The benefits and challenges of inclusive student-staff partnerships via an Inclusive Reciprocal Insight Scheme (IRIS)

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Abstract

Northumbria University's Inclusive Reciprocal Insight Scheme (IRIS) aims to form meaningful student-staff partnerships to allow for knowledge exchange between the matched Student Inclusion Consultant (SIC) and the senior, often non-student facing, university staff member. The opportunity to influence decision makers enables transformational conversations which can lead to the removal of barriers to access, participation and success in Higher Education. SICs offer a wide range of lived experience from being part of underrepresented groups, and the scheme allows them to build their networks through an element of experiential learning, applying and developing their employability skills in a professional context. Surveys and participant feedback evidence the success of IRIS, which is well regarded within the institution as being a valuable and flexible opportunity to improve professional practice, as well as offering the chance to help shape the institutional culture.

Introduction

Student voice is a vital pillar of Northumbria University, ensuring that all students are represented and that as many barriers to Higher Education as possible are addressed or removed. Student-staff partnerships are a key mechanism for how we amplify student voice, and one of the ways this is championed is through our Student Inclusion Consultant (SIC) scheme.

SICs are current students with lived experience of being part of an underrepresented group. The scheme offers flexible, paid opportunities to work on projects that are strongly aligned to Northumbria's 2024-25 to 2027-28 Access and Participation Plan (APP) objectives. In practice this can include reviewing current practices, both within and outside of the curriculum, and working with staff as partners to further an inclusive culture and student experience.

A key feature of the SIC role is the opportunity to take part in an Inclusive Reciprocal Insight Scheme (IRIS). This is centred around a partnership between a senior, and often non-student facing, university staff member and a SIC, whereby meaningful and transformative conversations are facilitated with the intention of influencing change at a strategic level. IRIS will expand and include a wider range of staff members, however, a core aim of IRIS has always been to influence decision makers utilising the lived experience of students, and so it has been beneficial to involve senior members of staff, who are often not directly student facing, to provide insight that they would not ordinarily get during their day-to-day work. There is

ownership on both sides of IRIS partnerships, with participants asked to enter the process with a willingness to learn, to challenge and to be challenged. IRIS is underpinned by the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) and takes a transformative pedagogic approach to create learning environments that allow dialogue and reflection to take place.

The principles of IRIS align with Costa and Kallick's Critical Friend Theory (1993) which centres on honest conversations leading to constructive feedback and improvement. Bates (2019, p. 171) notes that:

> *"...The role of critical friendship...is less formal than mentoring or coaching and can be best described as a professional undertaking based on mutual regard and a willingness to question and challenge".*

Furthermore, Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill (2019) position student–staff partnership as a movement for cultural change in Higher Education, one that challenges entrenched hierarchies and offers a values-based, transformative alternative to traditional pedagogies.

One of the benefits to SICs taking part in IRIS is the opportunity to build their networks through an element of experiential learning. How this translates in practice can vary between partnerships – for example recent staff and SICs taking part have co-presented at a conference while another pair has focused on a problem-solving approach to a campus estate issue in a space that the SIC was familiar with and could share valuable insight on. The common thread is that IRIS facilitates students to apply their existing SIC learning in a professional context. Brooks and Youngson (2014) highlight that meaningful work experience is not only beneficial for skills development but also reinforces students' sense of identity as capable professionals. Activities undertaken via IRIS help SICs to build their CVs with the development of soft and hard skills and access to senior professional references, which are of note for those underrepresented students where such capital may not otherwise exist.

As the name of the scheme suggests, a key element of IRIS is the fact that it is reciprocal. The staff members who engage in IRIS gain authentic insight into lived experiences that facilitates the opportunity to learn from students and to be challenged from a different perspective. This encourages a wider breadth of knowledge in their decision making with peers and colleagues. It also provides greater awareness of the actions they can take and the influence that they can have in removing barriers using their position as a senior member of staff.

