

# Students as partners: Creating a collective responsibility for course evaluation and improvement

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## Abstract

Student engagement and a culture of partnership are key features of UK Higher and Further Education policy. Dialogue and collaboration are at the core of these concepts. This article explores the role that students have in evaluating and planning improvement in the context of whole course evaluative processes. Using a small-scale study within a tertiary institution, we examine the impact and effectiveness of a new approach to whole course self-evaluation. Furthermore, we explore the role of the student in the creation and use of evaluative data and feedback and the nature and extent of collaborative partnership working between students and staff. Analysis suggests that the new approach outlined is perceived as highly effective in engaging students and staff in meaningful evaluative dialogue. We conclude with questions for further engagement and empowerment opportunities for staff-student partnerships in this co-creative context.

**Keywords:** Self-evaluation, Quality enhancement, Partnership, Students as partners

## Introduction

This article explores the role that students have in evaluating and planning improvement in the context of whole course evaluative processes. It presents findings from a small scale study within a tertiary institution and examines the impact and effectiveness of a new approach to whole course self-evaluation.

### *Institutional and sector context*

The College Improvement project (CIP) (announced by the Scottish Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science in March 2017) aimed to provide new methods to enable colleges across Scotland to respond to the attainment challenge. For example, in the academic year 2016/17 approximately 25% of students enrolled on a full-time FE course failed to complete it and a further 9% did not complete successfully. The project aimed to drive increased success in FE using Quality Improvement (QI) methodology. The methodology was designed to challenge assumptions and enable practical interventions which provided clear evidence to deliver positive change (College Development Network, 2018).

The QI methodology used throughout the CIP was the Plan-Do-Study-Act model for improvement. This cyclical process is initiated by stating the overall aim of an intervention which is then used to form a Driver Diagram, one useful QI tool utilised in this methodology. The driver diagram captures a range of factors which may contribute to achieving or influencing the overall aim and from that ideas for change can be decided. As this model uses the key concept of iterative change and learning, the

change ideas are planned and tested on a small scale then studied to evaluate their impact on the overall aim. Change ideas can then be altered as required or discarded depending on their impact. The model allows for quick trialling of ideas on a small scale which is evidence based before committing to large scale change.

Inverness College (ICUHI), part of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), is an institution of around 6000 students, studying from access level courses to doctoral level study. Committed to a culture of partnership both at local and regional level, we have reviewed and developed our self-evaluation processes for whole course evaluation over a period of 18 months from early 2018 to mid-2019. ICUHI formed part of a five-college strong improvement team testing this way of using QI methodology in driving increased success, focusing on the areas of retention and success of our learners. The outcomes would then feed into sector wide enhancement strategies.

As an institution serving both FE and HE, we were keen to connect the CIP to developments in the HE sector. An evaluation of the impact of the QI methodology (documented in this paper) was funded by University's Learning and Teaching Academy and in line with the Quality Assurance Agency's Enhancement themes at the time (Evidence for Enhancement, Enhancing the Student Experience) specifically relating to the sub theme of Student Engagement and Demographics, retention, and progression, responding to student voice and students using evidence.

### *Partnership culture*

Current thinking within student engagement in both further and higher education, particularly in Scotland, leans towards creating partnership relationships between staff, students, and their institution. The Scottish Funding Council funded agency, sparqs', remit is

*to advance education by promoting an environment where students are able to make a positive and rewarding difference to their own and others' educational experience (sparqs, 2018).*

Indeed, sparqs altered their name in 2015 from *student participation in quality Scotland to student partnerships in quality Scotland* (sparqs, n.d.) reflecting how thinking and behaviour has changed.

Colin Bryson, co-founder of the RAISE (Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement) network, believes that partnership rightly places student engagement at the centre of the educational experience (Bryson, 2014). There are many positive effects of partnership models within the research literature including immediate benefits for staff and students as well as wider positive cultural change. Bryson gives an example of Advance HE in collaboration with the National Union of Students where they found a partnership approach was not only more inclusive, but crucially worked with students at every level (Bryson, 2014, p. 16).

