

‘My input was actually being listened to and could lead to real change’: Developing trust through student voice in student-staff partnerships

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Abstract

Student-staff partnership working within higher education is a process in which student voice is critical for success. Trust is frequently identified as fundamental to both student voice and partnership, yet how is trust built and maintained? This project, in which eight student researchers interviewed both staff and students (n = 41) across four diverse institutions in the United Kingdom, was established to explore the implications of trust-building for student voice and partnership working and to capture insights from their experiences. Staff and student reflections on partnership working were collected using narrative inquiry in which participants were invited to explore their perceptions and experiences. Both trust and empathy were identified as key factors for meaningful partnerships alongside a consideration of the impact of power dynamics, reasonable reciprocal expectations, and authenticity. The importance of the findings for impactful student voice strategies is that a focus on trust-building and inclusivity is essential to successfully scale partnership working across higher education.

Introduction

In United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education, there is an increasing focus on how student voice is considered and acted upon to improve students' learning experiences (Hamshire et al., 2023). This engagement takes multiple forms, including student representation, activism, and pedagogical partnerships (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). While student voice is associated with different meanings and practices in higher education (Conner et al., 2023), a central mechanism for fostering meaningful engagement is through student-staff partnerships. These partnerships have the potential to advance inclusion agendas (Bovill et al., 2016), encourage a sense of student belonging and community through the importance of relationships (Matthews et al., 2018), facilitate cultural responsiveness (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019) and inspire new ways of thinking about the curriculum for both students and staff (Peseta et al., 2016). As such, student-staff partnerships are increasingly recognised as valuable reciprocal processes (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014) that amplify student voices and provide deeper insight into students' lived experiences. This significance is further reflected in the expectations of UK regulatory bodies such as the Office for Students and Quality Assurance Agency, which emphasise the inclusion of students in decision making processes.

The success of partnership initiatives is closely tied to the extent to which they empower student voices and integrate the core values of partnership working (Luo et al., 2019). Healey et al. (2014, p.14-15) identify authenticity, inclusivity, empowerment, trust, challenge, and community as fundamental values in partnership work, aligning with broader principles of responsibility, reciprocity, and respect proposed by Cook-Sather et al. (2014). Furthermore, various stages of the partnership process may draw on distinct values over time, spanning from the initial formation of partnerships to their operation, atmosphere, and eventual outcomes (Smith et al., 2021). McConnell (2023, p.8) conceptualises partnership trajectories as dynamic and evolving, emphasising that trust serves as a foundational element in fostering relationships, intentionality, and collaboration between students and staff.

Across the diverse literature exploring student voice activity internationally, the inclusion of and delineation between voice and partnerships has been studied (for example, Conner et al., 2023; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). Despite the significant role of partnership in developing spaces for valuing and listening to students, the specific function of trust in student-staff partnership relationships has not yet been explored in depth. This study directly contributes to the growing discourse by investigating how trust is developed and sustained through student-staff collaboration. The research project was developed in partnership with eight students across four universities in the UK, ensuring that student perspectives were central to the study's design and execution. Furthermore, this paper is co-authored with three of the eight students, embedding student voices not only in the findings but also in the scholarly dissemination of the research. By actively involving students as co-researchers and co-authors, this project exemplifies the very principles of partnership it seeks to analyse. Staff and student reflections on partnership experiences were gathered, and the themes developed from the findings are aimed at those seeking to understand and overcome some of the complexities as well as strengthen the relational aspects of the partnership process. The findings have implications for policies and practices related to amplifying student voice and developing effective and sustainable student-staff partnerships. Moreover, the study's outcomes have implications for institutional policies and practices aimed at amplifying student voices and embedding trust as a cornerstone of collaborative learning environments.

