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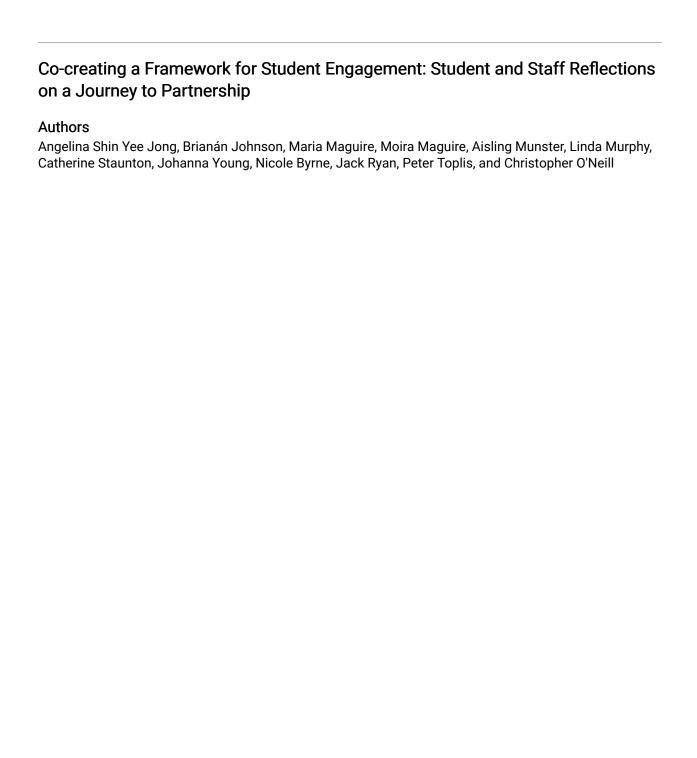
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CO-CREATING A FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: STUDENT AND STAFF REFLECTIONS ON A JOURNEY TO PARTNERSHIP

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Introduction

In this paper, we discuss a student-staff partnership initiative at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) to develop a framework to support and accredit student engagement. The initial project proposal was co-developed by the Students' Union, Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, and Student Services. The goals were to develop a framework to recognise, celebrate, and encourage student engagement and to support students in evidencing the employability skills developed by this engagement. Seven student interns were recruited to co-develop this framework. In this paper we discuss the process of the partnership. We will outline the context, the aims, and the nature of the initiative, but the primary focus will be on an analysis of our reflections on the process of working together to develop a framework for student engagement.

Background

There is widespread agreement that student engagement is a key enabler of student success and, as such, is an important focus for enhancement (e.g. Bowden, Tickle & Nauman, 2019; O'Farrell, 2019). Nonetheless, student engagement is defined and understood in various ways that have implications for how it is supported within institutions, and two broad traditions are recognised (see Buckley, 2018; Trowler, 2010). The first focuses on pedagogy and students' engagement with their studies, often drawing on national surveys, particularly in the US and Australasia. The second tradition is more concerned with student involvement in decision making, sometimes referred to as 'student voice.' This project draws on both and emphasises the breadth of extracurricular engagement within the institution. Trowler's definition (2010, p.3) was an important starting point for us:

> Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution.

While greater engagement benefits the institute community, it also has the potential to enhance the employability of the individual students concerned. Extracurricular activity plays an important role in developing the graduate attributes valued by employers, and this is recognised and sought by recruiters (Clark, Marsden, Whyatt, Thompson, & Walker, 2015).

As an institute of technology with an emphasis on applied programmes, DkIT has long emphasised employability as an important focus. However, students may find it difficult to contextualise generic skills (Jorre de St. Jorre & Oliver, 2017), and, increasingly, as staff we realised that as well as developing skills, students often need to learn how to recognise and demonstrate these. Thus, the aim of the project moved beyond recognition and promotion of student engagement to the development of a way to support and nurture the potential of such students so that they would be able to identify and express the value of their voluntary engagement both personally and professionally.

