

Students as Partners in Peer Review of Teaching: A Collaborative Model Involving the Students' Union

Emma Hollenberg, The University of Manchester Students' Union,
emma.hollenberg@manchester.ac.uk

Mario Pezzino, The University of Manchester, mario.pezzino@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract

In this paper, we highlight the benefits of engaging with internal (academic reviewers and student reviewers) and external (Students' Union) stakeholders in the implementation of a voluntary system of reviews of teaching in Higher Education. In particular, we describe our experience in introducing such a model in a research-intensive institution in the UK and reflect on the conditions and challenges for such a scheme to bring positive change in terms of teaching practices, academic culture and student experience.

Introduction

Improving and assessing teaching practices in a fair, objective and evidence-based way is inherently complex. In response to concerns connected to the information provided by student feedback in anonymous surveys (see, for example, Quenette and Rybas (2023) and references therein), growing institutional efforts—particularly within the UK Higher Education sector—have been directed towards establishing peer review systems that promote transparent evaluation and professional development, often incorporating reflective practices.

Gosling (2002) and (2014) categorise peer review of teaching practices in higher education into three models: the evaluative (managerial), developmental, and collaborative models. The 'evaluative model' is normally adopted for managerial assessments. The 'developmental model' is mostly aimed at enhancing teaching practices. It often involves educational developers or 'expert' teachers to provide constructive feedback. Finally, the 'collaborative model' emphasises mutual observations and learning. The goal is to foster dialogue, reflection, and shared understanding of teaching practices. However, even when models aspire to involve mutual and non-judgemental reviews, it is effectively impossible to eliminate all elements of judgement from a process that is inherently judgemental. This implies that, unless carefully designed and transparently implemented, even collaborative models could experience forms of resistance and distrust among colleagues.

An alternative categorisation that addresses some of these concerns is offered by McMahon et al. (2007). They introduce a six-dimensional framework emphasising the importance of the allocation of control and power between the reviewee and the reviewer. The authors also argue that the term "peer" is often misused, as many practices labelled as such involve hierarchical dynamics, and suggest the adoption of the term "third-party" observations or reviews.

Indeed, clarifying who a peer is and, perhaps more importantly, what makes an expert is critical in addressing the resistance and distrust toward the judgmental elements of a review. It is often the case that expertise is associated with seniority and, especially for junior colleagues, this comes with possible forms of power imbalances based on titles and roles (e.g. full professor, mentor, line managers, etc.). Seniority, of course, does not necessarily imply teaching expertise, and there could be situations in which the input from other stakeholders, such as educational developers, alumni and employers, may be more beneficial. Dall'Alba (2018) argues that teaching expertise cannot be fully separated from its teaching context, which necessarily must include learners and their society. Can students, therefore, be seen as experts, based on their direct experience of teaching practices and lived experience of social and cultural constructs of their generations?

Integrating student feedback directly into reviews of teaching could offer potential benefits. Students can provide distinctive, student-centred insights that could complement the academic reviewer's perspective: they experience a course in a distinctive way and can offer firsthand accounts of the effectiveness of teaching practices. While academic staff observations tend to be framed through professional or disciplinary lenses (often influenced by cultural perspectives that may not align with those of the students) student feedback may capture authentic elements related to how the class actually feels and functions from the learner's viewpoint. Some of these considerations have been extensively discussed in the literature, which has highlighted both the advantages and challenges of engaging students as partners. A non-exhaustive sample of a large and growing literature includes Cook-Sather (2011), Bovill et al. (2016), Healey et al. (2014), Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017), Owen and Wasiuk (2021) and Drake (2024). Several programs have already emerged that train and support students to serve as 'consultants', often coordinated by an educational developer or dedicated staff member. See, for example, the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) programme described in Cook-Sather (2016) and (2024) and the SLOCI programme described in McAnally et al. (2024). In these programmes, student consultants typically provide alternative or supplementary, somewhat disjointed, feedback to that which academic staff might receive from their peers; indeed, student consultants generally do not collaborate directly with academic reviewers and thus are not fully engaged as 'peers'/partners in the process. In describing the SLOCI programme, McAnally et al. (2024) report: "Unless specifically requested, SLOCI do not offer recommendations for course improvement as this is considered to be the remit of the academic". Consequently, we argue that the potential benefits of true partnership in designing and implementing reviews of teaching are not yet fully realised.

If students were fully integrated in a network of academic practice and empowered to review teaching in partnership with academic reviewers, the experience could truly be transformational, not just for the students (as often highlighted in the literature of student as partners and co-creation of curricular and teaching practice), but also for the academics who are reviewed and those who serve as reviewers; see O'Leary and Cui (2018). From this perspective, the relevance of the role of the academic reviewer is

enhanced; from evaluator, the role evolves into becoming a bridge between the institution, the profession, the academic reviewee and the student. In this process, the academic reviewer, working in true partnership with a student reviewer, could provide professional credibility to the process and reassurance to the reviewee, while serving as a mentor, could empower students to make the experience truly authentic and transformational for them.

