

# Enhancing student learning and teaching experience through a cross-level collaboration: a reflection

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## Students as Co-Creators

As a staff-student partnership programme, the Students as Co-Creators (SCC) was established at the University of Westminster to reflect the contributions, opportunities, values and possible outcomes of partnerships between students and staff. This extra-curriculum initiative provides opportunities and resources for staff and students to collaborate on research projects outside their courses, enhancing learning and teaching. The yearly programme allows students to become partners, working alongside academics collaboratively to share their perspectives and ideas, shape their learning experiences, build networks and develop skills in teamwork, leadership, communication, research, giving presentations, and managing projects and budgets. These experiences can enhance students' academic performance, advance their careers, facilitating skills development to ascertain employability opportunities (Sum, 2018). The SCC programme has three distinct strands: learning and teaching research collaborations, disciplinary research collaborations, and curriculum design collaborations. This Student Voice reflects the students' experiences on their project under the learning and teaching research strand.

## Our Project

Our project idea was first initiated by the PhD student (with a nutrition background) who felt there is a need to enhance industry experiences for nutrition undergraduates during their academic study. Following an open invitation to all nutrition undergraduates by the PhD student, two students (a first and a second-year student) joined the project team and an academic from the nutrition-teaching course was invited to support and co-create knowledge and understanding. As an important part of the University's Learning and Teaching strategy, this co-creation model between staff and students within the project team enables students to actively make changes, giving them a stronger voice.

As nutrition students within the same institution across different levels of study, we identified the knowledge gap in understanding the academic-industry relationship and its impacts on enhancing student engagement. From our personal university experiences, to informal conversations with students and alumni at university events, there was a limited understanding of students' learning, university opportunities and the support mechanisms between academia and industry in the undergraduate nutrition courses. Working in partnership with our academic partner, our aim was to understand nutrition undergraduates' and staffs' perceptions on the relevant opportunities in the subject sector; current university provision between academia and industry for student engagement; benefits of embedding academic-industrial collaboration into the curriculum; and appraising challenges and barriers enabling collaborations enhancing learning and teaching. Key findings highlight the need for better support from 'top-down management', ensuring messages are disseminated consistently across the division between staff and students for academic-industry engagement and opportunities.

## **Our Experiences**

The project topic itself drew us together through our common interest, curiosity and working with others from different cohorts with different university experiences. Using Gibbs' reflective cycle (1998), we reflect on our staff-student partnership project experiences.

### ***As a 1<sup>st</sup> year student***

#### *Description and feelings:*

My role within the team was assisting with different project tasks such as developing our survey, collecting data through focus groups and interviews and data analysis (i.e. transcription) to report writing. I joined the SCC project because I felt it was significant to start gaining practical experiences from the beginning of my degree. I found it motivating to see the practical application of my study in addition to collaborating with more knowledgeable and experienced team members to learn about academic research. Participating in the project is an excellent way to gain insights into the research topics. Thus, I will get more familiar with different subjects enabling me to make more informed choices in the future.

#### *Evaluation and analysis:*

I learned from the SCC project how little I knew about research methods, despite learning the basics of research methods through my first year at university. This highlights the importance of practising the theory and applying it into relevant applications. This project enabled me to gain qualitative research knowledge. I learnt how to conduct interviews as well as transcribing, analysing and finally writing the project up as a report. Aside from research skills, I learnt how to recruit participants for the study (i.e. finding new information channels for inviting participants until data saturation) and understanding the art of engaging participants through research incentives. Collaborating with students and other team members, I extended my teamwork skills, developed my courage to express my ideas, sharing them with more experienced team members. I also learnt about current academia and industry perspectives on both staff and students and the work experience links needed to build bridges in the sector. It was fascinating to see similar and different perspectives from both staff and students across the nutrition undergraduate course. The project enabled me to reflect on my own university experience and the future support needed to enhance the academic and industry link within our subject field for better engagement and opportunities. It was very inspiring and motivating to realise that our project findings could greatly benefit and impact our undergraduate course and the wider university community. Considering my limited experience in qualitative research, a challenge I found was sometimes having to rewrite my sections in our report, which required twice as much time as it would have otherwise. Additionally, despite mostly decent team communication, there were times where it could have been more effective - for example, setting up and preparing focus groups on the day.

