Chapter Title: On the Origin of Student Fellows: Reflections on the Evolution of Partnership from Theory to Practice

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Abstract: Student engagement at the University of Winchester has thrived in an higher education environment that has been hospitable to the growth of diverse initiatives. Winchester's flagship initiative is the Student Fellows Scheme, a student engagement opportunity that enables students and staff to work in partnership on an educationally purposeful or student experience enhancing project. This chapter will follow the evolution of the Student Fellows Scheme, exploring its development amidst a changing environment of institutional needs and the higher education landscape more widely. Further to this, it will critically discuss the limitations to partnership working and explore the hostile environments that could inhibit further evolutionary development.

> *Whoever is led to believe that species are mutable will do good service by conscientiously expressing his conviction; for only thus can the load of prejudice by which this subject is overwhelmed be removed.*
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> *Charles Darwin- On the Origin of Species (1876:423)*

Student engagement has long been a key strategic priority at the University of Winchester, with an aim to be 'one of the leaders in the University sector' in this field (University of Winchester Strategic Plan, 2015-2020:6). Winchester is a small-medium sized institution with a broad remit that focuses on humanities, liberal arts and has roots in primary education. It is an institution that prides itself on its values-driven education. This habitat has been the ideal breeding ground for a diverse biosphere of practice across the institution, in various forms, provisions and initiatives, all evolving convergently around working in partnership with students (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; NUS, 2012). While Winchester has been commended (QAA, 2012; 2016) and celebrated for these practices (Guardian Higher Education Awards 2015, NUS/HEA Partnership awards 2014), adaptation is essential to thrive in what can be seen as the hostile ecosystem of contemporary higher education (Moran & Powell, 2018). In light of this, we continue to evolve our practice to ensure it stays relevant to students and, above all, engaging. One such example of Winchester's commitment to student engagement evolution has been the emergence of a Centre for Student Engagement, after a team determined its necessity to ensure all students had an awareness of all student engagement initiatives and the opportunity to choose their level of engagement with them (Shaw & Lowe, 2017; Lowe, Shaw, Sims, King & Paddison, 2017). This particular adaptation in the evolution of engagement was driven in staff-student partnership from a Student Fellows Scheme project, which highlighted the conflicting definitions of student engagement and the need for students to have a single accessible place to go to engage with opportunities (Shaw, 2016; Shaw & Sims, 2016). This chapter will discuss the Student Fellows Scheme in relation to its evolutionary development in light of the both

hospitable and hostile environments locally and in the higher education sector. In doing this, we will draw on a range of stretched and often tenuous metaphors of evolution to illustrate both the challenges faced and that successful adaptations are key to developing a culture of partnership. The authors of this chapter have both coordinated the Student Fellows Scheme and acted as staff partners and one has been a Student Fellow. As such, this chapter is informed by reflections from our varied perspectives on the scheme across the years. This chapter will follow the Student Fellows Scheme's ever-developing structure, focus, partnership levels and legacy, as the scheme continues to refine itself in the spirit of evolutionary anagenesis.

An environment hospitable to growth

The Student Fellows Scheme (SFS) is Winchester's flagship student engagement initiative, a scheme that is continuously looking for ways to adapt to suit student and staff needs. It is a student-staff partnership initiative, co-directed by the University of Winchester and Winchester Student Union, which provides sixty students with a bursary to work in partnership with a member of staff on a project that will lead to an enhancement of the student experience (Sims, Lowe, Hutber, & Barnes, 2014). The SFS developed through debates in the UK higher education sector surrounding partnership and student ownership in order to ensure mutually beneficial change (Dunne and Zandstra 2011, Healey, Flint & Harrington 2014) Partnership is a concept that has gained significant traction in higher education internationally (Mercer-Mapstone et al 2017), but the UK focus took shape through the 'call to arms' presented by the National Union of Students in the *Manifesto for Partnership* (Wenstone 2012). This was not a document with a theoretical, or perhaps even philosophical approach, but a pragmatic and democratic one spurred by the sense that British higher education was changing. This is manifest in the funding relationship changing in the UK with the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees in 2012. Alongside this atmospheric shift in higher education the Quality Assurance Agency's Chapter B5 Student Engagement (QAA 2012) and bodies such as TSEP (The Student Engagement Partnership) and SPARQS (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland) emerged, focusing energy and institutional motivation on student engagement. This movement called for partnership as a resistance to a consumerist model where students pay fees and are treated as customers (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009). This championed partnership as a process (Healey, Flint and Harrington 2014) and a paradigm shift in relationships between staff and students. With this national, student-driven agenda in mind we developed a scheme that tried to embody these principles. Key to this is the notion (repeated in bold type in the original document) that 'The sum total of an institution's student engagement mechanisms does not equal partnership' (Wenstone 2012:3). It was not enough to meet the rallying cry of this manifesto by slapping a partnership label on an existing practice or rebranding something institutions planned to do anyway. This meant a fundamental reassessment of the way that students and staff collaborated institution-wide. However, complex animals originated from single cell organisms. To build and encourage partnership to develop as an ethos at Winchester, starting from a discreet activity that was genuinely built upon and to promote partnership, was an essential first step. The work of the