A review system centred around the professional development of the instructors based on academic and student input could spill outside of the reviewee-reviewer-student relationship: a truly voluntary and collaborative system of reviews could help establish a culture of regular, fair, transparent and trusted peer reviews and professional development. Such a system can be a way to address some of the concerns connected to evaluative models. To mention a few, mandatory evaluative models risk stifling truthful evaluations (due to concerns with power imbalances and potential repercussions on the career of the reviewees) and meaningful engagement (due to workload considerations and sometimes lack of training and pedagogical knowledge) on the part of the reviewers. At the same time, due to concerns with power imbalances and the motivation of the reviews, these models do not encourage the formation of a sense of trust among reviewees. These concerns may be particularly pronounced in research-intensive institutions, especially where a culture that values research and teaching equally struggles to take hold. Despite these concerns, it is difficult to imagine institutions completely abandoning evaluative elements in teaching reviews, at least concerning decisions over probation and promotions. Consequently, we suggest that it may be appropriate for institutions to consider establishing (at least) two systems: one more evaluative to support probation/promotion processes, and one more collaborative for developmental opportunities.

In what follows, we describe our attempt to design a voluntary and collaborative system, in partnership with students and the Students' Union, to run in parallel to the formal, policy-mandated, evaluative system in our institution. Specifically, building on insights from prior contributions, this paper examines how student partnerships can strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of teaching reviews. We describe our experience in offering a research-intensive university a completely voluntary review scheme in which students are partnered with academic reviewers, sharing responsibility equally. A critical element of our scheme is a close collaboration with the Students' Union (SU): a stakeholder positioned somewhat outside the institution and the specific practices connected to teaching and learning, but which could bring to the partnership the aggregated views of the wider student body and expertise in student voice, as well as a broader sector perspective. In this sense, the SU could become a key enabler in establishing this model across the institution and, more broadly, the sector. Thinking of the models that could be designed to centre student expertise in the development of pedagogical partnership programmes described in Cook-Sather (2023), the collaboration with the SU could be a factor in transitioning the scheme from a model focused on students within one institution into a model where students across different institutions collaborate to review teaching; see also the examples described in O'Keeffe et al. (2021) and Korpan and Murray (2025).

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 describes in some detail our institutional setting and highlights the key elements of the teaching review scheme that we piloted. Section 3 proposes an evaluation of the initiative based on the input of student reviewers, academic reviewers and reviewees, and our own reflections. Section 4 provides a summary of the key findings, conclusions and considerations for future developments.

Our pilot

In this Section we briefly describe the institutional context of our project and illustrate in some detail how we designed and piloted a new form of voluntary peer reviews of teaching with student reviewers. The project was initiated and led in partnership by the Director of Teaching and Learning of the School of Social Sciences and the Students' Union Education Coordinator, with responsibility over the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Manchester.

In its 2023 submission to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) – the scheme adopted in the United Kingdom to assess the quality of undergraduate teaching – the University of Manchester defined itself as a research-intensive institution that seeks to provide students with an outstanding academic experience and to maximise the benefits of delivering degrees in an environment of research excellence and research culture. The 2023 TEF panel awarded an overall rating of Silver to the University, with a Silver for the student experience, and Gold for student outcomes. While it commended the quality of the support to student engagement and the use of research in relevant disciplines to contribute to a high-quality student experience, the panel did not identify sufficient evidence of effective engagement with student voices in the co-creation of a learning environment. This highlights how enabling students to benefit from the institutional research culture and to contribute to their learning environment is a complex challenge. Given this institutional environment, the School of Social Sciences is one of the four Schools that make up the Faculty of Humanities.

The School is organised in eight Departments (Criminology, Economics, Law, Philosophy, Politics, Social Anthropology, Social Statistics and Sociology) and is home to more than six thousand students, with a large population of undergraduate students. The current approach to peer reviews of teaching follows an evaluative model with developmental elements: a departmental academic reviewer (normally a mentor in the case of probationary staff) is paired with a School reviewer from a different discipline; reviews are mandatory, and the outcome of the review is based on a specific institutional form shared with line managers (i.e. Head of Department). In addition, reviewers receive a policy-specified workload. The model includes some developmental elements too: reviewers are trained and instructed to provide constructive criticism and supportive feedback that could help colleagues reflect on professional development. In addition to standard operational challenges, our experience with this institutional model highlights similar problems to those already identified in the literature and mentioned above. Time constraints and workloads may be a concern (especially for colleagues who face

stringent research objectives), but the main obstacle appears to be the lack of trust in the system. During training, reviewers often express the concern that their honest feedback could harm the career progression of colleagues, while reviewees may experience anxiety about reviews being judgemental and used as evidence in the formal evaluation of their teaching. Despite its constructive feedback and reflective elements, the system seems to struggle with promoting genuine collaboration. It appears that neither reviewers nor reviewees feel that the process produces impactful improvement to teaching practices, while the time demands and potential risks discourage engagement.