Lucy Mercer-Mapstone, an expert in student engagement in higher education with a particular focus on student-staff partnership, more recently articulated the wider impacts of partnership. She advocates for partnership values which offer alternative ways of working that focus on cultural change and challenge traditional hierarchies. (Mercer-Mapstone, 2019).

On an individual level, Alison Cook-Sather's research on students' experiences of pedagogical partnership informing wider discussions of student success showed partnership work inspiring students beyond the classroom. She reports that they became more active agents outside of those partnerships (Cook-Sather, 2018).

Models of participation are often used to measure perceived levels of partnership in different community partnership contexts. A clear pathway model employed by Kanji and Greenwood, used in a research context, sets out a partnership model in five clear steps which can be applied in educational contexts: compliance, consultation, cooperation, co-learning, and collective action (Kanji N. and Greenwood L., 2001). Their updated interpretation draws on the commonly quoted Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969). This model set out fundamental differences and gives a historical picture of how the importance of the student voice has changed in recent years.

More recent research looks further into notions of partnership and staff-student relationships and delves deeper into aspects of social identity and how identity formation and navigation influences, and is influenced by, student-staff partnership (Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2018). Key to this type of partnership is the concept of student voice, and it being the foundation of partnership models. The change from a paternalistic higher education culture to one which responds to student need rather than acting on assumptions (Carey, 2013, p.1295).

Within our working environment, we have seen these changes reflected in our own working practices and understanding of student engagement. Two recent projects demonstrate this well. Firstly, the reframing of our Student Partnership Agreement and Learner Agreement to reflect working with students as experts and able members of our learning community, rather than reinforcing the traditional dichotomous student/staff roles and identities. One of the goals was to create "proactive engagement between students and staff" (UHI, 2019).

This was a successful project resulting in University wide recognition, winning the UHI Student Support Initiative Award in 2019. Secondly, a project in conjunction with sparqs, creating a toolkit to ensure effective student engagement in Education Scotland's How Good Is Our College framework. The How Good is Our College framework is a set of quality indicators for practitioners at every level and all college areas to evaluate and examine their work, finding what works well and could be better using the learner voice (Education Scotland, 2020). This project presented in this article as part of work for How Good is Our College, focused on several aspects reflected in the overall enhancement plan themes, and of particular relevance, our workstreams involving student representation, evaluation, and feedback.

Equitable relationships are at the heart of developing the enhancement themes. Furthermore, it is important to note partnerships are not just about student-staff relationships but the complex interactions across all levels and roles in an institution and the opportunities for growth through learning.

### *Overview of research project*

ICUHI has revised Course Committee Meetings (CCMs) to increase student engagement and shifted to a collective responsibility for all stages of the enhancement process. CCMs are whole course evaluation events taking place three times a year ('course' in this context refers to whole programmes of study). Before this shift in approach, these meetings were only attended by the lecturing staff of the school area concerned and class representatives were invited to attend for part of the meeting to provide their class feedback. Evaluative activity and planning for change were generally completed by academic staff or heads of school using the evidence gathered.

This new approach has altered this format in several ways; all students from these courses are now invited to attend, often classes are rescheduled to encourage and enable attendance. Staff from across curriculum areas, student support and professional services such as Finance, Admissions, Quality are invited to attend. The meeting format does not follow a traditional question and answer format; it uses a conversational dialogical approach using question prompts as a foundation (see figure 1), adapted from a resource co-created by Education Scotland and sparqs. The question prompts are used to facilitate discussion, to lead the group in a structured way. One person (a member of academic staff or the Quality team) leads the discussion and takes notes, building a visual representation of responses. The areas for discussion are clearly evidence led, using a bank of evidence to inform.

