that the Combined modules had set them up well for postgraduate education through offering autonomy and self-assurance.

What seemed to be required for this movement in perspective was the students going outside or beyond their comfort zone. Entering a different space challenged the students; they experienced the discomfort of liminality (Land et al, 2014). They were motivated (or forced) to move by a number of factors. We have discussed earlier how they took on responsibility. Gwen said, "in mentoring, a group of people relied on me, so it forced me to push myself".

For Victoria, she pushed herself despite her fears she would let herself and her supervisor down:

*He seemed really excited when I presented my topic idea and told me it was a good idea and interesting, and that I should do really well. And I thought, 'oh awesome...what if I don't?'*

But through building trust and respect she had overcome all her reservations, really extended herself and delivered something she was proud of, and went beyond just completing a project.

As we have noted, several of the students felt really uncomfortable and uncertain in this liminal phase. Two, Kat and Reuben never really entered that space. Kat identified her internship as an area where she had gained excellent experience to help her employability but the partnership dimension of that, and the module she did, offered little more to her, in her perspective. But those who were willing to take the risk to enter that space did get through it. Working in partnership both created the pressure to move into a 'brave space' (Arao and Clemens, 2013; Cook-Sather and Abbott, 2016) but also gave the individual support and reassurance to get through this. As Caitlin reflected, "learning is difficult". Ryan observed:

*Partnership takes you out of your comfort zones, if you deal with that it's really beneficial in the long term.*

For three students in particular, this learning could be described as transformational. Lana had changed profoundly through her roles and experiences on the Combined module, both personally and in her goals for the future:

*Working closely with [staff and students in] Combined, [getting] to know what the [staff's] day to day life is like, I am now thinking of becoming an academic ... Going to conferences and meeting more academics really created a passion for educational research. I did enjoy what I was researching...but never had studied education before ... open education...bringing in all my subjects in an interdisciplinary way.*

At the time, Lana was planning a PhD exploring interdisciplinary higher education rather than the school teaching career she had originally planned for (an after note: Lana informed us some months later that the experience of completing a masters in a very traditional academic department had reversed these plans).

The impact on Amy had also been profound. Interacting with other students started to make her receptive to different perspectives and changed her attitude to university:

*[the graduate development module] is when I saw a change in myself, if I am honest. [In final year] It rounded my whole experience off nicely. It ... brought my progress over the three years together. ... Each year I've ... got more and more involved. And this year has sort of helped me as a person. I've had a difficult time of it at university ... I've struggled. I've actually enjoyed it for the first time in three years and [this module] is definitely a part of that.'*

Amy finished her degree with outstanding work and gained a first-class degree, something she felt completely out of her reach at the beginning of university. A case can be made for several other students in the study (Ryan, not least) about just how much they had grown and developed in their awareness – and become good 'citizens' who cared about a wide range of important issues through working in partnership.



Daphne did not much enjoy her first two years at university but entered final year wanting to change that. In this earlier period, in her own view, she personified the self-interested, competitive student shaped by neoliberal influences on HE (Wiljaya Mulya, 2018). She found inspiration through undertaking the graduate development module. Through enabling her to self-evaluate and gain affirmation from a staff member and peers, she started to see herself, others, her degree and higher education in a much constructive and positive way. She cited Dubet (1993); “the idea of the personal project is so powerful”. Her purpose in studying for a degree had changed. She came to realise that for her, “University is a development tool not a commodity”.

## **Discussion**

We recognise that the number of students we interviewed was limited as was the context from where the evidence was drawn – albeit compensated by being a context shared by all the participants. Such a study is not fully generalisable but offers insight into just how complex interpreting the outcomes of partnership is. The twelve students have all shared individual and unique perspectives and personal stories. From their accounts we have learned that there is not one mode of partnership that is guaranteed to deliver the most powerful benefits and development. Instead we have noted how the same, or very similar experiences have manifested different benefits and challenges for each individual. A small number of participants did not appear to gain from partnership, but these students had not really engaged with partnership opportunities.