Literature review

Trust is a multidimensional concept that has been extensively researched across many disciplinary areas, including psychology, sociology, organisational behaviour, management, and education (Ghosh et al., 2001). It is a dynamic concept and can be explained as a "relational practice that enables growth, recognition, empowerment, community, and possibility" (Payne et al., 2023, p.142). In the context of student voice and student-staff partnerships, Healey et al., (2014, p.15) elaborate on the value of trust as when "all parties take time to get to know each other, engage in open and honest dialogue and are confident they will be treated with respect and fairness". As such, establishing trust is an enabling tool for listening to students and developing effective student-staff partnership (Healey et al., 2014). The role of mutual respect is also highlighted as a precursor to the development of trust in student-staff partnerships (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018; Kupatadze, 2019), including the belief on both parties involved in the joint endeavour, that the partnership findings will be used ethically and appropriately to enhance institutional developments (Marie & McGowan, 2017).

Trust in the partnership process

Faced with increasing complexity across higher education internationally, trust is integral to the successful operation of higher education institutions (Cho, 2017). Research emphasises the role of trust in cultivating positive evaluations and student satisfaction, even when expectations are unmet (Mallika Appuhamilage & Torii, 2019). To generate feelings of trust between partners, the ethos of student-staff partnership and its accompanying expectations should be made explicit at the outset within an environment that values the perspectives of all (Cotton et al., 2013; Høgdaal et al., 2021). Embodying a culture of trust within institutional structures can be complex (Bormann et al., 2021), as educational systems are often criticised for their inherent oppression, posing challenges to the development of trust, especially among diverse educational communities.

Trust in the partnership dynamics

Building trust between members of the partnership, i.e., between staff and students and between students and staff members, is essential. This process of trust building includes an emphasis on the relational nature of partnership working and the behavioural expectations that help partners manage some of the inherent uncertainty associated with student-staff partnerships (Smith et al., 2023; Marquis et al., 2017) and the perceived risks of working in this manner so that they can seek to maximise the benefits (Jones & George, 1998). Trust developed within the group dynamic reflects the shift from a dichotomous 'us and them' mentality (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2018) towards a more unified and reciprocal relationship between partners.

A pre-existing connection with partnership members, such as tutor and tutee, can accelerate the process of trust-building (Ali et al., 2021) however, it can also lead to inequities in the student-staff partnership (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020) with a lack of cohort representation and bias towards certain student groups being embedded into projects. Power dynamics within student-staff partnerships can pose significant challenges which often manifest in the form of hierarchical structures where staff members hold more authority and influence over decision-making processes. This imbalance can hinder genuine collaboration and limit the contributions of students who may feel less empowered to voice their opinions or challenge existing norms. Developing a sense of empathy with other members of the partnership is an important factor that helps to reduce the structural power differentials and establish shared responsibilities (Ali et al., 2021). Further, members of the partnership must trust themselves (Kligyte et al., 2023) and their capacity to contribute meaningfully to the project.

Trust in the partnership outcomes

Student-staff partnership is an inherently uncertain process, with partnership duration ranging from several weeks to operating continually, of variable sizes from a one-to-one relationship to large multi-disciplinary teams from across the institution (Matthews, 2017). The ability of participants to put their trust in the outcomes of the partnership is linked to two factors: first, the initial expectations and second, the potential impact of the partnership

output or outcome for the institution (Healey and Healey, 2018). As such, context matters, and those facilitating a student-staff partnership must consider how students are engaged and included as valued members of the team. Further, many students are attracted to student-staff partnerships due to the skill development opportunities, flexibility, and recognition that they offer (Roy et al., 2023).

Research Method

The purpose of this study was to explore staff and students' perceptions and experiences of partnership working at four universities: two research intensive institutes, and two teaching focused. The four institutions represent a mix of regional and metropolitan universities within the UK, varying in size, research focus, teaching emphasis and student demographics, providing a diverse institutional context for the study. Institutional ethical approvals were received for the study. To reduce the potential barriers associated with the research interview process and to ensure that the student voice was included in all aspects of the project, two student researchers were trained at each institution to undertake the interviews. Data were collected using narrative online interviews via Microsoft Teams in which participants were encouraged with a narrative prompt to tell their stories, beginning wherever they felt was most appropriate (Gubrium, 1993). The goal of these online narrative interviews was to gain detailed information about current partnership practices and projects at each institution rather than to get answers to specific questions to explore the underlying partnership philosophy. As such, there was no schedule or set of questions, but the narrative prompt provided an opportunity for staff and students to speak about themselves in relation to their experiences over time and convey their partnership experiences from their point of view. The exact form of words of the narrative prompt differed slightly at each institution; however, it was broadly:

"I would like you to tell the story of your experiences of student partnership. Please begin and end wherever is best for you and include anything that you believe is important for the research team to know."