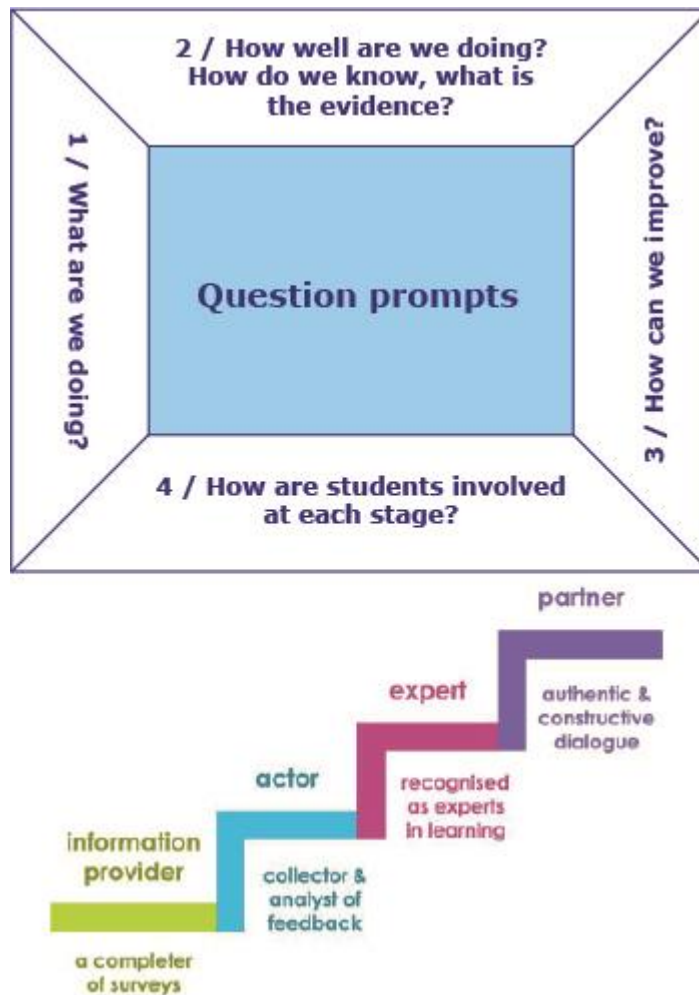


Figure 1, Question prompt example, adapted for these specific meetings. and Student partnership staircase (sparqs, 2022).

The approach was piloted at the end of the academic year 18/19 and was rolled out to all curriculum areas in 19/20 – notably not just at further education level, but across some HN (equivalent to first/second year undergraduate) levels of study. Our research has enabled us to evaluate to what extent this intervention is facilitating the empowerment and engagement of students, ultimately enhancing the student experience.

There are a range of statistics available which show the level of student engagement with surveys carried out at ICUHI, for example a recent response rate recorded as 43.86% for the Early Student Experience Survey carried out in October 2019, distributed to 3807 students. However, statistics such as figures of attendance do not show the whole picture of engagement. It is more meaningful to gauge the response of students participating in course self-evaluation and examine the level of genuine dialogue as perceived by both staff and students involved. As stated by Yorke, we must engage more closely with the lived experience of students to be able to understand student engagement better, which surveys do not allow for (Yorke, 2014, p.xvi). Our overall aim with regards to student engagement also aligns with the view of the National Learner Panel, which is

*an organisation in which learner involvement is embedded throughout the organisational culture, learner representation is strong and responsiveness to the needs of the individual has helped to improve provision (Walker & Logan, 2008, p.15).*

Good student engagement in the form of partnership working is broadly viewed by the sector as positive, effective, and empowering. At ICUHI our reasons for pursuing a partnership model, aiming to truly work with our students are succinct; we believe it is the right thing to do. One senior member of staff's view on working on improvement being to ask students:

*what do you think the problems are, help us identify it, you give us your views, collectively we'll construct what we should do about it and you help tell us if this is the right thing or not. And I think that has really shifted the game (Senior Staff Participant 1, 2019).*

The expectations of this research study were to provide evidence of the effectiveness of the new approach, justifying the change in approach and increased time spent in pursuing this kind of evaluative relationship with our students. It was also expected to show areas in which students were not involved in the use of feedback and evaluative data, findings which then could be used as prompts for additional development in this area.