There is evidence that working in partnership enhanced students’ engagement and empowerment. Good outcomes included: increased confidence and self-efficacy, a sense of ownership, solidarity with a collective (peers and staff), and a sense of self. Lana expresses the latter point elegantly and powerfully with her observation that partnership in the curriculum allows her to be an authentic self-author whereas the traditional curriculum does not (validating the proposition by Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018). The students contrast their experiences of partnership working in their Combined roles and activities with, in some cases, rather less engaging and more disempowering processes and outcomes in their interactions with peers and staff outside the academic department.

That is not to say there was not a flip-side to partnership too. For some the uncertainty through lack of fixed structure was actually disempowering, it created accountability and a sense of potentially letting peers or staff down. Students noted they tended to be more risk averse earlier in their degree and this deterred them from engaging at that point in such roles. Cook-Sather (2014) argues that partnership is a threshold concept. Thus, students entering that liminal space are inevitably going to be uncomfortable. That certainly emerges in this study. We saw that when they built good relationships involving trust and respect they got through this challenging phase. For example, the graduate development module worked as a peer support network in itself, with the students feeling that they are a member of a joint student and staff community. Perhaps the point that students on this module were already working on peer support roles in which they were part of a team with staff and peers is salient. Another facilitating factor is familiarity with working in partnership. Partnership is a journey where the road becomes less threatening as one progresses, and the benefits more profound. Alice described the independent project in her final year as a synthesis and culmination of all she had wanted to focus on, and gain from her HE experience. Similarly, Amy said that she had been engaged in either a Combined module or extracurricular partnership role in every year of her programme but that the role she took and module she

studied in her final year cemented her transformation of outlook and values. This suggests that engaging in partnership over a longer period sees personal development in individuals that is not possible in interactions of shorter duration and intensity. Reuben's narrative supports this. His first experience of the partnership agenda was not until his final year when he struggled to engage with it in the project module.

Indeed, it is the practice of partnership in the final year project module that is most problematic, both in terms of reception from students and being directly beneficial. The partnership dimension frustrated some students, who either did not understand its purpose or saw it as an unnecessary burden and creator of uncertainty in what was already a stressful and challenging undertaking. Others enjoyed the freedom and personal ownership of their project that this approach gave them. This seems to depend on two factors; how comfortable the student is to be autonomous and take responsibility for decisions; and the degree of trust and respect they share with the staff. Perhaps a lesson learnt, illuminated by this study, is that either, preferably both, of these facilitating factors should be scaffolded more with the students before the module begins, in order for the partnership dimension to deliver enhancement rather than hinder.

We share some outcomes with the most comparable study (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2017), in that it drew on rich student interview evidence but find contrasts too. We note Lubicz-Nawrocka's study involved cocreation of the curriculum rather than in the curriculum, (Bovill and Woolmer, 2019), and was more exclusively project based, so relationships are different. In our higher stakes mode of partnership in the curriculum, or where students felt responsibility for peers, risk and accountability to staff was perceived to be higher, thus 'failing' was not okay at all. This element of performativity diminishes shared ownership and needs attention to redress.

For partnership to deliver the potential benefits that it indubitably offers, it requires a sufficient degree of willingness and motivation by the individual to participate. At some points that participation will create feelings of discomfort and a sense of uncertainty in at least some of the partners. Increasing the intensity of the partnership raises the stakes but is likely to deliver the most powerful benefit of transformative learning (the partnerships described in the studies by Cook-Sather, with students and staff working closely together over sustained periods, very much support this point). The major challenge is to ensure that such opportunities are both accessible, diverse and attractive to all students. Adopting a whole cohort approach offers a way to do that. It does need will, effort and resilience to not only introduce partnership opportunities to everyone but also to ensure each student can participate in sufficient length and depth to gain these beneficial outcomes.

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