This narrative approach provided opportunities for the interviewees to explore their own stories and experiences and describe how both academic and personal circumstances had influenced their experiences. As such, this narrative space allowed for the exploration of individual perspectives as well as enabling a holistic picture of their overarching experiences to emerge.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit institutional partnership project scheme leaders, staff members who have led partnership projects as part of a scheme, and students who have worked on partnership projects at each institution. Recruitment was conducted via internal emails inviting students and staff to participate. There was no pilot testing due to the open nature of the interviews and no repeat interviews due to the scope and timeframe of the research study. The online interviews were recorded and transcribed within Microsoft Teams across the four institutions. To ensure accuracy, the transcripts were subsequently reviewed alongside the video recording, and any discrepancies and omissions were identified and

corrected. Across the four institutions, 22 staff interviews and 19 student interviews were completed, and these interviews were 30 – 60 minutes in duration.

The narrative space created within the interviews gave both staff and students the opportunity to explore wide-ranging and uniquely personal partnership experiences. All interview participants generously shared their thoughts and feelings as well as detailed their perceived barriers and facilitators to effective partnership working.

A thematic analysis was developed from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021) using a framework analysis similar to Ritchie and Spencer (2002). Initially, data were independently analysed and coded by members of the research team at each institution. Following this individual coding process, themes from each institution were discussed across the data sets and agreed upon during a three-hour intensive multi-institute collaborative analysis event. Therefore, themes were identified, discussed, and verified by both student and staff researchers to achieve cross-referencing and data saturation.

It was particularly important to acknowledge the positionality of both the staff researchers occupying different academic developer roles within their institutions and the positionality of student researchers studying within these institutions. Participants were employed, colleagues or fellow students, thus creating the need for attention to the internal political and social sensitivity of the study. Whilst the researchers were not direct members of the study population, it was appropriate to recognise that we shared a unique space between insider and outsider (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Through adopting a highly qualitative methodology and holding regular reflexive research meetings within and across the four institutions, we attempted to address this duality and identify the complexities this presented.

Findings

Despite the diversity of the four institutions included in the study, the overall findings demonstrate significant commonality in staff and student perceptions and experiences. The iterative, thematic analysis of the data set resulted in the development of a global theme of trust, with sub-themes of realistic expectations, power dynamics, and impact (ways of working from the onset of a project) followed by empathy, inclusivity, authenticity (behavioural actions that affect partnership working).

Based on the data from this study, and contemporary literature, we propose a conceptual model as a way of considering trust building in partnership working, framed by the six underlying sub-themes identified within the narrative data, represented in Figure 1 below. We suggest that the presence of six components inherent within student-staff partnerships will support positive experiences for all and build trust within the partnership. The matrix indicates that all of the components are interconnected, none are of more or less important, and that they need to be considered collectively as contributing to the central goal of building trust within the partnership.