## **Methodology**

To study how effective the QI methodology used in the CIP is with respect to the research questions, this study employed a qualitative methodology for gathering information, with an extensive series of interviews and focus groups. In total 14 interviews were conducted with 43 people, some in the format of one-to-one interviews, and some in a focus group style. This approach was due to availability of participants. One-to-one interviews allowed for in-depth conversations, and group sessions allowed ideas to be developed collectively, with a mix of similar and contrasting points of view expressed, sometimes building on what others in the group had stated. Around half of those engaged with were students. The interviews comprised of student groups, staff individuals and groups (lecturing staff, programme leaders, heads of school and members of the senior management team). The interviews were anonymous, and the format (semi-formal) encouraged areas not originally anticipated to be discovered.

Research questions considered the following:

- How effective is ICUHI's new approach to course evaluation in engaging students in evaluating and planning improvement?
- How is data for evaluation created and used, and what is the student role in this?
- To what extent are students and academic staff working collectively in the use of feedback and evaluative data?

Similar to engagement metrics, in measuring the extent of collective working, using only one method to do so may not give a rounded view. Opinion and clear examples of where staff and students had or had not demonstrated this aspect were used to evidence findings.

The research questions formed the basis of the interview set which was largely similar for all participants. Participants were interviewed over a period of four months, after having participated in one or two iterations of their corresponding CCM event.

The research project proposal included the employing of a student research intern. The research intern employed was an undergraduate student who worked with the lead researcher in transcribing interviews and categorising responses, identifying main themes and general analysis. Employing and involving students in a study like this was a key factor to lead by the example of including and working with students at all levels, demonstrating the importance of student contribution to both research and evaluative processes.

The data collected was analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2017). Data was categorised and content analysed to summarise and evaluate, identifying significant trends to draw a meaningful output. This was done by applying a coding system for responses – through initial analysis of the raw interview data, these categories or codes were identified and assigned to relevant points or individual quotes. A refining process was continual to ensure data was categorised correctly, and where nuances occurred a secondary categorisation was necessary to explore. Both student and staff interviews were coded in the same way but marked as either student or staff response to enable a comparable and separate reading of the data. Questions to staff and students were similar, but appropriate to the relationship (learner/teacher/organiser etc.), they followed a similar thematic pattern to explore the principal research questions. I was particularly interested in relationships, communication, and levels of understanding that both groups of participants had of partnership and the way it is approached in the context of ICUHI. Lastly three more senior members of staff (Heads of Schools/Areas) were interviewed one-to-one to achieve a rounded picture of understanding, commitment, and investment in this way of using QI methodology. They were asked similar questions and their responses were coded as per the students and staff.

## **Findings**

Interviews generally adhered to the set interview questions, although it became apparent there were other additional themes emerging through conversation with participants. Those related particularly to meaningful interactions generated in CCMs, the positive reaction to the dialogical approach taken in the sessions and the challenges that this new model presented.

Findings are presented here in relation to the main emerging themes of the research.

### *Shared dialogue*

Findings suggest that the new format promotes shared dialogue and has created meaningful conversations. This is extended to include other colleagues and students, not just teaching staff. This positive relationship building is evident to both those having participated and those viewing from outside, as one senior management participant expressed: *“And I see them in action, I see rooms full of people and feedback afterwards from various people, that that was a great event to be involved in; our student president has said he has had students telling them it’s a fantastic thing to do”*. From those who participated there was a keen sense of equity, as expressed by two student participants: *“we all got to give our points of view. About the course and – what we felt were the negative points, the positive points and just how we were all getting on... It was great...I thought it was really good to liaise with the lecturers...But also other people in the department as well”*.

### *Impact of an informal approach*

One aspect which supports relationship building through conversation, is the informal nature of the new meeting format – in many cases (but not all) programme teams refreshments for the duration of the meeting. This was brought up in interviews frequently, as shown in this exchange by three staff participants: *“I think the tea and coffee...I think that probably helped, because it made it adult...It made it like an adult [common] discussion, instead of we’re all sitting in rows and ... question- answer, question- answer”*. The student participants were also surprised at the less formal approach and welcomed it: *Student Participant 3: Well, I thought it would be more formal and we wouldn’t be as much involved and well it was good to even hear a lot of the -the concerns and things that were good from the other students as well*.