#### *Conclusion and action plan*

This project enabled me to transfer my qualitative research and teamwork skills to the next level and with other future projects. It has developed my confidence in data collection (e.g. via qualitative methods), report writing, asking questions, expressing my opinion and encouraging me to not shy away from engaging with people in research (e.g. via email, presentation or face-to-face conversations). It also stimulated my awareness of this topic area and thus, encourages me to take actions in the future if necessary. In the future, I will ask more specific questions before I start writing my report so that I will not have to rewrite my sections. Additionally, I will encourage even better communication in my future teams by talking through more precisely before conducting interviews, focus groups or report writing. This will help prevent possible confusion, delay and excessive effort. I have overall been

enriched by this project of not being afraid to work with those from higher education levels, and as such, the team members I worked with are great contacts for the future.

### ***As a 2<sup>nd</sup> year student***

#### *Description and feelings:*

I initially took part due to my curiosity about the research process and was highly intrigued by the thought of participating in a group project with members from various levels of the nutrition course. I felt from the outset that this would be a good experience, helping to expand my qualitative research skills and working in a collaborative team – I am pleased to say that it has helped me greatly in both areas. As a researcher in the project, I was also subconsciously aware of my capacity as a current student and the possible bias impacting my research approach. As a current student, the issues and experiences that arose from the project felt personal and easy to connect, whilst I simultaneously strived to remain impartial and objective.

#### *Evaluation and analysis:*

I found this research a truly eye-opening experience. We were made aware of ethical issues and the project design process; it was a valuable and interesting way to start my first research experience while progressing and preparing for my final year project. Data collected was quite fascinating in its diversity, scope and perspective, considering our participants were academic staff and students on the same course within the same institution. Our findings were intriguing to read, showing how our personal experiences and background shape our feelings and thoughts.

Working in a diverse research team, I would have assumed there would be some clashes in ideas and thoughts. Yet, a good mix of experience proved beneficial rather than a hindrance to our study. Furthermore, acquiring insights, support and guidance from an experienced PhD student and academic partner in scientific research, data collection, analysis and addressing any issues arising proved invaluable to the academic development in preparation for my final year project. However, the data collected was unnecessarily high within the context of our study; combined with varying writing styles and the relative lack of research experience by the undergraduate members of the team. This may have ultimately been detrimental to smooth progress causing unexpected, and otherwise avoidable, confusion and delay at various stages of the project.

#### *Conclusion and action plan:*

This project offered invaluable experience in the effectiveness of peer group work, challenging individual thinking and providing different perspectives for consideration; while acquiring a unique opportunity for myself and the team. A fascinating aspect I found was listening to our participants offering either some similar ideas or completely opposing insights against our perspectives – all participants going through the same learning experiences, but all having individual working approaches and opinions. Such diversity of thought is intriguing and stimulating, making me realise and appreciate the value of teamwork and other people's views facilitating my learning and development. This project provided me with a good underpinning knowledge of the research process and its applications and practices. Reflecting on the few obstacles encountered and looking ahead to future academic endeavours, the aim is to keep enhancing my research methods skills while implementing more efficient time management, effective planning and greater focus in data collection fitting within the specific context and constraints.

## ***As a PhD student***

### *Description and feelings:*

My academic journey thus far has enabled me to see beyond my PhD research topic, exploring the external opportunities to my academic study, identifying my strengths and weaknesses, but more importantly discovering my interests that would, in parallel, continue to motivate my PhD journey. As a graduate from the same undergraduate course as other students on the team, I understood the experience and challenges they and their fellow students were encountering – for example, work experiences and career opportunities.

I have previously been involved in staff-student partnership projects on a wide range of multidisciplinary topics. Yet I have never had the opportunity to collaborate with other students from other years on a topic relevant to our discipline. Involved in a SCC project not only raises my awareness of higher education challenges but exploring what can be done to help overcome the perceived barriers. There are benefits that enriched the project, with student voice being led throughout the project rather than a ‘top-down approach’ within the organisation. Working with other students who have had a shorter university experience than I, the project provides the opportunity to take on the ‘facilitator and supporter’ role alongside our academic partner to develop students’ research skills.