Context

DkIT is one of 11 institutes of technology in Ireland. It is situated in the north-east of the country, close to the border with Northern Ireland, and it provides a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes to approximately 5,000 students, a relatively high proportion of whom are first-in-family to participate in higher education. Approximately 16% are mature students and almost 10% are international students. DkIT has strong links with employers within the region, and most undergraduate programmes include a work placement.

The 'Partners in Employability' Project

This joint initiative was funded under the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning's 2018 Enhancement Fund. The partners, DkIT staff and Students' Union's President, worked together to develop the proposal. The project began in January 2019. The first phase focused on planning and preparation. This included extensive consultation with

students, staff, and employers, in addition to training and capacity building. The consultations were undertaken by the Students' Union and staff partners and included focus groups with student class representatives, 'pop-up' information and feedback sessions in coffee areas, discussions with relevant institute committees, and a survey of employers.

It became clear that, if students were to be partners in co-designing the framework, the size of the task meant most of this work would have to be undertaken after the exams. A number of studentships were advertised, supported by a stipend, that would allow students to contribute to the project over six weeks in June and July 2019. Over 30 applications were received and seven students were awarded the studentships. They were drawn from across all academic schools and all years of study.

The initial aim was to accredit the employability skills developed in the course of student extracurricular engagement. While the most straightforward option would have been to develop an elective module, DkIT's programme structures do not allow for stand-alone electives, and the consultations indicated a strong preference for an award rather than simply credits. Given this, we agreed to focus on developing a Special Purpose Award with the minimum value of ten credits on the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), which equates to approximately 200 hours of notional learner effort. While this would include some of the engagement activity itself, it still represents considerable effort on the part of the students, and it was clear that this would not be a realistic option for all interested students. The core project team decided to explore an interim honorary award; however, when the student interns joined the project, they proposed a 'flipped' approach whereby an honorary award would form the core of the framework. The Special Purpose Award would be something additional on top of this, which students could choose to work towards or not. It would be the 'cherry on the cake' rather than the cake itself.

Together, students and staff developed the 'Elevate Framework for Student Engagement at DkIT,' illustrated below. The first honorary Elevate Awards were presented in March 2020, and the DkIT 2021 Elevate Award will launch in September 2020. The Special Purpose award, the 'Certificate in Engagement and Employability,' was validated in February 2020, and we hope to offer it in academic year 2020/21.

Figure 1: The DkIT Elevate Framework for Student Engagement.

Reflecting on the Process

As this initiative was the first of its kind within the institution, it was important to capture the learning from it in order to build capacity and develop the work further. Following Moon (1999), reflection on the process was the first step, and we chose the Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Learning Cycle to guide our reflections, as the focus on emotions allowed us to capture an important aspect of the experience.

We completed individual written reflections after the summer internship had finished. This had the advantage of allowing us some distance to 'stand back' from the process, but competing demands and changes meant that some students and staff were not in a position to complete their reflection.

The group met on several occasions to review and discuss the reflections, and through these iterative discussions, themes were identified and refined as outlined below.

The Journey to Partnership

For all of us, students and staff, the metaphor of a 'journey' captured the essence of the process and reflected the significant changes in terms of the project itself, our expectations, and our working relationships.

We all had underestimated how much work would be needed to build the partnership in addition to developing the project. In addition, staff and students brought different expectations that led to tensions. Resolving these tensions allowed a genuine partnership to grow. This theme, the tension between structure and ownership, captures the essence of the journey. Resolving this tension involved shifting power, the second theme. Both themes are discussed below from both the student and staff perspectives.

Theme 1: Tension between structure and ownership

Student perspective

By definition, the term 'partnership' suggests equality. This project set out to create a partnership between students and staff to bring their own level of experience and expertise to the project. The concept was to get a student's perspective to shape the framework of an engagement programme, designed by students for students in partnership with staff.

During the early stages of the project, we understood that we had entered this project as partners: it was made clear that there was equality between the partners, we were reassured our voices were valuable and respected. However, we still needed time to grow and develop that partnership confidence for ourselves. As students, our daily workload required a certain amount of guidance and indeed students are used to being told what is expected of them.

