

# A Collaborative Approach to Designing and Implementing Student-Staff Partnership Work

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**In this case study we describe the design and delivery of a student-staff partnership project relating to the Academic Learning Centre (ALC) in Munster Technological University. The partnership team involved academic support staff, academic teaching staff, undergraduate students, and postgraduate students.**

## Introduction and Context

The aim of the project was to rethink and redesign how the ALC communicates and promotes its services to the wider student body within the context of emergency remote teaching and learning due to COVID-19.

The project team were guided by the Project Officer (PO) from a new programme, Le Chéile, which supports staff/student partnership activities from within The Student Engagement Office (AnSEO). In MTU, the Le Chéile programme operates within AnSEO (The Student Engagement Office) and offers resources and processes that scaffolds staff and students to engage with each other and work together.

During this project the methods and extent of interaction between the Le Chéile PO and the partnership team were mindfully reviewed through regular discussions between the Le Chéile PO and the ALC Coordinator. The aim was to design a structure that could be used with future projects to enable sustainable scalability to increase the number of such projects that could run concurrently in the future.

## Research and Development

Partnership work with students has diverse definitions in various contexts. In our project, we took our lead from Healey, Flint and Harrington and used the term ‘partnership’ to mean “a relationship in which all involved - students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students’ unions, and so on – are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together”. We also concur that, “it is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself”, (Healey, et al., 2014).

The benefits of partnership for students are well documented. Positive outcomes include: increased student engagement and motivation, increased confidence and self-efficacy, and increased understanding of staff experiences, (Mercer-Mapstone, et al., 2017). Felten, Bovill & Cook-Sather (2014) propose that staff also benefit greatly from involvement in partnership activity.

The student staff partnership project team was intentionally comprised of a diverse selection of staff and students. An email was sent to all students inviting applications for the role of partner on a joint student/staff partnership project exploring the effectiveness of communications to students used by the Academic Learning Centre. Students were offered €150 in vouchers in return for approximately twelve hours of work across six weeks.

Eighty-eight students applied for the role and six were selected. It proved more difficult to recruit staff to the team due to time constraints and challenges already being faced with remote teaching. One lecturer/tutor from the Academic Learning Centre agreed to be involved along with the coordinator of the centre. A further two staff from MTU’s Library service joined the team mid-way through the project.

## Actions Taken During Project

Action	Brief Description
Relaxed first meeting	The first meeting was a ninety-minute online meeting, led by the Le Chéile Project Officer. The purpose of this session was to allow the team to connect and get to know each other. The group were introduced to the staff/student partnership model and the project. This initial meeting allowed the team to have discussions about how they might work together, communicate and coordinate team meetings.
Agreed Expectations	During this first meeting, the team agreed the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To meet for 1 hour per week over a period of 6 weeks, allowing for a further 1 hour of asynchronous work.</li> <li>• To communicate via WhatsApp.</li> <li>• To use Google Docs as a platform for ideas and tasks.</li> <li>• To use a shared Google document to track progress and share ideas asynchronously during the week.</li> <li>• To establish a system of rotating chairperson so that each member of the team had the opportunity to chair or co-chair a session and set the agenda.</li> </ul>
Regular meetings with ongoing support	Weekly meetings proceeded with the system of rotating chair as described above. Ongoing support was provided by the Le Chéile PO to the ALC Coordinator to check in on how the project and partnership work was evolving.
Co-Created final product	The final product of the project was an ideas board on Padlet created collaboratively by all the team members. This gathered the ideas for ways to communicate about the ALC to the student body. Some key discussion points highlighted included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep email communications short and sweet.</li> <li>• Create an Instagram account.</li> <li>• Lecturer recommendations count most.</li> <li>• Clearly communicate to students the benefits of engaging with the service.</li> </ul>
Debrief and reflection	Following completion of the project, the members were invited to a de-brief meeting with the Le Chéile PO. This gave participants the opportunity to reflect on their experience of partnership and to discuss the benefits and challenges they experienced with this style of project work. Themes emerged from these de-briefs which will inform how future student/staff partnership projects will be supported by Le Chéile.