### *Evaluation and analysis:*

Knowledge exchange was significantly highlighted in our team. With a mixed background and level of academic research experience and staff-student engagement, we identified the skills and knowledge gap we each had, and the process of dividing workload went well. I learnt to develop my facilitation and communication skills - understanding the teams’ strengths and weaknesses. With a career aspiration in higher education, I self-assessed and reflected through the project; learning to encourage and support others, sharing experiences and together learning how best to collaboratively achieve our project’s aim with our academic support. It gave me the experience of learning to guide and supervise students, allowing them to learn, practise their skills and support their every step. It was a difficult role as other students had limited research experiences especially data collection and analysis. I spent most of the time at the initial phase demonstrating techniques for data collection and analysis. Despite it being time-consuming and slowing the project down, I felt I had the duty to share knowledge and encouraged others to become independent researchers. Despite knowing I could just complete all the tasks; this project highlights the importance of collaboration, of which tasks were split throughout the project ensuring we were stretching our abilities to learn new skills.

With mixed abilities and the large amount of data collected, not having a planned coherent writing style was another challenge. We were so focused on completing the project within the timeframe that no one would raise a concern. However, our academic partner supported and facilitated the whole project, sharing writing techniques and for us to develop a plan where we were encouraged to take part-ownership of different project sections and embracing the collaborative aspect in constructing knowledge via a co-creation approach.

### *Conclusion and action plan:*

I overall thoroughly enjoyed this project and gave me an insight into the possible changes and impacts in the nutrition undergraduate course - creating opportunities and finding ways

for everyone to collaborate, strengthening and supporting the division in engaging with staff, students and external stakeholders to enhance and stimulate university experience. Using team members' strengths is efficient and planning how we want the project to look before going off to complete our tasks were helpful. Moreover, writing one section together before writing our individual section would be recommended in the future to ensure that we can mirror the same writing style through the whole project. Looking ahead, my experience provided the first step into more facilitating and supporting roles when working with junior team members - an attribute that I wish to continue to develop as a researcher and working towards my career aspiration.

### ***Lessons learnt***

Embracing pedagogical principles from our institutional report (University of Westminster, no date provided), the SCC project encouraged staff and students to build collaborative and reciprocal relationships of learning and teaching at university. From identifying an area to enhance student engagement and university experience in our subject degree course to the opportunity of sharing ideas, developing communication, project management, research, teamwork and co-designing skills, we worked with the wider university community (staff and students in our college). As Students as Co-Creators, we took advantage of our university years to make a difference and become autonomous learners through shared topics of interest. The project highlights the importance of "staff-student partnership", where our academic partner did not take full control of project management, but collaboratively distributed responsibilities to stretch each other's abilities. We supported each other as sources of learning and teaching, which itself can be a skill transferable to our study and other activities. However, it is without a doubt that having our academic partner as our continuous cheerleader throughout the project has encouraged us to think innovatively and creatively when experiencing challenges.

### **Conclusion**

All student partners on the team reflected on our SCC project experience through our own lens using the Gibbs' reflective cycle - as a first-year, second-year and a PhD student. This cross-level collaboration identified the benefits of a diverse project team such as skill and knowledge exchange and the opportunity to take on responsibilities acting as the foundation for future career skill developments and aspirations. We achieved our project aims in full but also identified key areas needed to further enhance learning and teaching which can be applicable for other degree courses. We identified the need for a 'top-down management' support ensuring students and staff have resources and abilities to strengthen professional connections. This is important to continuing to improve centralised coordination between module teams ensuring consistent and correct information to all, adopting and promoting inclusive and active learning approaches both inside and outside of the classroom. But more importantly encouraging students to continuously reflect their skills and experiences for further participation in subject-related activities.

### **Contribution to the wider education community**

Our staff-student partnership project identifies benefits of learning within the group, creating cohesive and collaborative learning. Whilst leadership was somewhat needed to help drive the project forward, leadership was led by students. This encouraged independent learning and improving educational quality, enabling students to not just provide advice for change but rather actively involved in the implementation process. Data collection was conducted by the student partners. As such, students who provided feedback through focus groups were less hesitant and more open to share about their university experiences - not feeling restricted and or being confronted by staff members. For staff, partnership projects provide the

opportunity to understand students' perspectives, and find ways to connect with less engaged students in more innovative ways. The project overall embraces and highlights the importance of valuing students' contribution in any educational change - any partnerships including students creates a sense of belonging and identity. Not only for the students themselves but also to the wider educational community.

### **References**

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