Given these challenges, we wanted to establish a truly collaborative system of reviews that would complement the institutional one, and be credible, valuable and transformative. We set out to establishing a completely voluntary system (both for reviewers and reviewees with no workload allocations attached to it), centred around the reviewee (e.g. giving them the power to choose what aspect of their teaching to be reviewed and what to do with the feedback) to ensure that only colleagues genuinely interested in professional improvement and student experience would engage with it. The only limitation to the control given to the reviewees concerned the allocation of reviewers: as coordinators, we retained the responsibility of matching reviewees and reviewers. This allowed us to maximise the benefits of operating within a large School and exposing reviewers and reviewees to cross-disciplinary teaching practices, while also ensuring that we could retain flexibility in matching academic reviewers with students.

To enhance the insights that a review could produce, we wanted to combine the benefits of co-creation and partnership with students with the benefits of a truly collaborative model of reviews. Rather than students serving as independent consultants, we wanted them to serve as equals, as peers to the academic reviewers engaged in the process. This implied that, in addition to training, coordinating, paying and supporting student reviewers, we needed to pair them with academic reviewers. We organised a joint meeting to ensure that both sides would understand the benefits of a working partnership, highlighting the importance of an equal sharing of responsibilities among academic and student reviewers while recognising the different types of expertise. To reduce potential anxiety for students, we requested academic reviewers to take the lead in approaching and coordinating with the academic reviewee.

An additional and innovative element of our approach has been the desire to establish a close partnership with the Students' Union in this, in particular, in selecting, training and supporting the students involved. In the UK, most Students' Unions are independent membership organisations that democratically represent the interests of students and thereby enhance their experience. The University of Manchester Students' Union (UoM SU) is a registered charity and one of the largest Students' Unions in the UK. The SU, therefore, occupies a unique position in this project; due to its student-led nature and cultural distinctiveness from the university, it can offer expert insights into the needs and experiences of the student body and act as a bridge between students and the university.

The interactions of engagement and partnership that we have established in our system are represented in Figure 1.