NUS and others had created a hospitable environment nationally for partnership, which manifests in the thriving student engagement activity within Winchester's ecosystem.

The Student Fellows Scheme structure has evolved greatly since its beginning in 2012. The scheme began as a small-scale JISC funded FASTECH project at the University of Winchester and Bath Spa University (Hyland *et al,* 2013). Initially, there were only 8 projects that ran across semester two and at this stage in the scheme's existence, the projects were solely focused on technology enhanced learning. This variation in the DNA of student engagement proved a successful adaptation and there was keen stakeholder interest for the Student Fellows Scheme projects to continue in the following year, scaled up and for a longer period of time. This lead to the scheme evolving into an opportunity for 60 students to work on a project from October, after the September recruitment phrase, until May at the Student Fellows Conference. The Student Fellows Scheme is co-owned in it's day to day running and evaluation by the university and the Student Union (for more information see El-Hakim, King, Lowe, & Sims, 2016). The Student Fellows project's have thrived in the partnership environment at Winchester, which has led to a shift and expansion in their focus across the years of the scheme. Initially, at the scheme's inception, the projects were given a targeted focus on technology enhanced learning. Thereafter, the project's' focus broadened from just technology to any pedagogical initiative and development, such as assessment and feedback (Shaw & Sims, 2017). This focus has since mutated into a scheme that has adapted to suit all manner of environments and student and staff needs, engaging over 300 students across five years.

From the primordial soup to sprouting legs

Emerging from the 'warm little pond' (Darwin, 1863) that birthed it, Student Fellows has now climbed up on land to stand tall as a mature partnership initiative. SFS provides a platform for students to work with a member of staff from across the institution to actively shape any part of their student experience, leading to over 200 completed projects since its inception. Projects that have come from this expansion have had a significant impact on the student experience, whether large or small scale. Such projects include spaces and events for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, a lounge with showers and kitchen facilities for commuting students and an annual festival dedicated to celebrating the different cultures of students across campus. This shift has been driven by demand from the institution, the staff and the students, as the effectiveness of the model has been seen. There are still projects that focus on pedagogical aspects of the student experience, for example this year there have been co-designed modules in both the Accounting & Finance and Film Production programmes, but the scheme is not limited to this focus as in the previous stages of the scheme's evolution. The scope of projects has also grown, with an aim of changing institutional policy and structures, for example in 2018 a Student Fellows project engaged students in redeveloping the University's Learning & Teaching Strategy. The responsive evolution of the scheme toward fewer boundaries and greater scope gives staff and students a sense of agency and ownership over their experience. A key legacy of the scheme has been its adaptability to both student and staff needs on campus

and wider trends in the higher education sector (for further explanation of this practice see El-Hakim et al 2016).

The scheme's scope for projects needed to make sure it was evolving to suit the new cultural climate of students, which has changed considerably since the scheme's inception in 2013, which we will explore later in the chapter. The scheme has also, more recently, had to adapt to a shift in student's needs for structure and time frame. The projects have been running from October to May each academic year, since 2014. This has recently been reconfigured in order to adapt to the change in student needs, where students were dropping out of the scheme due to workload pressures, taking up employment opportunities to fund their time at university, or due to unforeseen circumstances. The students are often frustrated with having to withdraw because they want to see their projects through to completion, but do not have the ability to commit to a full year. This has proven particularly prevalent in third year students who in the second semester are completing their final year projects. Students were expressing a desire for a short and fast project, rather than a long and thin project.