Furthermore, the equalising nature of informal social interactions not expected in a classroom setting both surprised staff and has further helped to break down the dichotomous student/staff roles and identities. One staff member here noting this exchange with one of her students: *“And I got up and made the students a cup of tea on our table, and one of my students said to me- I didn’t think I’d ever see the day when you’d make me a cup of tea”*. However, it is important to note the provision of food and drink is not seen as a barrier to being able to explore difficult topics, that it is viewed as a respectful gesture which shows the participants their attendance is valued (particularly if the meeting is held over lunch time hours). This is about valuing the student contribution, the expertise that they bring and furthering the culture of respect and partnership at all levels.

### *Potential for positive change*

The potential for change as a direct result of these evaluative meetings was clearly demonstrated. Both staff and students could see the potential for using the information gathered in these meetings for making change and that it would or has already happened. It appears transparent and clear to students that action has been taken or at least in part been taken: *“ I feel like our lecturer has tried to kinda [implement] some of the things we suggested”*. Staff can also see how small changes, which this method of quality improvement lends itself to, could be easily taken on: *“You can find very*



*small things to work on which you could implement immediately”(Senior Staff Participant).*

When looking into the process of change and how it is approached by the programme teams, it is important to note the positivity and individual/team ownership being encouraged which in turn could have positive impact on staff wellbeing and their attitude towards this new approach as expressed by this staff participant: *“It’s more meaningful as well – not only for students but for staff as well- to see that there is actually some outcome to attending these course committee meetings, and it’s not just another ticky box exercise”*. The new format helped to create a new informal relationship between staff and students, which was viewed positively, and which was a potential catalyst for change.

### *Student involvement*

Students generally felt that their contribution was not limited to answering questions but having a conversation. The overwhelming response throughout was that they felt their voice was being heard, as evidenced in this exchange:

*Student Participant 11: You get your points across a lot better I think.*

*Participant 12: I actually feel like you’re getting listened to... instead of you say it to somebody and then you never hear about it again. Not that that happens often, but it can happen.*

*Participant 11: Yeah , It’s quite proactive. Like right [...] What can [we] do and is it realistic.*

*Participant 12: And you know you are getting heard cuz there’s so many other people....and somebody else - if you’re saying to one of the lecturers or something, they might not agree with you but then another one might. So, you’ve got more than just the one person.*

This is echoed when exploring how involved students felt in joint solution making – all participants spoken to felt they had the opportunity to think of ideas to change and that they were part of that conversation: *“I made a few suggestions and some of the students and some of the staff agreed with me...[it made me feel] really good”*. The simple act of being included reflects well on the expectations we as an institution have of students that they take responsibility for their own learning and development. This correspondingly can aid trust and relationship building within staff/college/student partnerships and create a feeling of empowerment and a more equal balance.

### *Student role in data evaluation*

In some cases, evaluative data that was discussed in some of the CCMs was data from student surveys (mid-year surveys for example) which was presented at the meetings using specific topics. For example, if the topic discussed involved learning resources, the data from surveys with specific questions about learning resources was offered. Although this was not a standard experience, it marks a change in approach to students having access to this kind of data. In some cases, participants did not recall having seen data, and some staff were not wholly in favour of this approach: *“I’m not sure they [students] should be [involved in quantitative data like surveys] ... I’m all for, you know them being aware of things but I think that’s taking it too far and too daunting*

*and perhaps inhibitive*". However, this view was not unanimous and conversely, some staff leading sessions commented on the possibility of making that data available to students in advance of the CCM.