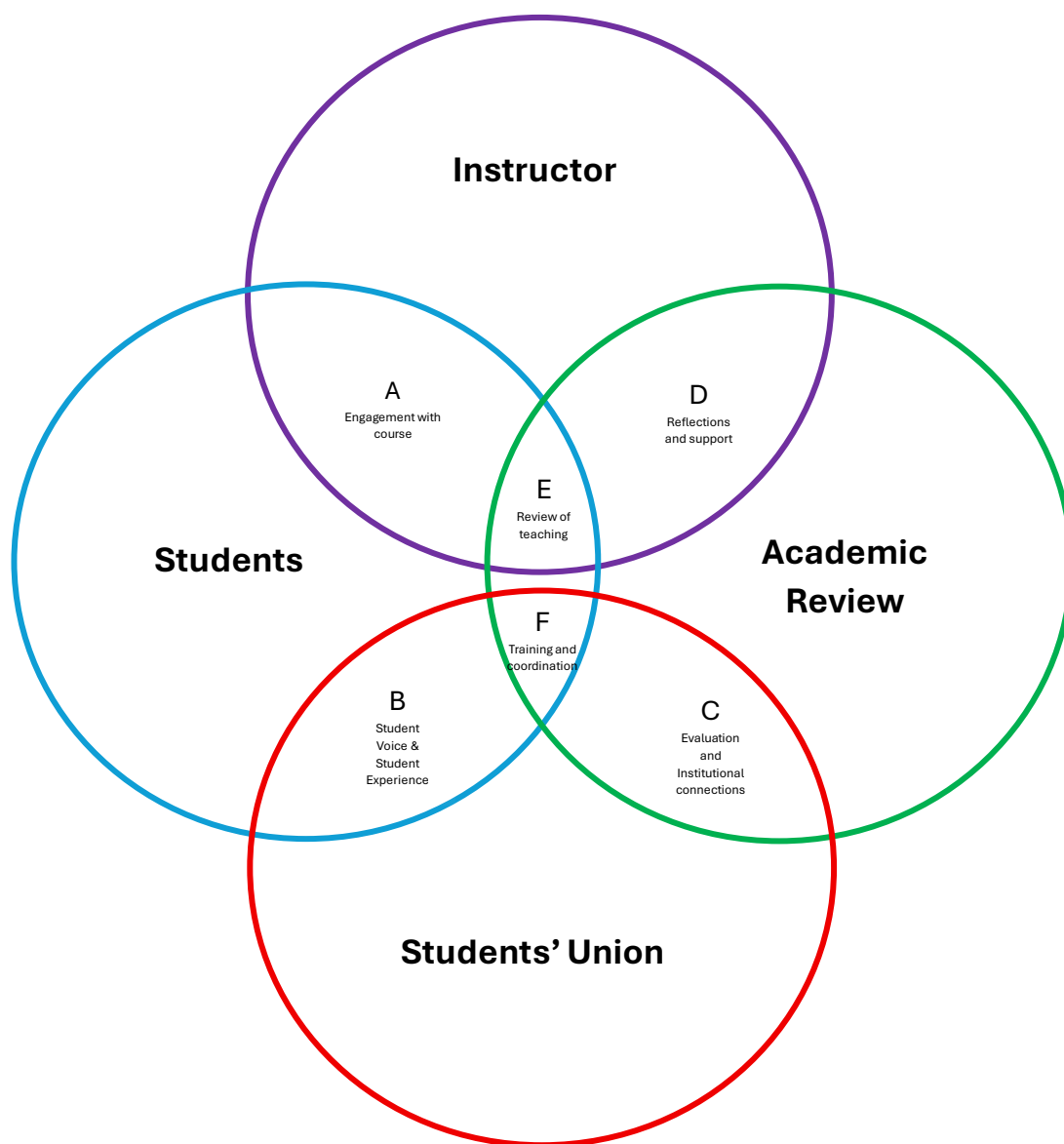


Figure 1. Our extension of the model in McAnally et al. (2024), based on Fleming et al. (2018), which includes the elements of partnership with SU and the direct involvement of student reviewers.

In Figure 1, area A represents opportunities for student engagement with the course resources and the course leader. Area B represents student engagement with the support and activities of the Students' Union. We highlight, for example, two main dimensions: the enhancement of student voice (e.g. student representation) and student experience (e.g. the organisation and running of student societies and campaigns). Area C represents the School activities, in partnership with the SU, to design, establish, run and evaluate the scheme. Area D represents the post-review opportunities for engagement and reflections of the reviewee following the review. Area E describes the activities connected to the review and evaluation of teaching and teaching resources done in partnership by academic and student reviewers. Area F represents the opportunities for training (in partnership between the School and the SU) of the student reviewers and the efforts toward administrative coordination and management of feedback. Notice how,

while area D describes standard peer review processes, the elements of areas C, E and F highlight our partnership with the SU and the innovative contribution of this project.

We established the scheme following a series of structured steps. In summer 2024, we submitted a proposal and secured financial support from the Faculty of Humanities, UoM, to remunerate student representatives to serve as reviewers. This allowed us to make sure that student reviewers were remunerated, at an hourly rate of £12.70, for three hours of training and six hours for each individual review. Through the SU, we issued a call for expressions of interest among student representatives in the School. Simultaneously, we invited academic staff via a School mailing list to express an interest in taking part as reviewees and/or reviewers. We deliberately promote the scheme among student representatives rather than the whole student population in the School, as they had prior training from the SU on the ways the School is organised, what a quality academic experience entails, representing the views of a diverse student body, and giving constructive feedback. In the end, we recruited four students. We provided tailored resources and training to both groups separately. Academic reviewers, in addition to the standard training provided to peer reviewers in the School (which includes online resources, policy documentation and a compulsory workshop to discuss examples/case studies, and address queries and concerns), were introduced to the innovative elements of the project and, in particular, their role in this collaboration with students. The training of the students followed a similar structure and resources, but it emphasised eliciting true student voices, reflecting on teaching practices and challenges, and delivering constructive feedback. Finally, we organised a meeting to facilitate introductions, address queries and pair academic and student reviewers. In total, the training and onboarding of student reviewers required about three hours of contact.

Collaboration, support and sharing of information were also facilitated, making use of a group chat on Microsoft Teams to which all reviewers were included. 18 reviews were ultimately completed. On the whole, a rather mixed set of academics engaged with the project. Among the reviewers, we counted 6 lecturers, 6 senior lecturers and 4 professors. Among the reviewees, we reviewed 10 lecturers, 5 senior lecturers, 6 professors and an academic advisor. All student reviewers were undergraduate students in their second year of study. Of them, two students were from the LLB Law, one was from the BA Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE), one from the BA Economic and Social Studies (specialising in Economics) and one from the BA Social Sciences. The feedback from all students and academic staff involved in the project is discussed in the next section. Examples of calls and messages, including the questionnaires, can be provided upon request.

Evaluation

In this Section we report and reflect on the feedback that we have received from students and colleagues involved in the project. After the completion of each review, we asked students, reviewees and reviewers to share their views with us via a questionnaire on Microsoft Forms.

Due to the small nature of this pilot study and the limited number of students and colleagues involved in it, we do not carry out a thematic analysis at this stage. Instead, we are reporting and reflecting on some of the initial feedback we received. This allows us to highlight areas where we can make improvements and suggest ways the project could be extended in the future.

Student Perspectives on the Project

The following evaluation draws on feedback provided by four student reviewers and identifies what aspects of the process worked well, what were less effective, and what could be improved in future iterations.

Partnership with Academic Reviewers

All four students described their collaboration with academic reviewers positively. They appreciated learning from the academic's experience and reported that it reduced anxieties around reviewing teaching. The presence of a more experienced partner was seen as a source of guidance and reassurance throughout the process. This also had a positive impact on students' confidence to share their feedback with reviewees, with all students reporting feeling very comfortable discussing and sharing their observations.

One student reflected,

"I found the partnership with the academic reviewer valuable, as it provided insights into the review process and helped me feel more confident. Their guidance was helpful, and I appreciated the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions."

Another described,

"Overall, it was a great experience. The project went well and there was plenty of interaction between me and my academic reviewer."

These reflections suggest that the structure of the partnership played an important role in enabling student participation, not only by offering support, but by fostering a collaborative and engaging relationship between student and academic reviewer.