These benefits are summarised by this staff participant's reflection on their involvement in 2024-25:

> *"Ultimately (taking part) has enabled me to learn from and understand the barriers that exist for students across much wider elements of the student experience and that when we are looking at embedding experiential learning more widely there is much to consider before it is going to be accessible for everyone. This shapes my thinking and the conversations I have, and contribute to, in strategic committees as my perspective on the work needed to operationalise this in an inclusive way has advanced thanks to my student's willingness and openness around sharing experiences".*

The themes identified here are further supported by the pre- and post-survey data from 2024-25 where 83% of staff participants strongly agreed that "working with a SIC provided me with challenge from a different perspective". Furthermore, 67% of staff from the same cohort strongly agreed that "IRIS provided me with authentic insight into students' lived experiences that will inform my practice". In the same year, 75% of SICs believed that "staff / student partnership work undertaken via IRIS makes a positive impact on the student experience" and 100% "felt able to provide authentic insight into the current student experience". Those who did respond "strongly agree" responded "agree".

IRIS surveys are conducted before, during and after the activity has taken place to feed into the evaluation. The questions asked are heavily aligned to TASO's (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education) Access and Success Questionnaire which provides a set of validated survey scales used by the Higher Education sector to evaluate access and student success activities. These surveys, in conjunction with theory of change workshops, help identify any challenges that partners have faced. Some examples of challenges faced by IRIS matches include:

- Scheduling and logistics issues, which were addressed by effective communication and a flexible approach on both sides
- Uncertainty from SICs around how they could make an impact, and anxiety as to whether they were being productive, which was resolved after initial conversations between the matches, as well as conversations to close the feedback loop and demonstrate what they were achieving

Background and Rationale

IRIS was established in 2021-22 and was initially funded through the Vice-Chancellor's (VC) Diversity and Inclusion Fund as an initiative which would feed learning into the EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) Committee. The intention was that the scheme could be replicated at more local levels where key gaps were identified in future APP or Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) data, if found successful.

Concurrently the impact and profile of the ongoing SIC scheme was gaining internal recognition, and so the decision was made to invite students from that scheme to take part in the pilot. There were 10 staff from various faculties and services and 10 SICs who took part. This integration of complementary schemes had the dual benefit of providing additional opportunities for SICs, who by then were familiar with "students as partners" ways of working, and ensured staff were more readily engaged based on their prior knowledge and awareness of the SIC scheme.

Feedback from the pilot was largely positive, with one staff member commenting that IRIS:

"provided a real insight into the student experience that continued to help shape my understanding and to inform my approach when making changes to the service that we provide".

A SIC taking part in the same pilot observed that:

"(Taking part) made me realise that the university listens and is interested in what students have to say".

One example of a meaningful impact of the pilot can be seen in the enhanced student experience of those based at Northumbria's London Campus. Largely influenced from IRIS discussions between a SIC based there and a staff member leading the Accessibility and Inclusion service, there is now an established lead specifically for London within the Student Accessibility Team. Furthermore, the SIC's voice informed the design and implementation of our refined approach to student induction with the intention of bringing parity of knowledge for all students across all campuses.

Subsequent iterations of IRIS have been wholly embedded into the SIC framework, which is now funded by, and aligned with, our APP. Despite these adaptations in practice, IRIS continues to be guided by the aims of that pilot, which are to: (a) contribute to the enhancement of an inclusive environment for students by supporting transformational conversations which provide senior members of staff with an opportunity to gain insight into the current lived experience of a specific cohort of students; and (b) enable underrepresented students to build networks with high-profile staff members and gain key employability skills such as professionalism, confidentiality, time management and confidence.

To date, there have been over 50 individuals taking part in IRIS including some instances of returning staff and SICs. Throughout this time, some of the lived experience of SICs has included mature students, those with caring responsibilities, neurodiverse students and commuters. From the staff side, our Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education, Dean of Students and some Heads of Services have engaged with IRIS over the following timeframes:

- 2021-22 (10 staff and 10 SICs)
- 2022-23 (7 staff and 7 SICs)
- 2023-24 (7 staff and 7 SICs)
- 2024-25 (7 staff and 7 SICs)

Individuals returning can be viewed as a positive thing since they have benefited from their experience and are open to furthering this with a different match. On a rare occasion where there were fewer SICs than staff expressing interest, priority was given to a staff member who had not taken part before.