Ultimately, it is students who populate surveys and although typically their involvement in how these are engineered is limited (they are not involved in what questions are asked or when and how they are completed, with the exception of the involvement of the Students' Association in some aspects such as promotion and Association specific question phrasing), there can be a sense of ownership of that data: *Student Participant 7: "I've done a couple of surveys online... I feel like it's a responsibility"*. The change in focus from numbers to qualitative evidence in this area is also interesting viewed from a staff perspective: *Staff Participant 8: "we get data to look at and we're expected to then do something to improve – I don't know if I ever feel like it being a discussion. [data is] quantitative rather than qualitative data, so all we get is the numbers of this... the numbers of that performances this, performances that... there is no real evaluation of some of the qualitative information that's coming through"*.

How change is viewed is discussed in more depth later, however a common thread from staff responses was a wariness about the assumed greater length of time using qualitative data takes. Despite this, there is evidence that the increased quality of data is welcomed by staff:

*"One of the things I noticed as opposed to the tiny course committee meetings where basically the reps came in and gave some feedback. People, students were not focusing in on the things like the price of chips...because it was structured in such a way as they were answering separate set things – set topics... It was actually much more focused- which was really good"*.

#### *Closing and documenting "the feedback loop"*

An essential aspect in the use of any student feedback is ensuring students know what has been done with feedback, can get involved and that we as an institution are checking that the right action has been taken. Some programme teams started off their sessions by talking about changes that had taken place as a result of previous sessions. An example of how students reacted to that knowledge: *"they talked about the things that had happened [after] last year's talk and the things that they had improved, that they'd gotten for example - there has been improvements made obviously from last years. [I felt] Well positive – it means whatever we're saying potentially could improve next year"*.

#### *Including others*

One aspect that is an addition to previous CCM formats, is the inclusion of external partners such as employers relating to the curriculum area being examined. Where this has been possible to facilitate, the impact has been positively welcomed: *Senior Staff Participant 4: "They (other staff/external employers) would also be sitting at tables with students who weren't necessarily from that professional background – but they were able to get equally pertinent comments about placement experience or what their experiences about working with the college, and about how we come around to*

*delivering the courses that we do with their input as much as student's input too. So, it was a very open and frank discussion. It was really very, very useful".*

### *Collective working*

There is evidence of the new CCMs having a positive impact on intra-staff relationships, further demonstrating that strengthening relationships can bring about successful change. Here in this interview excerpt two academic staff members are talking about the benefits of working with different/non-academic staff:

*Staff Participant 11: .... particularly the opportunity always to have some interaction with support staff.*

*Staff Participant 12: They were hearing about our perspective and about the actual courses themselves in a way that they just didn't have...*

*Staff Participant 11: The access- [...] don't have the access to that to be honest. And actually, the support staff fed back that they found it very beneficial.*

Furthermore, the realisation that usually challenges are not in isolation and often similarities can be seen across different curriculum areas, as in this exchange:

*Staff Participant 13: I think what was nice about it was that we were discussing with [tutors] from different areas*

*Staff Participant 13: and...discovering that our problems are*

*Staff Participant 13: similar.*

*Staff Participant 14: and it's just...it's always nice to have exchange*

*Staff Participant 14: exchange of anything is positive and discussion and so- and we are no longer in our little bubbles*

This collaborative effort also has a positive benefit in leading by example, showing different departments working together, potentially encouraging further collaboration with students as shown in this staff participant statement: *"I feel that we have worked so well with other departments as well as the support services coming in - I've never worked with so many support service staff members in a course committee meeting...and I feel it was again a big team spirit and even the students felt that team spirit".* Across every curriculum area, there is evidence of other staff members and a variety of roles in attendance showing clear collective use of feedback and evaluative data.