As a group, we became frustrated by what we felt was a lack of guidance in the early weeks of the project. The staff partners had planned to allow these stages to be free and relaxed, which would allow us to find our own direction. While the staff wanted to give us the

freedom to encourage creativity, the students craved structure and guidance, since this was what we were used to. However, this freedom from structure gave us ample time to bond as a group and to know each other's strengths. This unity formed a strong relationship within the student group.

We worked together in one room and here, there was much discussion and debate. At the end of the first week we wrote on post-it notes what we liked, disliked, and would like to improve going forward. These were then displayed and all members of the team, both students and academic staff, could contribute. This was helpful for everyone. While the academic staff had a clear understanding of how to develop learning outcomes and the process of creating a course, we struggled initially. These evaluations helped us going forward.

There was tension between structure and ownership during these early weeks. From the students' perspective we had to learn a lot in a short space of time, and given our inexperience in the academic programme design process, we felt that we had no clear vision of what the end product would be. Frustrations grew as we found it difficult to recognise the progress that was being made as the project took shape.

Despite the tensions, we formed a strong bond and we had one voice together. Perhaps because the student numbers were larger than the staff, this gave us the confidence to push our ideas and opinions a little further than we would have, had we been in a smaller group. Of course, these tensions might have developed regardless because it is a natural part of the process of developing a new partnership (Reid, Hayes, & Stibbe, 2014).

At the end of the six weeks, all of us — students and staff — went for lunch together to celebrate all that we had managed to create in such a short space of time: a special purpose award, the DkIT Elevate award, presentation for a symposium, and learning resources along with many friendships.

Staff perspective

To work on a project where a genuine partnership between students, academic staff, and professional support staff was the explicitly named approach was innovative and meaningful for all of us. The bringing together of academic and professional support staff was in itself a divergence from too common siloed approach in Higher Education.

A core focus of the first phase of the project was capacity building for all project partners. One of the most impactful activities was a workshop on Working in Partnership, facilitated by the National Student Engagement Programme, in which Arnstein's 8 Step Ladder of Participation was applied to our individual roles, this project, and the wider institution. We wanted to avoid a form of partnership that resulted in tokenistic consultation and placation, where staff really set the agenda. We were very mindful of the power differential and keen to give the students ownership and freedom to identify their own priorities.

However, initially this did not work out as intended. The early feedback from the students was that they wanted a schedule given to them and were exasperated by what we perceived as giving them more control. While some tension between structure and freedom is almost inevitable on a project like this, this was frustrating for both parties. While initially we felt disappointed, we realised that our expectations had been unreasonable. All the students were

used to a structured environment within DkIT and it was not realistic, or fair, to expect them to adapt quickly to a different way of working and interacting. Fundamentally, our initial expectations were different, and we did not spend enough time exploring these and agreeing on a way forward.

As the work progressed, we found that we were able to draw on the students' own expertise more, and they seemed more confident. This also helped to rebalance the partnership. We began to note differences between the approach of staff and students. This was particularly apparent with regard to the question of the number of hours of extracurricular engagement that students would be required to undertake as part of the Special Purpose Award. In retrospect, we see that this issue was rooted in the initial emphasis on a Special Purpose Award and the associated 200 hours of notional effort. As the focus shifted, staff were keen to use 'hours' in a broad, indicative sense. Students who are engaged are already doing it for no external reward—presumably, from fairly intrinsic motivations (see Ryan & Deci, 2000). We were concerned that a focus on counting hours might have the unintended consequence of undermining motivation and harming, rather than promoting extracurricular engagement. Frustratingly, we found our group discussion returning time and time again to hours and exactly what hours would be awarded for each activity.

In terms of resolving these differences, full-group discussions were by far the most successful means of doing these. These began to work well from about halfway through the project, as we were able to balance power differentials with the team and as the students' confidence and autonomy grew. We all really listened to each other in these sessions and were able to arrive collectively at solutions that we all could live with. This led to greater trust and sense of genuine partnership, which in turn helped to rebalance power further and progress the project in meaningful ways.