Preferences around Review Pairings

Student responses highlighted a clear preference for being paired with one academic reviewer rather than working in a group of three with another student. Three of four students felt adding another student would complicate logistics (e.g. finding time to meet), and they valued the focused discussions that being paired with an academic reviewer allowed.

“I felt that the current setup was sufficient, and adding another student might have made the process more complex. The one-on-one interaction with the academic reviewer was beneficial and allowed for focused discussions.”

Nevertheless, one student reported that they would have preferred for an additional student to join the process; future iterations of the project might consider offering students the option to collaborate in pairs. Despite this difference, all students agreed on preferring to be paired with an academic reviewer over working solely with another student and working as student consultants, highlighting the benefits of exchanging perspectives with academic staff and drawing on the academic’s experience to reduce uncertainties:

“Being paired with an academic reviewer [instead of being paired with another student] was beneficial as it provided valuable insights from their experience. Their guidance helped me understand the review process better and address any uncertainties I had.”

There was less consensus on disciplinary alignment. Half of the students would prefer reviewing teaching within their own discipline, while the other half would prefer reviewing a different discipline. Although the reasons behind students’ differing preferences are unclear, it is possible that reviewing their own discipline may provide a sense of reassurance and expertise, as well as intrinsic motivation to improve teaching in their own department. Students preferring to observe teaching in a different discipline may value learning new things, and it may reduce concerns about evaluating familiar staff.

Skill Development

Students reported developing a range of skills by participating in the project. This included communication and interpersonal skills, such as giving and receiving feedback, and developing a professional approach in engaging with conversations and documentation produced in the reviews. One student noted developing problem-solving skills in observing teaching and formulating constructive suggestions for improvement. In addition, students identified developing leadership skills, such as taking and delegating responsibility. One student even said that they learnt how to be more assertive (“directive”) by taking on “a leading role” in the review, as the paired academic reviewer was new to the project, whereas the student already had engaged with previous reviews. Beyond these specific examples, the scheme provided a structured environment for students to practice collaboration and negotiation in a professional context. Working alongside academic staff required students to adapt their communication style, demonstrate empathy, and balance confidence with respect. The experience of contributing to constructive dialogue and managing sensitive feedback situations helped students build resilience and emotional intelligence, both of which are essential for leadership and teamwork. Moreover, the voluntary nature of the scheme fostered a sense of ownership and accountability among student reviewers. By taking initiative in planning and leading aspects of the review process, students strengthened their ability to work independently while coordinating effectively within a team. These experiences not only

enhanced their employability but also deepened their understanding of professional standards and collaborative problem-solving, equipping them with competencies that extend well beyond the academic environment. It is worth noting that, by design, all our student reviewers belonged to Social Sciences programmes. While these soft skills (e.g. communication, leadership, problem-solving, etc.) are critical for all students regardless of discipline, the experience of participating in peer reviews would, of course, offer unique benefits for those pursuing careers in education. Observing teaching practices, formulating constructive feedback, and engaging in reflective dialogue mirror core professional activities in educational settings. For education students, this hands-on involvement may provide authentic preparation for future roles where they will be expected to evaluate, mentor, and collaborate with colleagues in a similar manner.

Areas for Development

One area for improvement identified by student participants was the training and resources provided, which they only found somewhat helpful. They expressed a desire for more structured guidance throughout the review process, particularly clearer instructions at the start:

“I think the process could have been improved by having clearer guidance on the initial steps and perhaps more frequent check-ins to ensure I was on the right track.”

The student’s call for more frequent check-ins throughout the review highlights the need for ongoing support to address uncertainties. Several students also suggested that examples of strong reviews would have been helpful. Together, this feedback suggests that more detailed training using examples and ongoing guidance could increase student confidence in future iterations of the project.

Academic Reviewers’ Perspectives

This analysis is based on reflections from ten academic reviewers who worked in partnership with student reviewers and explores what worked well, what was less effective, and suggestions for improvement in future iterations.

Motivations for Participating

Academic reviewers engaged in the project for a variety of reasons. A common motivation was the informal and voluntary nature of the scheme, with four reviewers reporting it as their initial motivation to get involved in the project:

“The informal nature of the review (...) is a good chance in particular to get views on any new elements of your teaching without the fear that if it all goes wrong on the day this will impact probation.”

This aligns with insights in the literature, see Gosling (2014) and McMahon et al. (2007), which highlight that informal, voluntary peer review models can reduce anxieties and

resistance often linked to more formal processes. By emphasising collaboration and professional development, rather than managerial oversight, such approaches reduce concerns and generate more openness.

Among the reviewers, three expressed liking peer reviews in general as their initial motivation, regardless of the particular system. Interestingly, only three reviewers were initially specifically motivated by the opportunity to collaborate with students. As discussed below, however, all academic reviewers found the partnership with students to be highly positive and valuable, despite this not being their initial motivation. This is worth noting because it suggests that these reviewers were not necessarily already strongly motivated to engage in student-staff collaboration per se, indicating that the project may have favoured a change in culture, encouraging positive attitudes toward working with students in partnership. As noted earlier, embedding student-staff collaboration within existing practices that staff are already expected to do and that bring clear professional benefits fosters a positive culture of partnership, rather than relying solely on prior intrinsic motivation to collaborate with students.