In 2018 the Student Fellows Scheme piloted "fast-track" Student Fellows projects. This gave students the ability to complete a Student Fellows project with reduced workload expectations and less time committed. The pilot was a great success, as many students and staff applied with projects for semester two, to which they felt they were able to commit. The projects are smaller in size, but equally as valuable for getting the students voice heard through working in partnership. Examples of these fast-track projects include engaging history students in the wider community, ethical approaches to food on campus and innovative approaches to student feedback. For the academic year 2018/19 a full roll out of the optional "fast-track" Student Fellows projects will mean students can apply with a project they only need to commit to for a single semester. The adaptations to the Student Fellows Scheme has come from the scheme's commitment to student and staff feedback. The university's Student Engagement Advisory Group, made up of staff and students, determined the necessary changes and shaped the new structure for the scheme from a range of viable options. The outline of the new structure for the scheme can be seen below in Figure 1. It is imperative that the Student Fellows Scheme remains a flexible partnership model. The scheme will continue to be responsive to the higher education environment and adapt accordingly. Change is necessary for schemes such as this to survive.

Student Fellows Timeline 2018-19
INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE
Figure 1.

Biodiversity and ecology

There are numerous considerations to bear in mind when embarking on developing partnership activities, particularly if the intent is for them to evolve into something beyond the confines of one discrete activity. The Student Fellows is predicated on the concept that there is a shared

sense of what the university is, what it is for (Readings, 1996) and a shared culture to which staff and students contribute but also share responsibility. This is not a mechanism for just giving students what they want because they have asked for it, but emphasising the need for evidence-based practice (Pring and Thomas, 2004) as a challenge to the developing landscape of consumerism. A key part of SFS is encouraging students to engage with other students to demonstrate that there is a need for the change they intend to make and why this matters. This means that not all projects are 'fixing a problem' but are developing innovations that staff and students deem worthwhile. Those that are changing an aspect of the institution do so based on democratic ideals; that it will benefit the many and not the few because they are representing more than just their own voice. This does mean that not all SFS projects make changes. If students have engaged with the wider community and collected empirical evidence, which suggested that people were happy with the status quo, then it validates that good practice is already occurring and no change is necessary. This would not be considered an unsuccessful project, but rather adding to a body of evidence to support our continuing practices.

Partnership is key to ensuring a democratic approach, both in the organisation of the scheme and the individual staff-student partnerships within. Shared involvement in the management, participation and evaluation of the scheme gives genuine ownership and partnership at all levels. To develop effective and representative change it is necessary to ensure that anyone involved in the institution can be involved. As the scheme is co-owned by the Student Union and University, this means decisions made about what projects are viable for the scheme are done with the interest of both of these groups. The important role that unions play in championing not only student voice but democracy is an important thread running through the DNA of the scheme. There is also a degree of pragmatism around the way the SFS works. Partnership has been employed as a theoretical framework (Healey et al 2014), an ideological imperative (Wenstone, 2012) and a 'trend' (Bovill, 2013), however, broadly speaking, the SFS exists to deliver practical benefits and is pragmatic at its core. Pairing staff members with students in order to conduct projects is often seen as a solution to immediate problems or to allow much needed room for innovation. Co-ownership with the Student Union is fundamental to the schemes authenticity as an institutional partnership initiative, but also comes with practical benefits such as engaging a wider student audience. The scheme itself needs to be evaluated to ensure it remains relevant and effective, conducting this with students ensures that throughout the priorities of students are represented and that the outcomes benefit students. A partnership ethos is threaded throughout the scheme's operation and philosophy to practically address the demands of the environment.

Hostile environments?

As outlined above, one rationale for embedding partnership in such a discrete activity was as a first step towards broader cultural evolution institutionally. The potential for a much celebrated scheme to become seen as 'where partnership happens' can imply that it is the only place partnership should happen. Indeed by paying students to take part in Student Fellows, this

immediately sets it apart from other more organic student-staff partnerships, which is problematic if the paid roles are seen as having higher status. There is perhaps an inherent danger of ghettoising partnership, which could lead to an evolutionary dead-end. This reinforces the importance of normalising partnership working, so such activities do not seem like a localised novelty specific to one department or initiative, but an ethos interwoven to all university activity. This would also seem to reinforce ideas that partnership is only valued when it is performative. The public face of staff-student partnership can be very different to the local partnerships being developed between academics and students. Particularly if there is a perception of 'partnership' or student engagement being new 'buzzwords' (Gibbs 2014, Vuori 2014) that are foisted upon beleaguered academic staff drowning in administration and institutional dictats.