Aside from the evidence gained in exploring the three main research questions, and grouping results thematically, other findings materialised:

### *Challenges in approach*

As we have seen in this approach, there is the scope and capacity for smaller scale changes to be implemented, which can sometimes have immediate and noticeable effect on the student experience. However, these findings point to challenges with larger and more difficult issues. Staff overall seemed positive and welcoming of the ability and potential for small incremental changes and the impact this has on the student experience, however with larger issues it is highlighted that despite the documenting and evidencing of these issues, the approach seems to have less impact

on them as noted by on senior staff participant: *“We have not been able to, in the long term, address the issues that surfaced under the old system that then came and surfaced in the new system of course committee meetings - some of them are very repetitive and justly so, because they are ongoing issues. and they’re ones that we as individuals cannot fully address. The things that we can’t control are - are at a basic level”.*

Despite a clear endorsement of this new approach to self-evaluation, particularly from heads of school and senior management, there is an aspect missing which fails to be able to address more complex problems which could be within individual curriculum area or college wide issues, as expressed by one senior staff participant: *“Am I seeing the same old problems continuing? To a certain extent, yes. But I am also seeing change”.* However, that this understanding is coming from senior staff committed to the process is still encouraging.

### *Openness and transparency*

Despite the difficulty in finding solutions for larger scale issues, the format and length of the meetings allows for more in-depth conversations and explanations about why these types of issues may not be able to be resolved or immediately addressed:

*Staff Participant 13: And if there’s things about – you know that involves the students- the issues that they raise – we talked about the difficulties and the constraints placed upon us, to timetable or to do this, or to do that.*

*Interviewer: And it felt- probably felt quite good to be able to explain that.*

*Staff Participant 13: yes*

*Interviewer: This is the reason why- we’re not just saying no*

*Staff Participant 13: Yes. Exactly.*

Students echoed this through their understanding of how some decisions are made;

*Student Participant 14: yeah cuz it’s not just a case of them making a decision – it has to go higher up [...] they have to meet criteria [...] yeah so [...]*

*Interviewer: Was that helpful?*

*Student Participant 14: yeah, I mean it’s helpful.*

That there is an opportunity to have conversations like these with students further builds trust and equality in the partnership.

## **Discussion**

Overall, the general findings of this new approach to self-evaluation were found to be positive. To summarise the main findings in line with the research questions:

- How effective is ICUHI’s new approach to course evaluation in engaging students in evaluating and planning improvement?

The new approach is effective as it is considered to promote shared dialogue and meaningful conversations. Through the informal approach taken, an equalising nature of social interactions has taken place. Both staff and students could see the potential

for using the information gathered in these meetings for making change and that it would or has already happened.

- How is data for evaluation created and used, and what is the student role in this?

In some cases, evaluative data that was discussed in some of the CCMs was data from student surveys which was presented at the meetings using specific topics. Although not standard, it is a change in approach to students having access to this kind of data at a more detailed level. Some programme teams began sessions by presenting changes that had taken place as a result of previous sessions, thereby including the students in the impact of their evaluative data.

- To what extent are students and academic staff working collectively in the use of feedback and evaluative data?

There is positive evidence of inter-staff relationship impact, further demonstrating the concept of strengthening relationships to bring about successful change. In the case of student-staff collective working, students generally felt that their contribution was not limited to answering questions but having discussion. They overwhelmingly throughout felt their voice was being heard, that they had the opportunity to think of ideas to change and were part of that conversation.

That this new approach is built on a shared dialogue, where students and staff are having meaningful conversations and respecting each other as experts in their learning experience, has had a positive relationship building impact. Furthermore, the realisation that challenges are usually not in isolation and often similarities can be seen across different curriculum areas.

Further exploring shared experience and seeing the benefit and importance of working together for success, Fielding notes the interdependent nature of teaching and learning is enhanced by dialogic encounters and that its shared responsibility is clear (Fielding, 2001, p.130). In the inclusion and collaboration with students, this making explicit is clear – the student voice and opinion and expertise is needed and a responsibility that is shared in partnership work. This new approach required that both students and staff were learning together – how to use the QI tools and create meaningful dialogue in the evaluative context. Fielding also talks about the democratic nature of this dialogical approach. Where teachers learn not just from each other and their community but perhaps more particularly from their students (Fielding, 2001, p.130).

This perception of learning together further enhances the more equal partnership relationship that is being cultivated. Carey notes that traditional power dynamics of the student/teacher relation can favour the institution, but collaboration requires genuine dialogue between partners (Carey, 2013, p.1302).