IRIS in Practice

The process begins by recruiting staff and SICs in semester one to ensure training, facilitated one-to-one meetings and group sessions can begin in semester two. SICs are first appointed to IRIS through their broader SIC onboarding process. The intention is that every SIC who would like to take part can do so. Therefore, the recruitment of staff to ensure the numbers

match is central to ensuring this intention can be realised. This is largely addressed through the delivery of online and on-campus expression of interest sessions to encourage engagement from staff. These sessions discuss previous IRIS impacts and provide an opportunity for the staff to ask questions of some of the Senior SICs who have previously taken part.

Once staff have been appointed, training sessions are delivered to the staff group and to the SIC group that focus more closely on respective roles and responsibilities as well as identifying ways that staff can ensure their IRIS partner feels valued and empowered. By virtue of the students taking part in IRIS being paid (as SICs), the power imbalance that can occur in partnership ways of working is somewhat mitigated.

A Microsoft Teams site is then created for the IRIS staff members to create a community of practice and encourage peer engagement. SICs also have a dedicated Microsoft Teams channel for support and discussion.

Based on discussion and, sometimes, prior knowledge of the participants, the IRIS Coordinator identifies where the suitable matches might exist. Working within a less restrictive third space environment, and taking an interdisciplinary approach to their work, ensures the IRIS Coordinator can draw on their strong institutional networks, strategic understanding and sector knowledge effectively when matching. Due diligence is paid with staff consulted on whether there is any conflict of interest between themselves and the student to ensure an honest and meaningful environment is established at the outset. Following a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, staff and SICs are asked to provide a short bio and photo of themselves which is shared with their match ahead of their introduction. SIC feedback highlighted that this approach is "helpful" because it "reduces anxiety in the run-up to the meeting".

Staff and SICs are asked to complete a contracting template which outlines their goals and expectations of taking part alongside more nuanced detail related to their meeting and communication preferences. They are asked to bring this to the introductory meeting, which is facilitated by the IRIS Coordinator, where it is discussed in more detail. This process has been noted by one SIC as particularly useful as it helped them "understand what [they] wanted to achieve" and set out a "clear accessible structure" for their partnership.

Power relations are a consideration, and potential challenge, with IRIS. An activity that was initiated in the pilot, and which continues, is for each staff member and each SIC to consider an artefact related to their identity which they feel comfortable to share at this introductory meeting. The objective of this activity is to provide both SICs and staff with a sense of agency in allowing them to choose what they share to help address notions of a power imbalance. There is a vulnerability in sharing, and this activity highlights the cornerstone of relational pedagogy on which IRIS was established. It furthers the development of a sense of belonging and builds trust on both sides from the outset. Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) found partnerships "positively shifted traditional power dynamics" between students and the staff they worked with. This was because of the reciprocity in partnership, which "subverts the traditional power hierarchy" (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). This can be seen in our IRIS

partnerships, and while there can be differences in power imbalances between pairs, staff and SICs approach IRIS with an open mind to learn and work beyond the traditional hierarchical roles.

Thereafter it is the responsibility of the participants to schedule future meetings to have the intended impactful conversations that will lead to positive change at Northumbria. There is no minimum or maximum number of meetings that IRIS matches must commit to, this is decided on a pair-by-pair basis and can be reviewed throughout the partnership. Survey results from 2024-25 participants identified that most met more than six times across a six-month timeframe. Examples of meetings from different pairs include attending the Celebration of Black British Women's Writing event together, talking while walking around campus grounds to create a more relaxed and open conversation, and attending events organised by the Students' Union. These meetings have been stated by several staff members as "time generative" due to the insights they gain enhancing their ability to carry out their duties.

