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CASE STUDY

Students as Partners in the Real World: A Whole-Institution Approach

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ABSTRACT

Students as Partners (SaP) is an approach to student engagement that has gained much traction in recent years. Evidence shows that it adds value to the learning experience and provides opportunities for students to develop the capabilities needed in their future pathways. This paper documents one university's approach to embedding partnerships in its institutional culture. The paper begins by contextualising the process in relation to wider institutional goals and outlines the three phases of implementation. This case study argues that to enable a whole-institution approach to SaP, it has been necessary to invest in strategies at a number of levels that enable partnership, from high-end policy and protocols to providing opportunities for staff and students to shape their own partnerships.

KEYWORDS

students as partners, student engagement, whole of institution approach

INTRODUCTION

Conversations about student engagement penetrate every aspect of higher education in almost every context. However, in today's climate of uncertainty, traditional avenues for engaging students are no longer enough to prepare our graduates to be "future-capable" (Bridgstock, 2016). Never before has there been so much choice for students about where and how they learn. The way knowledge is generated and shared has changed and information is easily accessible to students from many different sources. As a result, the role and function of universities in contemporary society is changing. Universities need to ensure what they offer adds value to the student experience beyond what they could learn online and equips them with the capabilities to thrive, not just survive, in their future professional pathways.

Students as Partners (SaP) is one approach to fostering student engagement. SaP focusses on engaging students in their learning and in the way in which they are taught and

assessed. At the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), we define SaP as “staff and students work[ing] together to make things better, by sharing perspectives and jointly making decisions.” (Shaw & Tredinnick, 2017) Ample evidence proves that the more engaged students are in their learning, the better their academic and professional outcomes (Bovill & Bulley, 2011; Buckley, 2014; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011; Thomas, 2012; Vuori, 2014). In fact, this concept is so widely accepted that governments both in Australia and abroad are embedding the broader concept of working “with” not “for” students into policy (Carey, 2016).

While many universities implement and celebrate SaP projects and initiatives at a program level, there is little written on strategies to partner with students at an organisational level (Bell, 2016). This paper documents QUT’s approach to SaP as it works to embed partnerships into its institutional culture. We begin by locating this initiative within the QUT context and outline the three phases developed to support the process. This case study includes examples of strategies implemented and identifies the successes and challenges we have experienced. We conclude by highlighting key learnings and insights that will influence SaP at QUT and cause it to mature into the future.

CONTEXT

QUT has a student population of just under 50,000. We are an urban commuter institution with three campuses. Our students expect a flexible and blended learning environment that accommodates their competing obligations of study, work, and family. QUT’s branding is that it is a university for the “real world.” This branding not only influences the courses we offer and the way we operate, but also influences who is attracted to work and study at QUT. Our students tend to be outcome driven and focussed on achieving in the world beyond the university context. Similarly, QUT staff encourage and maintain strong links with their professional bodies. Academic staff’s commitment and belief in Students as Partners as an approach in many ways controls the extent students are allowed to co-determine aspects of teaching and learning (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013, p. 1453).

Our approach to embedding SaP in the institutional culture at QUT has been to investigate what it would take to enable all stakeholders to participate and benefit from SaP. The language of partnership in QUT documentation extends beyond the walls of the university and embraces industry and community. Any exploration of partnership and SaP at QUT must contribute to this identity and real-world focus. In the following section, we outline how we have shaped an institutional approach to SaP that responds to this context.

GETTING STARTED: INITIATING A PHASED APPROACH

There have been three distinct phases in the development and implementation of Students as Partners as a whole-institution approach at QUT. These phases have been both deliberate and organic in development. It was recognised very early on that no single strategy would suffice to embed SaP within university culture. It required a multi-pronged approach that was flexible enough to respond to needs and issues as they emerged. Outlined below is a summary of the three phases identified:

- Phase 1: Test and prototype
- Phase 2: Identify and implement strategies
- Phase 3: Systems and structures

Although the phases are in chronological order, each phase is not restricted by time, but simultaneously co-exist and merge. While our goal is to embed SaP across the institution, we are also keen to find ways to do this that allows and encourages a range of responses and approaches to SaP that will complement individual discipline's cultures.