Through the opportunity to learn together in this new approach, the traditional power dynamic is not reinforced, but replaced by one of mutual learning and respect of each party's expertise.

Examining individual events, the new approach and dialogical format it employs, is extremely effective in engaging students in both evaluating and planning improvement. However, this is not consistent across curriculum areas. Where some areas are not attracting students to attend or not scheduling course evaluation activity, engagement is low. Some areas experience difficulties with students being on placement at the time of timetabling these events – an example of the academic timetable being led by external factors which do not relate to student need or availability.

There is also a question about to what extent students are involved in planning improvement. Should this be limited to discussing potential ideas for improvement or is there a role for students in creating change besides their role as consumer/participant in their course/the college system?

Despite these concerns, the level of engagement in the activity looked at in this study generally is found to be greater (particularly if you consider numbers of students attending course evaluation events) and more meaningful than previous course self-evaluation exercises employed. The engagement can be considered as more meaningful to both staff and students, both through their continued engagement with the process and at a higher level, the reporting of these events and their impact. Students' feeling of empowerment and of their feeling of having a voice that is listened to is clear.

Although data gathered (the areas focussed on in each evaluative event) is informed largely by statistical data such as survey data and key performance indicators for example, which are largely not available to students (at least in detail), there is also a large focus on qualitative data. This data is created through dialogical means in a collaborative way using question prompts and group facilitation to ensure discussion and to capture a range of voices reflecting the broader student experience. The student role in this is one of collaborator or partner where the dialogue is authentic and constructive. This shift from relying more heavily on metrics such as student survey data can be seen as promoting true partnership and even co-creation:

*In the resultant absence of genuine dialogue between the students and the university, managers rely on unsophisticated student surveys (Carey, 2013, p.1293).*

Which can lead to a tendency to manage expectations to ensure increased student satisfaction rather than engaging in more stimulating learning experiences (Furedi, 2009). It is this intellectual and emotional experience that students participate in which is key to the concept of co-production and real engagement as noted by Carey (2013) and Yorke (as quoted in the overview section). Participation in CCMs not only provides more and richer data that is co-created, but a sense of empowerment and knowledge not previously experienced by students when participating in a more consultative model of participation through surveys. Further development could take the form of looking at how these two methods (traditional all student surveys and more intimate dialogical, co-produced evaluation) could work together, and provide data that gives a more rounded picture of the student experience that could be effectively used for quality improvement.

The extent to which students and staff engage and work collectively to both produce feedback and evaluative data varies between curriculum areas; however, we can be

confident that the evidence points to a more meaningful and collective engagement than in previous iterations of whole course evaluative activity. Although students are the main creators of data used to inform the prompts for discussion (through their participation in surveys), they are not involved in other more direct ways of influencing those prompts. Students' role in collectively using evaluative data to inform solution making is also very positively viewed by both staff and students. There is little evidence of them being involved past the initial stages of discussion of ideas for change.

## Conclusion

In summary, this study has shown a broad enthusiasm for a new approach to whole course self-evaluation and the greater inclusion and working with students to implement this new approach. This kind of approach aligns better to ICUHI's perception of partnership working and how that might be realistically achieved in the context of Further and Higher Education. Although there may be challenges in using these QI methodologies across all areas, such as ensuring time for students and academic staff to attend and staff time to document and work on findings, for the majority this approach is effective at engaging students in evaluating and planning for improvement. There is work still to be done in exploring the potential of the role of the student in the creation and use of data, particularly in the employing of broad college wide surveys.

The extent to which a collaborative approach is being used in working with feedback and evaluative data is very encouraging. As can be seen, where change and impact are directly reported to students through face-to-face dialogues at subsequent events, their understanding and the value of their contribution is made clear which has had a positive effect and may influence their level of engagement further. Providing a platform for honest, inclusive, and meaningful dialogue can have a positive impact on how people work together to shape their future. That future could be an empowering and exciting place.

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