Reflection and Feedback

IRIS is a constant cycle of reflection and evaluation. Beyond the introductory meeting, there are further group sessions, including a mid-point review session in April which is focused on facilitating impactful conversations with the wider community of practice. This provides the SICs with confidence that their voice and opinions are valued in a space beyond their own partnership and enables staff to identify themes emerging from the wider group. The 2023-24 mid-point review adopted a constructivist approach in the delivery of a zine-making workshop where staff and students were asked to create a collaborative reflection of their experiences to date. This creative method of zine-making (Desyllas and Sinclair, 2013) encouraged authentic and meaningful conversations to take place within an environment where some were comfortable and some felt more challenged. While making the zines, participants were free to talk with others about their experiences. This session was very well received, with participants feeding back that they enjoyed having another way to express themselves with a focused activity that grounded them in the present. The outputs of this session can be seen here:

Figure 1: Photograph of zines from the session
(https://doi.org/10.25398/rd.northumbria.c.7587680.v1)

The mid-point review for 2024-25 focused on the co-creation of an IRIS Theory of Change aligned to the Office for Students' (OfS) regulatory requirements. The OfS recommended that theories of change should be included in providers' APPs to show that thinking had been aligned and a considered and evidenced approach was taken for its implementation.

This workshop allowed participants to reflect not only on the success of IRIS in terms of impact and engaging student voice, but the reasons behind the success. Understanding why IRIS has had the impact that it has allows for its future development to ensure that it not only continues but grows.

Aside from collaborative sessions, feedback is always gathered from both the staff and the SICs who take part. This has taken the form of surveys, interviews and a series of "letters to…", which are a new form of creative enquiry that the community is exploring. The letters are written by SICs and are addressed to IRIS. They reflect on their reasons for being a SIC and for taking part in IRIS, discussing their experiences and what they have gained both personally and professionally. The following extract from one of these letters demonstrates the impact that IRIS can have:

> *"IRIS has also allowed the opportunity to be a part of true student-staff partnerships. These partnerships have fostered true co-creation where both voices are equal leading to positive outcomes. This has led to an influence in my graduate decisions. I have one year left of my degree, and I now have to consider all my post-graduate employment options. I initially wanted to be a barrister, but after actually studying law, I decided to become a solicitor instead. However, since becoming a SIC and being involved in IRIS, I'm considering applying to do a PhD within the university with the ultimate goal of working within Higher Education, ideally at Northumbria, where I can continue to work on EDI projects and promoting accessible and inclusive practices".*

Staff feedback highlights the accessibility of the scheme, and the positive impact that engaging with SICs can provide for their practice and the institutional culture:

> *"For me, it was about meeting students as well, and really understanding about their lived experience, listening to their stories, understanding what their experience of being in Northumbria was like. And in a very kind of easy way, so there was something about the informality and the fact that it was up to us to organise when we would meet and the way that we did that".*

> *"It is not something that is suddenly going to take up a huge amount of your time, it…actually gained me back time in places because if I had to do that work…I would have spent 10 times longer doing it whereas I had an expert in [the SIC]".*

> *"…That voice can challenge and shape our institutional culture. The principles of mutual exchange, insight, and respectful challenge are central".*

Understanding Success and Future Development

The recent Theory of Change workshop clearly indicated that there is interest from both staff and SICs in IRIS being upscaled. IRIS has been successful in engaging student voice, providing professional and personal development for staff and students and encouraging cultural change; however, the impact of this needs to be felt wider and potentially by students beyond those in the SIC community.

Discussions in this session focused on the core values of IRIS, the impact of the experience and the skills and development of the participants. Consideration was given to whether IRIS could or should take place across both semesters and be opened to the wider student population. Doing this has the potential to develop a culture of empowerment, respect and co-creation through the development of a larger student-staff partnership network. Having both the general student population and a wider range of staff involved can build a better university community that improves the current practices at Northumbria and provides a rewarding experience that all participants can learn from.

However, this approach does not come without potential challenges. One issue raised at the workshop was that part of the reason IRIS succeeds is because of the SICs who take part. SICs are passionate about student voice and sharing their lived experience. It is because of this commitment in conjunction with the commitment of staff that the partnerships thrive. Opening IRIS to the general student population raises questions of quality assurance through situations where students do not engage, miss sessions, or only sign up due to an incentive.