Phase 1: Test and Prototype

In mid-2015 we first started to seriously consider SaP as a whole-institution strategy. In phase one, our focus was to prototype and test the appetite for the approach with both staff and students. In semester two of 2015, we supported five micro-curriculum design projects. We identified academics who could champion SaP within their faculty and invited them to participate. These pilots provided an early opportunity for us to identify any concerns or obstacles and garner some understanding of what SaP might look like within different disciplinary contexts. The five project foci were:

- Nursing: Develop a pedagogical approach/ framework that enables the development of clinical judgement where students learn to “think like a nurse.”
- Creative industries (CI): Develop a curriculum that enables engagement with industry professionals and organisations through rich, interdisciplinary collaborations.
- Law: Identify learning approaches in a second-year subject that promote optimal outcomes for students, particularly discipline knowledge and legal thinking and analysis skills.
- Science and Engineering (SEF): Explore how students engage with different forms of assessment and the impact of the assessment process on their motivation to learn.
- Pharmacy: Develop curricular strategies for stronger professional identity, culture, and community amongst the pharmacy student cohort.

What we learned from phase one influenced and shaped our next step as each staff-student team reported back to their school or faculty on the outcomes of their projects and made recommendations for the future. Overall, feedback from participants was positive. The strongest indicator of the pilots' success is that all faculties involved have continued to work in partnership with their students in the design and implementation of learning and teaching. Each project has morphed into its own independent strategy with its own character and focus. For example, the pharmacy pilot has resulted in the development of a peer-mentor program and the science and engineering pilot has expanded to include other disciplines from within their school.

The pilots also identified some key challenges. We needed to find better ways to align SaP initiatives with other strategic priorities across the university so that working in partnership did not feel, especially for staff, as yet another task above and beyond their core duties. A couple of ways we have done this is by integrating SaP into course review processes and providing small grants for unit-based SaP strategies. Other challenges included building the capabilities of staff and students to engage in partnership and finding suitable meeting times and venues that worked with student and staff calendars. We have started to address this by delivering professional development workshops for staff and students and expanding our online resources. Even though there were challenges, the initial

evaluation of impact for both staff and students was positive enough to encourage us to continue.

Phase 2: Identify and implement strategies

Phase two aimed to build on the success and lessons learnt in phase one and better integrate SaP into institutional systems and structures and provide opportunities for more staff and students to work in partnership. The first action was to establish a cross-institution SaP working party. It seemed logical that from the outset a whole-institution approach to partnership should be done in partnership with students and staff, both academic and professional. Students and staff who had participated in the pilots as well as those who had not were invited to join. A Participatory Action Research framework (PAR) guided our process. PAR has been utilised as a collaborative enquiry approach to SaP in a number of initiatives (Seale, Gibson, Haynes, & Potter, 2015). Both PAR and SaP emphasise non-hierarchical relationships and involve collaborative agenda setting, sharing in decisions about processes, and group problem solving skills. Over the past year, the SaP working party has met for 2 hours every 6 weeks to unpack what enables or inhibits the cultural shift towards working in partnership with students at an institution. Our first task as a group was to define our goal, clarify our purpose, and refine our research question to focus our inquiry. Our goal was that SaP become “just the way we do things,” and our question was action based: “What will it take for SaP to be just part of the way we do things”?

As a group, we reflected on the outcomes of the pilots and identified different strategies to enable partnerships between staff and students. The next task determined by the group was to define the guiding principles for SaP at QUT. These guiding principles would then be used as a reflection tool to check that, first, we were progressing according to these principles and second, that the principles truly did align with the organisational culture and priorities. The wording of the principles is consciously active and strength based to reflect the values and vision of QUT. Our principles are:

- *SaP is relevant because it satisfies needs, affirms values, and invites action.*
- *SaP is inclusive because anyone, anyhow and anywhere, is acknowledged as able.*
- *SaP is respectful because participants responsibly see, hear, and act on contributions.*

The first principle emphasises the importance of integrating SaP into authentic learning opportunities that build graduate capabilities; the second acknowledges that opportunities to be involved in SaP need to be visible and accessible to all; and the third principle directly speaks to SaP as a “way of doing” a process rather than a product (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014).