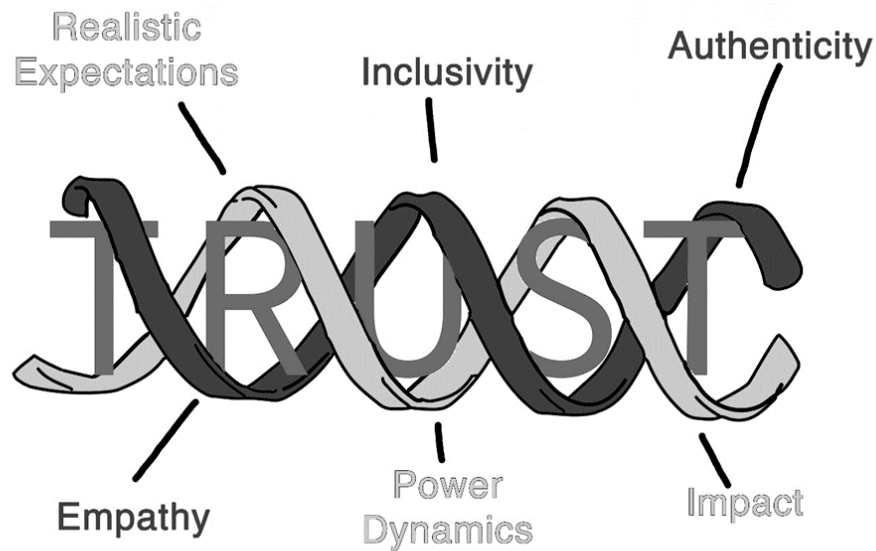


Figure 1: The Trust Matrix of student-staff partnership working.

Trust

Both staff and students repeatedly referenced trust and trustworthiness, explicitly and implicitly within their reflections on working effectively together in partnership to enhance educational provision. Building trust within an inclusive environment that provided spaces to listen to and value all members of the partnership team was identified as fundamental to effective partnership working. Setting clear expectations and being clear about the context was important, and this needed to be facilitated through effective communication, as detailed by a member of staff at Institution 2:

I2 Staff 3: Trust is key, and I think you have to be really careful with your language. So that you don't break that trust because, you know, words can have a lasting impact.

This sentiment was echoed within the interviews of members of staff at Institution 3, who also acknowledged that trust could only be built with students if the staff were approachable and receptive to listening to student voices:

I3 Staff 2: Trust can only build upon transparency, and so to be open about it can help to build a foundation.

Students also highlighted the importance of trust and openness to enable effective partnership working; it was noted that it was vital that staff members trusted that students were also committed to partnership working:

I1 Student 2: I could very clearly see that [staff partner] was so passionate about what they were doing and getting it right, and there just needed to be a bit more trust there that you got this like, yeah, I was a student but like we got accepted from our interviews for a reason we're equally as passionate about this, we care as much as you about getting it right.

Trust was also identified as being essential when partnerships were not progressing as anticipated. When trust had been established within the partnership, it created a space in which staff and students could have difficult conversations with mutual respect to resolve difficulties:

I2 Staff 5: I think, trust is that people feel like they can say what they need to say, and that's being done in within a safe environment, and that there's no judgement, and that it's okay to disagree, and that you will be able to resolve that disagreement in a proper manner. You know, you've got to trust that you can disagree because a lot of this is about having courageous conversations, and if you can't have those because there's no trust, then that's quite problematic. But I think you know fundamentally it's about also feeling like you can get it wrong, and there's gonna be no repercussion to that, and I think that's the fundamental for me.

Realistic expectations

Across the dataset, setting realistic expectations was identified as fundamental to establishing trust and building student-staff relationships. All parties recounted entering partnerships with high expectations, and throughout the partnership, have had to become flexible as the reality of the situation was often different from what was first imagined.

I2 Staff 5: There is also recognition that partnership work isn't necessarily always gonna work like that. There are gonna be differing opinions in a room.

Several students interviewed commented about the partnerships not being what they expected and having poor experiences because of this. Many of the anecdotes linked a poor understanding of the project at the outset, to disappointment as the project progressed.

I1 Student 4: I think it's a fantastic [partnership] initiative but it felt clearly the job description and the job I was being asked to do were very different.[...] It was an attractive prospect [...] but on reflection, it was significantly different from the job that I applied for and I guess the learning for this project [...] might be to assess more thoroughly the work that students are going to be invited to do.

Both students and staff also identified the importance of direction and scaffolding in setting the agenda of the partnership. While it was noted that giving students space to be heard and

make decisions about what would happen within the partnership was important, overall direction from the staff was integral for both students and staff.

I4 Staff 1: I think we [staff] are better saying: ‘actually we need to be more honest with students’ [and] say: ‘this is the direction’; [and] within that spectrum you [students] can choose this.

I3 Student 4: Well, I guess, in terms of like each project at the start, it can be a bit overwhelming because, especially within the bigger groups, because [...] there’s so many ideas, and you’re kind of trying to. You know, narrow it down to something that is doable and feasible. And on the budget and within everyone’s time constraints.