Experiences of Student Partnership

The feedback from academic reviewers about collaborating with students during the review process was overwhelmingly positive. Many noted that students contributed different and unique perspectives to their own that enhanced the review:

“It was really valuable having the student as a partner. They have a broader experience of current teaching than I do and were able to spot points that I missed.”

Students’ broader and more current experience of teaching enabled them to identify aspects that academic reviewers may overlook, reflecting the argument made previously that students can provide a source of authentic insights based on first-hand accounts of the effectiveness of teaching. Compared to staff, students tended to focus on how their peers were engaging with the session and student reactions. One academic reviewer concluded that getting the students’ perspective was “eye-opening”, and another said that the student was able to provide a perspective “we sometimes forget”, overall enhancing the peer review process. These comments resonate with our argument that, under the right circumstances, students can contribute as experts/peers in their own right, bringing perspectives that can complement the professional expertise of academic staff.

Furthermore, academic reviewers appreciated the reciprocal nature of the partnership, noting that both students and staff learned from each other throughout the process. While staff learned from students how to better engage with students, what forms of communication work for students, and more generally, a different pedagogical perspective, staff believe that students benefited from learning about the significance of providing feedback and hearing academic perspectives. It suggests that collaborative projects like this can have a far-reaching impact beyond the immediate context, enabling

both staff and students to take valuable learnings away that can inform and enhance other areas of academic practice and partnership working.

Overall, 100% of academic reviewers who took part in the peer review said they would recommend colleagues to serve as a reviewer and request a review in the future. In addition to the aforementioned reasons, they appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues and observe good practice of teaching.

Elements to Continue

Academic reviewers reported which aspects they thought should become part of standard practice in the School. In addition to student partnership, identified by eight reviewers as something they would like to see continued, seven reviewers highlighted the opportunity for the reviewee to specify which aspects of their teaching should be reviewed as a key benefit of the peer review. This approach was valued because it allows academics to receive feedback on areas where they may feel unsure or are trialling new approaches, while also ensuring that it is within students' capacity to provide meaningful feedback.

Not surprisingly, as it was pointed out as a key motivation to get involved with the peer review, the optional and informal nature of the review was seen as an aspect that should become part of standard practice. However, some reviewers noted that this type of peer review would not necessarily be appropriate as a formal, evaluative process. For them, its value lay precisely in its optional and informal nature, which offers an alternative to more formal reviews "without the pressure" and could be undermined if it were linked to performance management. These comments seem to reinforce our view that institutions may want to consider implementing multiple systems of review to address different objectives, i.e. evaluation and collaboration. In addition, if this kind of peer review is to be scaled up in the future, it raises questions about how institutions can further incentivise participation in order to sustain engagement in the long term.

Several academic reviewers made positive comments about the opportunity to engage with colleagues and students from different disciplines and observe diverse teaching practices. One reviewer described,

"I really enjoyed being paired with a student on a different programme with different teaching practices to discuss the observation. It allowed a discussion of the norms in different subject areas, which I think led to a more informative review."

However, when asked directly, only one participant explicitly said they would like cross-disciplinary reviews to be continued. This suggests that, despite generally positive experiences, staff, like students, may have mixed views on cross-disciplinary pairing. In the future, it may be helpful to ask participants whether they would prefer to be matched within or across disciplines. At the same time, participants may not fully anticipate the potential benefits of cross-disciplinary review until they have experienced it. Given the

positive comments received, cross-disciplinary review remains an element worth considering for continuation.

Areas for Development

One challenge identified by academic reviewers about collaborating with students on teaching reviews is that “students sometimes ask for things that we cannot give”, highlighting a broader issue around managing expectations and navigating the limitations of what can realistically be changed in response to feedback about teaching. This could be mitigated to some extent by ensuring the training provided to student reviewers includes clear guidance around institutional constraints. However, it is an inherent part of any feedback process that not all suggestions will be feasible to implement.

Another challenge identified was coordinating staff and student availability, which sometimes made scheduling observations and follow-up conversations difficult. In future iterations of the project, it could be helpful to ask participants to indicate their usual availability when signing up, potentially allowing for better matching of pairs.

Echoing students, two academic reviewers noted that it would have been beneficial for the student reviewers to receive more detailed training, alongside ongoing mentorship and more regular check-ins.

Academic Reviewees Perspectives

Drawing on reflections from ten academic reviewees who received feedback from an academic reviewer and a student, the following analysis highlights strengths of the process and lessons for future implementation.

Motivations for Participating

All academic reviewees who engaged in the project initially signed up because they liked the idea of an informal and voluntary peer review of teaching scheme, as well as the opportunity to receive feedback from students. This suggests that the participating staff already held a positive view of student involvement, or were interested to see how it worked in practice.