Potential solutions could include a more in-depth, mixed methods exploration of participant's expectations and motivations, particularly around where a staff member's strategic priorities might coalesce with a student's interests or lived experience. Recognition of a commitment to working within Northumbria's Values and Behaviours Framework could also be explored at this stage. This information can then be used to match participants in a more formal way than is currently being practised.

A further mitigation could be to invite student union reps or Equality Officers into this space since they will likely share some of the professional qualities that a SIC brings to the partnership.

Another issue that was identified was the fact that SICs are paid for their time and contributions and that, for it to be fair, there would have to be some sort of incentive for other students to take part. This also carries cost implications since the larger IRIS gets, the more students there would be to pay. Since this is funded through the APP it opens discussions around redistribution of budget, which could be a challenge in the current Higher Education climate.

Conclusion

Discussions between staff and SICs are ongoing about the future growth of IRIS, but the current results speak for themselves. From feeding into the development of student communication systems and redesigning physical spaces, to building confidence and strong networks, IRIS enables positive change on an individual and institutional level.

The university Student Contact Strategy project has allowed us to contribute towards improving the accessibility of the student communication systems, with the aim of improving student engagement. SIC feedback through IRIS has led to the development team working on making amendments to improve the systems including the development of an IT induction training package for managing Outlook effectively, better control over opt-in and opt-out preferences for emails, better streamlining of newsletters to avoid duplication, and implementing consistent and standardised "sender names" for university emails. This shows the impact that IRIS can have, linking into wider ongoing student experience projects and involving staff beyond the partnership to enhance student engagement at Northumbria.

One of the many projects the last iteration of IRIS led to was a room on campus being redesigned to be more accessible. This included changes such as making the lighting softer to make it a more neurodiverse-friendly environment and assessing the overall layout of the room to create a comfortable and engaging learning environment. The staff member fed back that they found it was a positive experience for them personally, and it was also positive for the goals of their department. They shared that the SIC's expertise from their knowledge and lived experience was "invaluable" as it helped educate their team and enabled them to identify similar issues in other rooms on campus as they work to transform spaces. The staff member involved in this project remarked how "this is impactful personal training that money cannot buy" demonstrating how IRIS partnerships can impact the wider university and lead to cultural and transformative change.

Another multi-faceted project which emerged was focused around improving the experience of commuter students. Developments are ongoing, but one aspect is that the university has arranged commuter student welcome events to allow commuters to meet and help begin forming friendships before the induction week commences. This aims to make a positive impact by improving commuters' sense of belonging at Northumbria. There will also be tours to show specific spaces and facilities which could be of particular use to commuter students. SICs have also been involved in the creation of a knowledge-based article (KBA) on the student portal containing information to help commuters make the most of studying at Northumbria while living at home, as well as providing travel tips based on personal experience.

Engaging with student voice in such a personal and impactful way has ensured that all participants of IRIS benefit in some way, whether that be gaining new perspectives, understanding barriers for current students, or developing vital skills that can be taken forward into future careers and practices. IRIS will continue to develop and grow, but no matter how it evolves, it will always strive to be a pillar of student voice that aims to develop an inclusive environment by supporting transformational conversations.

Our Head of International Mobility has been an IRIS advocate for two iterations of the scheme and reports that:

"I have learnt about the challenges of a specific group of students in their subject area. Women in STEM is a characteristic that we sometimes overlook as important to consider when promoting learning opportunities at university. (Taking part) has increased my awareness of their challenges but also where the opportunities are for our team to engage more with this cohort and the faculty in general."

The SIC that she was matched with this year reports that her department does not widely advertise international mobility opportunities but that, through conversations with her staff match, she became aware of an internship in Saudi Arabia which she is now applying for.

It will be exciting to see what new partnerships and accomplishments IRIS will make in the coming years, but one thing is certain – IRIS' future is bright.

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