To increase opportunities for staff and students to test working in partnership, we invited proposals for SaP initiatives linked to the following institutional priority areas:

1. Authentic assessment and its relationship to academic and professional integrity as it is at the heart of the “real world” of teaching and learning.
2. Whole of course design where staff and students focussed on a three to four year program of study rather than an individual semester long subject or unit. This past semester we supported eight projects in area 1 and five course-team SaP projects in area 2.

Our belief is that the more SaP is embedded within existing mechanisms of the university, the more it will become inclusive and accessible for students and staff.

In phase two we developed ways to recognise and reward contribution and expanded the strategies developed in phase one to build the capacity of both staff and students to engage in partnership. For example, during phase one; we facilitated workshops for the students involved to build their capacity to engage in partnership. In phase two, we investigated ways to build capacity and acknowledge contribution through other areas of the university. For example, we negotiated that the contribution of student participants in SaP projects be recognised on the pilot co-curricular record and linked SaP participants in with the leadership and development program. Similarly, we approached capacity building for staff at a number of levels. To broaden the reach of the conversation across the university we (staff and students) jointly led a conversation around SaP at the QUT Senior Leaders Group Conference, and invited all professional and academic staff to attend professional development workshops on SaP throughout the academic year. We developed (and continue to develop) resources for students and staff that provide examples and strategies that groups can implement.

The working party identified areas where we believed embedding SaP would have the most impact. We worked with the Academic Development team to embed SaP into an assessment item in the Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice for early career academics and had SaP incorporated as a key enabling strategy into the University Vision statement “2020 Real World Learning Vision” (QUT, 2017) We conducted a preliminary audit of policy and other key institutional documents to understand where SaP already existed and identified where embedding SaP in policy and procedures would enable SaP in practice. We worked with the curriculum review team to revise the language used throughout course accreditation and re-accreditation documentation to be more in line with working in partnership with students (rather than just consulting them) and to require course teams to provide not only evidence of partnership with students but also how partnerships had shaped course design.

Two conversation threads recurred during the working party meetings: first, how to measure our success in embedding SaP, and second, if SaP was the right fit for our students and institution. In response, we formed a mini-working party group of staff and students and developed whole-institution evaluation strategies for SaP. We are now in the process of collecting baseline quantitative and qualitative data on students’ and staff members’ knowledge and perceptions of SaP. If we are looking at SaP being part of the way we do things at QUT, we need to first measure the current state of awareness and participation in SaP activities.

Another strategy to gauge interest in SaP at QUT has been to create opportunities for those staff and students who have been involved to share their experience with others and celebrate their successes. The sharing of practice through a half-day symposium demonstrated that opportunities to celebrate and share SaP initiatives are important in fostering a sense of pride and accomplishment in both staff and students and for piquing community interest in SaP.

The final significant strategy to grow SaP at an institutional level was to fund a dedicated position to coordinate SaP across the university. The creation of this position signalled the university’s commitment to SaP as a long-term initiative. The employment of a dedicated third-party facilitator or supporter is strongly advocated in SaP literature and has

proven to be very useful in our context (Bergmark & Westman, 2016; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014).

In summary, phase two has seen some significant progress towards embedding SaP within the culture of the University. This has been achieved by both supporting practice across faculties and disciplines, and working at a strategic level to integrate SaP language and values into core processes.