Experiences of Being Reviewed by a Student

Academic reviewees’ experience of being reviewed by a student was positive, with all highlighting the unique benefits that a student perspective brought to the peer review process. Several described the feedback as insightful and refreshing, noting that students were able to identify issues that may be overlooked by colleagues, particularly aspects that may seem obvious to staff but are not always clear to students. One reviewee reported that while they initially dismissed a point of feedback, they realised the benefit of the students’ perspective:

“There were some aspects of the feedback that made me wonder if they hadn't read something properly. But then I realised - that is MY job to make sure that everything in course materials is as clear as can be”

This demonstrates how student input can prompt broader reflection. Students were also praised for their constructive and thorough feedback, and for raising concrete actions that can be taken to improve teaching or materials. Despite initial nervousness, one reviewee noted that being reviewed by a student encouraged them to try out new ways of teaching:

“I was nervous about it, particularly with a student as peer reviewer. But this prompted me to be more inventive with my teaching, so I devised a new structure for the lesson. I was also prompted to keep teaching style in my mind during the class, which helped me do a better job than usual”

Another reviewee even reflected that they thought the feedback was “very detailed” compared to feedback from compulsory reviews, reiterating the level of expertise students contribute to peer reviews.

Another key strength identified by one reviewee was the cross-disciplinary nature of the review. They appreciated receiving input from students who were not enrolled in their module, as it can be difficult to receive critical and constructive feedback from students due to existing power dynamics.

The only challenge mentioned by one reviewee was that one student reviewer disengaged partway through the process. As noted earlier, more regular check-ins with students throughout the process could help mitigate this. No other concerns were raised.

Elements to Continue

All reviewees said they found the feedback they were given very helpful, and they thought that partnership with students should become standard practice, with one reviewee sharing that they felt they could count on the feedback more because it included a student perspective. This underscores the idea of recognising students as contributors of expertise.

In addition, academic reviewees echoed many of the same sentiments expressed by reviewers when reflecting on which elements of the peer review process should be continued. The majority of reviewees (7) saw the informal nature of the scheme as crucial, as it enables open dialogue without the pressure and “stress” of being formally evaluated. Like reviewers, they noted that it would not necessarily be appropriate as a formal, mandatory scheme, so maintaining the voluntary element is important.

Several reviewees (6) also valued being able to specify which aspects of their teaching they would like reviewed. This allowed them to seek feedback on areas where they were trying new approaches or felt less certain, while also ensuring it is relevant for students.

Based on the above, all reviewees would recommend a colleague to request a review in the future. They found the opportunity really valuable and did not find it administratively burdensome.

Our reflections

On the whole, our impressions of the pilot are highly positive. It was encouraging to witness the genuine interest of academic staff in engaging with the project, despite the absence of formal workload allocation. Although the initial stages involved operational challenges (e.g. onboarding participants, issuing contracts for the student interns and coordinating logistics) and a slow start, the level of engagement with the project and the feedback that we received have been overwhelmingly positive. Encouraged by these results, we think that the scheme could be enhanced and expanded in the future. We provide a few elements of reflection below.

Introducing additional opportunities for reflection

Reflective practices can contribute to the credibility and effectiveness of peer review processes by legitimising the experiential learning and knowledge of educators. See a review of the literature in Zen (2020). See also Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2005) and Kolb and Kolb (2018). In our pilot, we explicitly requested that reviewers offer the opportunity to discuss reflections. We did not provide any specific guidance on how to facilitate reflections, though. This element could be improved in the future. In the future, we could also ask reviewees to identify in advance challenges and goals that they identify in their teaching. This information could then form the basis for a discussion before and after the review. Moreover, we believe that it would be worth it to dedicate more effort to facilitating reflections also among the student reviewers. For example, during the training, students could be asked to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, and to identify challenges and goals to be discussed with the academic reviewer at the end of a review; see Woolmer and Tran (2024). Academics and students involved could be asked to share their reflections, for example, in the form of a workshop, to which colleagues and students in the School could also be invited. See Bernstein et al. (2000). To maximise collaboration and engagement, workshops could be designed around Liberating Structures activities; see Lipmanowicz et al. (2015) and Korpan and Murray (2025). Having a consistent and effective framework of reflections within the review process, that could spill over to the rest of the School/Institution, could be a condition to establishing a change in culture that would favour collaborative reflections and peer support around the improvement of teaching practices. This could evolve into a system of “unseen observations”, see O’Leary (2022), whereby teachers self-evaluate their teaching and share their reflections with peers that act as collaborators, rather than observers/reviewers.

Improving aspects of the process

Because of our desire to keep the process as informal as possible, and centred around the needs of the reviewee, we did not suggest colleagues paired in a review to consider

swapping roles and reviewing each other's teaching. This was perhaps a missed opportunity and definitely something to consider for the future. Moreover, colleagues could be invited (and supported) to follow up with an additional review in the following year. This could be a way to establish an "experiential learning spiral" as described in Kolb and Kolb (2018). In line with the considerations of O'Leary and Savage (2020), a system of reciprocal reviews could allow reviewers/mentors to evolve into supporters, coaches, i.e. colleagues that provide guidance, feedback and support, not because of their seniority, but because of a genuine involvement in the professional development of a colleague. Making the roles of observed and observer interchangeable and fluid may require the systematic input of a coordinator, i.e. a member of staff who would ensure the running of the observations and the collection and distribution of feedback; see Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2004). In addition, to truly empower reviewers to coach colleagues, proper training would have to be provided.