While much of the literature in favour of partnership cites it as being democratic and inclusive (e.g. Seale et al 2015, Sims et al 2017 and Shaw et al 2017), this is potentially challenged by the day-to-day experience of academics. This is well articulated by White (2016) who suggests that partnership undermines the authority of academics and this is wholly driven by the consumerisation of universities. The counter-argument to this tends to say that partnership is a process of involving students more in their university experience and that this is not to challenge existing knowledge or authority. Partnership draws on the fact that students are experts in being students, even if they lack the pedagogic or disciplinary expertise of staff (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten 2014) Rather, their experience and expertise typically is in being a student. The way this is addressed on Student Fellows is to make it clear to staff and students when promoting the scheme that partnership does not necessarily mean equality of time, effort or expertise. Both partners will contribute to the project but this will naturally draw upon their capacity to do so and be informed by their prior experience. Key to this is that project ideas can be developed by staff, students or existing partnerships, which allow the nature of the balance to be evident from the outset. This also requires the coordinators of the scheme to play a significant role in negotiating the nature of partnerships. This involves supporting staff and students to establish boundaries that respect both the academic freedom and expertise of the staff and the expertise that comes from the experience of the student.

An additional challenge is that by establishing a discrete activity, with funding attached there is a necessary degree of gatekeeping about what projects are deemed acceptable. Staff and students apply to the scheme with project ideas which are then scrutinised based on their likelihood of success. There are a number of reasons why we judge that a project may not be successful. These include, previous projects in a similar area (whether successful or not), the scope being too big (particularly in terms of time), being unable to find an appropriate partner (staff or student) or that the idea is not a good fit with the remit of the scheme. Each of these are subjective and therefore at risk of falling foul of the prejudices and preconceptions of the SFS coordinators. The partnership between the Student Union and university is designed to help ameliorate this dilemma in Student Fellows. As the scheme is run with a genuine desire to advance staff-student partnership, the agendas of both the university and union are largely

aligned. However, these are two separate organisations and there can be tensions in satisfying what both the institution wants and what those applying to the scheme want.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have discussed the myriad changes to the Student Fellows Scheme in the light of a changing higher education sector and shifting institutional needs. As these changes have occurred, we have endeavoured to ensure that these practical adjustments are always made with the intent of advancing the cause of staff-student partnership working. To turn theory into practice it is important to first recognise that a number of factors are brought to bear on both the theory and the practice. In the inherently challenging and complex environment of a university, shifting cultural expectations of how and when it is appropriate to work with students takes time. While there is significant support from across our institution for the principle of working in partnership, this is by no means total. As discussed, a risk of such a high-profile scheme being seen as the only source of partnership is one of which we have to be aware. In many ways, a fear of this has driven the expansion of the focus of the scheme from technology, to pedagogy to the whole student experience. It has also underpinned endeavours to recruit a wider range of staff and students from all corners of the university. However, these are practical solutions to perhaps a theoretical problem. This could be better addressed by supporting and normalising grassroots partnership, where there are mechanisms in place to support students and staff who want to work in partnership in their own contexts not necessarily attached to an initiative. This does not mean that such initiatives do not have their place in the normalisation of partnership, as they provide evidence that this model works and empower students to be the ones who approach staff with ideas. Balancing the development of partnership in this way also requires balancing competing pressures on the direction of such a scheme. The tension between being theoretically authentic while satisfying the needs of the institution involves a mixture of reflection, compromise and a stubborn adherence to core principles. Establishing a scheme that espoused laudable traits such as normalising partnership, challenging consumerism and generating a shared culture and meaning is highly unlikely to get off the ground. However, these are principles that should not be compromised but a practical idealist approach is necessary for embedded change. The prevalence of these challenges raises the importance of self-reflection, evaluation and engagement with a wider community to ensure staff-student partnership remains relevant as both a theory and practice. We are aware this discussion has been focused on a particular habitat, namely a small to medium sized, post-1992 university in the South of England. Just as different species shape and are shaped by their environmental conditions, exploring the common foundations of partnership cross-institutionally, and in greater depth, would allow a richer understanding of the evolution of the principles of staff-student partnership.

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