Phase 3: Systems and structures

We are now at the point of transitioning from phase two into phase three. In 2017, we will work with each faculty to look at their systems and structures to support working in partnership with students and find ways to sustain practices that are not resource intensive. This includes continuing to look at ways we reward and recognise staff working in partnership, and trialling a mentorship program within faculties where staff and students now experienced in SaP can support emerging practitioners. We are also keen to investigate how we educate new staff by introducing SaP as the norm rather than the exception. For SaP to be enabled, we need to build a culture that values student engagement and participation beyond the classroom. To achieve this, we plan to work with students-as-researchers investigating how we engage with students in academic governance and the deliberative structures surrounding teaching and learning at an institution-wide, faculty, school and discipline level. Together, staff and students will develop a five-year implementation plan to guide SaP at QUT into the future.

KEY LEARNINGS AND INSIGHTS

This case study of how one university approached embedding SaP across an institution has itself been a partnership between staff and students. With each phase, our own understanding of the concept has matured which has deepened and enriched the process. We have all learnt much along the way. In our context, it has been important to invest in strategies at a number of levels that enable partnership, from high-end policy and protocols to providing a structure for people to engage in SaP and make it their own. Embedding SaP requires a shift in culture. For some disciplines, staff, and students, this shift is small; for others it is monumental. Cook-Sather (2014, p. 186) refers to SaP as a threshold concept that is “troublesome, transformative, irreversible, and integrative”. We have experienced all of these responses. Although we are in the early stages of evaluating impact on staff, students, and practice, we are seeing benefits emerging for both staff and students. For example, in a current project that explored ways to improve teamwork, students were asked to use a word to describe teamwork. The words used by students to describe the experience shifted from “painful,” “challenging,” and “frustrating” pre-SaP to “successful,” “productive,” and “fun” post-SaP. The academic staff teaching into the Unit also reported a greater sense of satisfaction when the Unit was designed and delivered in partnership with students than without (Naumann et al., 2016). One of our next tasks is to collate individual project evaluations and outcomes to identify common themes.

What we have learnt so far is that we need to provide opportunities for staff and students to have a sense of ownership and autonomy over the process rather than it being a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach. We acknowledge that different contexts require or allow different types of partnerships. Challenges that continue are the logistics of partnership and access to opportunities for all students. At QUT, like many other universities, most students have other demands competing for their time, such as work and

family, in addition to study. Again, finding ways to embed rather than have SaP as an add-on activity will hopefully help achieve this. There is still a long way to go, but SaP is gaining traction within the university. This relative success has been due in large part to aligning SaP with the vision of the university and staggering the implementation in a way that is responsive to the needs of our students now and in the future. However, underlying all phases and strategies have been two key enablers. First, we have had strong endorsement of SaP from the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Learning and Teaching, and the Vice Chancellor. Second, we have approached the implementation of SaP at the institutional level by modelling the way we are asking people to work—in partnership with students and guided by the principles of relevance, inclusivity, and respect.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Natasha Shaw is the Coordinator of Students as Partners at QUT. Her background is community cultural development and education. She is particularly interested in pedagogies that facilitate transformational learning.

Caroline Rueckert is Director, Student Success at QUT. Prior to commencing at QUT, Caroline was Program Director for First Year Student Initiatives at the University of British Columbia in Canada. Her interests are in building partnerships to enhance employability, student learning, cross-cultural issues in higher education, and facilitating student resilience and well-being through coordinated approaches to learner support.

Judith Smith as Associate Director, Academic, Real World Learning at QUT, is responsible for providing university-wide leadership to curriculum transformation and real world learning in strategy, policy, curriculum design and pedagogy. Judith is also a Board member of Australian Collaborative Education Network and chair of their Research Subcommittee.

Jennifer Tredinnick is Coordinator, Volunteer Development and Management at QUT. Jennifer is experienced in supporting partnerships in both the UK and Australia in community, school and university contexts. Particularly, Jennifer is interested in the participatory and collaborative inquiry processes that underpin successful partnerships.

Maddison Lee is a 4th Year Law and Justice Student who has recently joined the Student Success and Retention team to develop resources for QUT's SaP initiative. Maddi has previously worked in student engagement and mentoring and is passionate about developing a new culture that encourages students to take advantage of opportunities in shaping their own learning environment.

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