## Reflections on Engagement

Following the debrief discussions and our own reflections, we identified four important themes:

- Hierarchy in Partnership
- Empathy and gaining insight into each other's perspectives.
- Skills development
- Discomfort and uncertainty

### **Hierarchy in Partnership**

Both students and staff commented on equality and the flattened hierarchy within the project. Staff could see that students were stepping up and taking on responsibility for the project. Staff members commented that they felt that responsibility for the success of the project was equally shared between students and staff meaning that they felt like they were in a team of equals.

*Staff partner: "...felt like there was great equality, no inhibitions...could see students taking notes and driving the agenda."*

Students liked the sharing of opinions and noted the importance of making sure all voices were heard. They mentioned the student voice was given equal importance with the staff voice and that the engagement with the students' opinions felt real.

*Undergraduate student: "I felt valued as equal partners rather than just being in the student 'role'."*

The sharing of the role of meeting chair was key to achieving this flattened hierarchy within the project. Since each team member took a turn chairing a meeting, power was shared among the members.

### **Empathy and Gaining Insight into each other's Perspectives**

Working in partnership allowed both students and staff to gain insight into each other's worlds and to deepen their empathy towards the position of the other. One comment from the postgraduate involved in the project sums up the insights, empathy, and community building:

*Postgraduate student: "I have learned a lot about how things worked on an institutional level and how we can collectively help each other out."*

Through the process of working in partnership, the student partners started to see the human face of the institution. Reciprocally, the staff were exposed to the effort and enthusiasm put into the project by the students.

## **Skills Development**

The students on this project embraced the unknown and used the opportunity to try new things, and practise ways of working that might not have been familiar to them. Examples of this included volunteering to chair meetings, creating and driving agendas, note-taking and using Padlet to share ideas.

Staff partner: *“I could clearly see the increase in skill set from the students leading the meetings.”*

## **Discomfort and Uncertainty**

One of the most common experiences in much of the literature on student/staff partnership work is that of participants feeling “uncomfortable” with this new way of working. Partnership work challenges participants to set their roles within institutions to one side and embrace a flat structure. This notion of stepping outside hierarchical roles was more challenging than expected for participants.

Staff partner: *“I realised very quickly during the meeting that it might be difficult for me to step back and let this go where the students take it. It’s not my business to dictate where it goes. It feels strange to step back and let it run in an unexpected direction.”*

For student staff partnerships to work effectively and democratically, participants may need to lean into the discomfort of dropping their role.

## **Conclusion**

The fact that participants commented on the lack of hierarchy indicates that we achieved a level of ‘real’ partnership as discussed in the literature through the project work. Through awareness and reflection, and despite some discomfort felt, we made progress overcoming challenges associated with starting something new and different. We hope that as the team members from this partnership begin to work in other partnership projects (as has already happened) there will be ripple effects which start to create an institution with a ‘partnership mindset’. Students and staff both commented on an increased awareness of, and empathy towards the positions of others. This highlights the fact that a level of ‘humanness’ was reached in the partnership project. Although difficult, the team made steps towards leaving their professional and student identities at the virtual door of the meeting.

An interesting aspect of our project was the impact of the supporting structures around the project and how this can be expanded to include a growing number of projects. We discovered the usefulness of having a resource external to the project team to assist in focusing the group on working in partnership, rather than solely on the project output. There was a very deliberate effort made at building relationships and explaining how partnership works. The Project Officer helped facilitate the team to organise how they might work and communicate together.

As a result of the work with the Academic Learning Centre, Le Chéile will be implementing the following actions for future projects.

- In our recruitment material, we will continue to be explicit about what partnership work entails so that those interested are informed of the nature of the work.
- Ensuring all initial team meetings are facilitated by the Le Chéile PO with a focus on the group getting to know one another, building relationships and explaining the realities of partnership work.
- Inviting a student and staff member who have been part of a previous partnership project to join the first team meeting to share their experiences.
- Providing light touch coaching for team members who may not be experienced in setting agendas/chairing meetings.
- Providing some resources on partnership work for those interested.
- Continuing to provide mentoring and support to the team as they progress through their project.

## Supporting Evidence and References

- Bovill, C. (2017). A Framework to Explore Roles Within Student-Staff Partnerships in Higher Education: [Which Students are Partners, When, and in What Ways?](#) *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(1).
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