Power dynamics

The issue of power dynamics was a significant theme that ran through many of the interviews from the dataset. In creating a successful partnership, it was noted in both staff and student narratives that the power imbalance has to be acknowledged, and deliberate acts taken to counteract the imbalance. These deliberate acts are an equal level of responsibility by both staff and students to create the environment for a positive partnership.

I4 Staff 5: Everything’s equal. It’s never fully equal, and that’s important to recognise. So, you’re right, we do need to be engaging with staff more, including making them recognise that they are always the more powerful one in the partnership and they have to make deliberate choices and practice. Do deliberate things to rebalance and redress that inherent imbalance.

When levelled power dynamics are discussed and established, both staff and students described the positive impact this had on them as individuals and within their partnership. Feeling valid and heard was noted multiple times throughout the dataset as the positive impact of transparent power dynamics.

I1 Student 6: As a student like I do feel like very accommodated and very welcomed into those spaces by the staff. Like there’s always an air of you are equals and we care about what you have to say. You know, there was never sort of like, oh, you’re a lowly student or something like that. [...] you felt like your opinion was valid and you felt listened to and that you were maybe making a difference to the uni, how it ends and stuff, you know, at least a little bit.

Levelling the power dynamic is not always an easy task for academic developers to engage with; multiple staff talked about their personal challenges in adapting their behaviour from the classroom to working in partnership with students, for example:

I3 Staff 3: So, I suppose... the main kind of things that I learned would be around letting go.

Impact

I4 Student 6: Knowing that my input was actually being listened to and could lead to real changes in the curriculum and how the department approached certain things was incredibly rewarding.

Many of the student participants commented on the importance of recognition, especially that their efforts were both valued and impactful. This led to a sense of meaning and motivation, reinforcing their commitment to the shared goals of the partnership, and strengthening students' sense of pride and accomplishment. Leaving the legacy of positive change for future cohorts gave one student (I3 student 5) a sense of reward from their partnership work, and another student explained,

I1 Student 2: If I can see that my work has been implemented and used and valued and 100%, that's gonna make me more likely to put more effort in next time.

Furthermore, when students and staff saw that their work had been impactful, their trust in the institution became strengthened, and they understood that their efforts had created a lasting outcome for future cohorts.

I3 Student 5: It felt really rewarding. Like you're actually doing something worthwhile. And you're actually doing something that is leaving an impact.

I3 Student 4: It feels like we actually created change, [...] hopefully benefit[ing] the future of our course.

Similarly, staff partners expressed that their involvement created legacy for the institutional community:

I3 Staff 3: the long-lasting effect that can impact on the wider community and by the student community and by the kind of, institutional community.

For staff participants, the impact of their partnership work contributed beyond the anticipated aims of the project, such as to a 'change in attitudes, and culture' (I4 staff 2), developing a 'joined shared vision [...] and the ability to take an initial idea in a sustained manner to continue delivering together' (I2 staff 3), demonstrating the longevity of potential impact.

Empathy

I2 Staff 2: When you actually talk openly with students [...] you really get to understand what their challenges are. And it's so easy to assume that it's the students'

fault that you know, *“this is a fantastic opportunity, you should get the most out of university,”* but we do not understand until we talk [about] what they’re really going through.

The ability to listen to, and understand each other, in terms of commitments, situation and connection on a more personal level than in traditional learner-teacher relationships arose as a key theme across the data. Participants spoke of the enabling actions that other parties took, as well as those actions that prevented or diminished the spirit of empathy and care. The student participants emphasised the importance of providing a safe space to enable them to speak and be heard and needed the partnership space to be safe and confidential; for example, one student expressed:

I3 Student 4: I think that’s really important, that we knew it was a safe place to actually say, like, *“Look, we felt really unheard. We felt a bit put down in this situation, and we wanted to communicate that.”*

For other student participants, staff appreciation of their workload helped them to feel that their time was valued and that it was going to be okay to step back from the partnership temporarily without judgement. Conversely, when staff expressed their workload to students, this possibly instigated a sense of unease, causing a perception of a lack of empathy, one student participant explained:

I1 Student 4: Everybody on the project spoke all the time about how busy they were constantly. So, there was an impression that they were not available to support.