Another element that was missing in our pilot was the contribution of learning developers and digital experts. There could have been multiple opportunities for collaborative engagement with developers. They could have worked as part of the review team. Alternatively, they could have played a strategic, consultative role by contributing directly to the design and delivery of the process or by helping to identify relevant issues, practices, and technologies to be shared with colleagues for collective reflection and discussion; see for example, Bell (2001).

Training and support of student and academic reviewers

The feedback that we received from the student reviewers highlighted the need for additional training and the desire for more regular opportunities to connect. In hindsight, it would have been beneficial to offer the students another opportunity for a training refresh and to share concerns and reflections at the beginning of the second semester. About opportunities to connect with the rest of the group, again in hindsight, the Teams chat did not appear to be sufficiently effective.

Something that we have recently introduced in the latest iteration of the project has been the creation of the role of a dedicated student coordinator, i.e. a student who would be hired for a year in a professional coordinator role, providing the student reviewers with opportunities for regular support and training. Initial impressions of introducing this new role have been highly positive. At the start of the 2025/26 academic year, we appointed two coordinators who participated in the formal training of student reviewers and shared responsibility for managing the new review cycle. A key benefit of creating this role has been its contribution to addressing potential concerns around power dynamics, both within review teams and in relation to colleagues being reviewed.

The scheme's voluntary and informal nature has been central to this. Self-selection ensured that review teams consisted of colleagues motivated to engage with students as partners and to provide constructive feedback to peers. Neither academic nor student reviewers reported concerns about power imbalances, and we observed instances where student reviewers confidently led aspects of the review process. Similarly,

colleagues requesting reviews were explicitly offered the option to opt out of student involvement; however, all welcomed student feedback, which was often a motivating factor for participation.

That said, we acknowledge that complex power dynamics cannot be entirely ruled out. To mitigate this, the presence of a senior student reviewer, who would have contributed to the initial training, was designated to oversee the development of each review and act as a first point of contact should any imbalance or challenging dynamics arise.

Final considerations

This was a rewarding experience for us. The benefits, particularly in terms of engagement and feedback from both students and academics, were such that we believe that an expansion of the project could create the conditions for a meaningful impact on teaching practices and foster a stronger culture of continuous professional development based on peer support within the School.

Naturally, we also encountered challenges, and addressing these systematically would be essential for the success of any future larger-scale implementation. Issues of legitimacy, workload, role clarity, and institutional alignment must be carefully managed if these schemes are to maintain their developmental purpose. Crucially, we believe that the voluntary and informal nature of the model is key to its effectiveness, and efforts to formalise or scale it must preserve its ethos of collaboration and shared ownership. Moreover, scaling up the initiative (for instance, to other Schools within the Faculty) would likely require the involvement of dedicated administrative support. Such support would also be invaluable if the project were to be enhanced with the addition of complementary activities, such as collaboration with teaching developers or the collection and dissemination of reflections through reports and workshops. Finally, we believe that the scheme in the future could grow to include reviews and collaborations across different institutions; see, for example, O’Keeffe et al. (2021) and Korpan and Murray (2025). For this, a close partnership with the SU will be essential to ensure consistency of practices across different universities, broad institutional endorsement and genuine student engagement in defining and improving learning environments in the future.

Conclusions

In this paper, we reflected on the potential benefits of engaging with internal (academic reviewers and student reviewers) and external (Students’ Union) stakeholders in the implementation of a voluntary system of reviews of teaching in Higher Education. Our experience suggests that engaging both academic and student reviewers can serve as a powerful mechanism for fostering reflective teaching practices and enhancing pedagogical development. At the same time, our findings highlight the complexity of implementing and sustaining these initiatives within the context of a research-intensive university.

We believe the scheme has distinctive features, in particular the involvement of the Students' Union and the authentic partnership between students and academics as equals in reviewing teaching. However, its core principles are highly transferable. Our recent collaboration with counterparts at Manchester Metropolitan University (including Students' Union representatives, academics, and learning developers) to establish a shared cross-institutional peer review system with student participation, scheduled to launch in the second half of the 2025/26 academic year, demonstrates this potential. Teams from both institutions share common values and a commitment to enhancing teaching quality through partnership. They recognise the benefits the scheme offers, not only for students and staff directly involved, but also for fostering a culture of openness and continuous improvement in teaching practices across both universities. We anticipate that this collaboration will lay the groundwork for identifying general principles and developing shared resources that can be scaled and adapted across the sector, amplifying the impact of the scheme.

This experience offers a valuable starting point for further inquiry into student-staff partnerships in teaching review and enhancement. Future research should examine the long-term impact of such models on teaching quality, academic identity, and student engagement, as well as the organisational conditions that enable them to flourish. As Higher Education continues to navigate evolving expectations around accountability, inclusion, and pedagogical innovation, such collaborative approaches may prove essential to creating more responsive and inclusive academic cultures.

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