Theme 2: Shifting power

Student perspective

One unanticipated detail that affected the power dynamics was the ratio of staff to students in the team with seven students, two Students' Union representatives, and three staff. This was important, as too many students would have been like a class, and with fewer students, the opinions of the staff might have been dominant. One of the key elements of the award, the notional hours for certain activities, was constructed based on this discussion. Without this ratio of students, there would not have been enough heads to bounce ideas off, different opinions and experiences to learn from, or that there would be too many different and opposing ideas, which could lead to the problem being unsolved. Once the student ideas were presented to the staff, each of us defended our combined idea from different points of views. This ensured that students and staff had equal opportunities on questioning and defending an idea.

Staff perspective

Having more students than staff and a strong student group identity were important, if unanticipated, means by which the power differentials were reduced. Unfortunately, unexpected work demands encroached on time that had been set aside for the project in the

early weeks. This exacerbated the frustration the students felt about the loose structure. In response, additional staff support was provided by two staff from the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, and this also provided an opportunity for the students to build expertise independently. However, an unexpected benefit was that the students had the opportunity to bond as a group and develop a strong identity. Having a shared working space was important in facilitating this. Although it was not deliberate, we were fortunate in that the students were representative of all schools and years, which brought real balance to the group and ensured a wide range of perspectives. It was important to have the experience of those graduating but equally important to have those at earlier stages, especially in terms of sustaining the benefits of the experience into the future.

The process of introducing concepts and ideas from both the field of teaching and learning and employability to the students was another important consideration in managing the power dynamic. Students needed to own these concepts so that they could operate with confidence and as equal peers in the process. As staff, it was important for us to allow space for discussion and reflection so that we, together, could deconstruct and reconstruct terminology and concepts, and apply them with shared authority.

Discussion

The process of partnership for us was a journey to resolve the tension between structure and ownership, and negotiate different needs and expectations. Shifting power was the means by which we travelled. This was facilitated by a diverse and cohesive student group, a favourable student-staff ratio, and the use of full group discussions to make decisions. Notwithstanding the initial challenges, the experience was a very positive one for all partners, and we have continued to work together on finalising the framework and disseminating the project.

This experience will also inform the further development of staff-student partnerships within the institution. In particular, it has highlighted the significant time commitment involved in building a partnership. Given the time pressures for both staff and students, it will be important to explore how to continue this kind of work in sustainable ways. The summer internship model was effective in freeing student time, and this is something we hope to continue. The internships were open to all undergraduates, attracting a good deal of interest. This was encouraging, and we regretted that we could not involve more students. Inclusivity is an important concern in this kind of partnership work (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard & Moore-Cherry, 2015) and it is important to carefully consider how inclusive partnership opportunities are (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019). The open application process and stipend were positive in this respect, but it will be important to explore ways to enable more students to become involved. The Elevate Framework itself may contribute by supporting an increasingly wide range of engagement initiatives.

Staff time is scarce too and is likely to remain so in the post COVID-19 environment. However, more careful planning would certainly help to make better use of the time that is available. Certainly, in the future, a more structured approach to the initial few days or week would be beneficial. The loose structure compounded the differing expectations that led to tension and frustration. We did not spend enough time considering these and agreeing a way forward, and this has been perhaps the greatest lesson learned. While some tension is

inevitable, and may be useful, exploring expectations at the outset would certainly have helped us to make the journey faster.

It is noteworthy that three of the factors that contributed to the success of the partnership—the diversity of the group, the cohesiveness of the group, and the student-staff ratio—were serendipitous. The number of internships was determined by the workload and funding available; the impact on the power differential was an unanticipated benefit that will inform future work. Similarly, the diversity in terms of stage, discipline, and background was very beneficial in the context of this project.

The project outcomes are significant within the institution. There is considerable enthusiasm and support for the Elevate Framework across the institution, and more engagement opportunities will be aligned to it over academic year 2020/21. This should have a positive impact on student engagement and partnership. The project has also provided a model for partnership: internships are planned for other projects and, for the first time, we are able to offer a small fund for student-led enhancement projects. The work is helping to evolve approaches to student engagement and partnership at an institutional level, and is informing relevant policy.

These outcomes will be important in encouraging the development of a culture more supportive to partnership; however, critical reflection on these processes and future initiatives will be essential to ensuring success.

Acknowledgements

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