Intentionality was certainly an enabler in creating a shared language of empathy, such as making time to check in on a personal level and allowing for flexibility within the project if one partner had to prioritise other commitments. However, power dynamics posed a risk in terms of diminishing empathy, where students were asked to carry out tasks outside of the expectations of the job role, resulting in a sense of feeling devalued.

Inclusivity

The findings indicate that it is important to establish a sense of inclusivity for all members of the partnership for it to thrive. This value is intricately linked to addressing the structural power dynamics during the project and ensuring that all voices are valued. Where an inclusive environment had been created, students remarked on feelings of empowerment and satisfaction that they were being heard, for example:

I3 Student 4: they’re [staff] always open to listen to anything you’ve got to say, and any anything you want to raise with them.

I3 Student 5: I think one of the highest is the feeling of being heard as a student. It gives self-determination.

Staff partners often commented on the importance of engaging underrepresented student groups to understand their experience and some of the challenges that they face, recognising that student-staff partnerships should actively seek to include such students and accommodate some of the barriers to participation, e.g., commuting students, students working part-time. Making time to ensure that students' voices were heard was fundamental to this:

I2 Staff 2: But it's only when talking to students that you understand the real challenges that they face, and I don't know that our academics really understand that.

Further, where inclusivity had been achieved, staff noted that it reduced the pressure on students to contribute and fostered creativity by allowing a space for all voices:

I1 Staff 4: There is a special joy in there, and there is a special community that's grown from it, not by any sort of hierarchy or I don't know any other pressure. [...] There is no major expectation on anyone and therefore, it opens it up that anyone and everyone can contribute. And whatever you do, do, we'll help. And then it blossoms from there.

The consensus amongst interviewees was that it was the role of the staff members to create an inclusive atmosphere in the partnership. Partly, this links to the power differential between staff and students that student-staff partnerships seek to dissolve, without an active effort on behalf of the more powerful partner, an inclusive atmosphere cannot be achieved.

Authenticity

Interviewees discussed authenticity in two key respects. Firstly, in terms of establishing authenticity within the auspices of the student-staff partnership:

I2 Staff 4: The most important thing is to strike up that rapport, build the trust, be authentic. If you're not authentic, people will see through. You've gotta be yourself and try just try to make that connection with the students so that they trust you enough to speak to you. In that way then if they feel comfortable with you, they will share their ideas, and they will be genuine back to you as well and that is so, so valuable.

Secondly, both student and staff interviewees discussed that the authenticity of motives for participating in student-staff partnership work was an important contributor to establishing trust. Whilst many students mentioned the benefits of remuneration for the work, in most

cases, this was a secondary consideration to their genuine interest in the project topic. An example of student interest in the partnership topic is given in the following quote:

I4 Student 4: I was actually quite interested in like how AI was affecting education because I saw it being used all around me.

Staff members were more likely to mention some degree of instrumentalisation, with some concerns raised related to student-staff partnership participation being viewed as criteria for promotion:

I4 Staff 2: I think some people think about partnership as a thing to do, and it's like, well, you're thinking about it the wrong way.

The partnerships that the interviewees described to the researchers highlighted the importance of authenticity on both sides as a factor in successful student-staff partnerships.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to critically explore student and staff reflections on partnership working and perceptions of their roles, to identify the central values of their partnerships. Each participant gave generously of their time and had a commitment to supporting staff-student partnership working; in selecting their comments to illustrate the themes presented here we do not intend to be critical of them or their efforts to support partnership working. The participants were all self-selecting in response to an email invitation to explore partnership working. Utilising a narrative methodology created a space in which participants could discuss whatever was important to their own experiences, providing insights into the fundamental importance of trust-building within partnership work.

Our findings have revealed challenges and limitations highlighting that in some partnership instances trust had broken down, and power disparity was reinforced (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017); aligning with others' findings that emphasise the centrality of relational aspects of student-staff partnerships and student voice (Conner et al., 2023). In order to address the breakdown of trust, our findings showed that setting realistic expectations, acknowledging the impact of power dynamics and the recognition of all voices were found to be essential within a partnership 'culture' and needed to be established through the presence of empathy, inclusivity, and authenticity.

Trust is an outcome, resulting from the enactment of values across the partnership life cycle, for example, where the values of partnership are established then trust is created (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Bovill, 2019). It significantly impacts students' emotional connection (Komljenovic, 2019), perceived service quality (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001), satisfaction (Rojas-Mendez et al., 2009), and loyalty to the university (Latif et al., 2019). **Authenticity** is an important indicator that those involved have engaged with the project with clear **expectations** and understanding of their motivation and ability to contribute to the student-staff partnership. This authenticity is linked with the understanding that all parties will aim to step outside of existing positions of power, inherent in the university structures and effect **impactful** change. It is this appreciation, combined with a mutual respect (Kupatadze, 2019) that makes it possible to create an atmosphere of **inclusivity** for all parties. Student partners

having a two-directional fit (O'Neill, 2018) with staff partners, the commitment, reliability, competence, and expertise of their staff partners is an indicator of the **power dynamics** having been addressed within a partnership and shows the level of trust between partners. **Empathy** surrounding language and the use of constructive feedback (Yeager et al., 2014) helps to address issues of mistrust between partners. Both staff and student partners have a responsibility not to use their power carelessly within this setting.

The Trust Matrix (Figure 1) includes the six key sub-themes that came from the narrative data. The sub-themes are divided into two strands, like that of DNA, that surround trust. The darker strand looking at behavioural actions and the lighter strand addressing ways to work from the onset of a project. The viewer can engage with the matrix to consider the key and equal themes that when enacted together build trust between staff and students, helping them to improve their own partnership skills.

Conclusion

This study explored the role of trust within student-staff partnerships and the findings have been conceptualised into a trust matrix. Contributing to the literature on trust building within student-staff partnerships this study provides insights into the complex interplay across the six components of the Trust Matrix (Figure 1). The role and position of both staff and students has significant potential in terms of facilitating partnerships, as well as identifying and intervening where support is required across the institutions in this study. Whilst it is noted that providing structured support for university staff to build trust through student-led partnership can provide spaces for students to matter on their own terms and staff can become active allies (Hamshire and Forsyth, 2024); trust and methods of facilitating trust-building are currently underexplored in higher education (Sutherland et al. 2023) leading to a gap in the research literature.

The findings of this study have identified that higher education practitioners need to ensure that spaces for authentic student voice are intentionally created, and that those involved need to be equipped with a range of skills and attributes for this facilitative work, such as mediating, negotiating, advocating, and offering a third-party perspective.

These findings have several implications for those supporting student-staff partnership work and amplifying student voice activity as well as opportunities for further research, including:

1. Ensure that staff are prepared for student-staff partnership working. At least in the early stages, they are expected to take the lead in providing an environment that facilitates the partnership and set expectations to build trust and respect; by ensuring that students voices are valued.
2. Agree the expectations of student-staff partnership working with both staff and students so that all partners are given an opportunity to express their opinions at the outset. This may include completing a partnership agreement that outlines the scope of the partnership, noting the communication preferences of the participants, and the availability of all parties.

3. Exploring techniques to reduce the power inequalities inherent in the roles of staff and students throughout the partnership. For example, encouraging students to lead on parts or all of the meetings and encouraging students to develop project communications to ensure that their voices are prominent.
4. Consider how participants are recognised, both within and beyond the immediate project, such as through institutional dissemination opportunities, co-authored publications, external recognition schemes, and providing open references for career development.

The findings from this study are drawn from a relatively small sample at four UK institutions therefore care should be taken not to over-generalise as the student-staff partnership context varies significantly. Institutions that contributed to the study were a mix of research and teaching intensive universities, with student bodies ranging from around 18,000 students to around 44,000 students. In each, the process of recruiting students to work with academics on research projects varied but typically included a role description which was drafted for the project, and a selection and interview process. However, despite the differences in the institutional environment the empirical work undertaken at each institution generated convergent findings and based on both this study and previous partnership work with colleagues and students (Hamshire and Forsyth, 2024). We suggest that further research exploring how to build and maintain trust should be a central component of student voice and engagement work.

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Disclosure statement

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