



# PRACTICAL GUIDE

Scaling up  
student-staff  
partnership in  
higher education

2019  
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THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH



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## About the Authors

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## Foreword

Student-staff partnerships are a focus within many higher education institutions internationally, as the value of student agency for enhancing learning and wider university cultures is increasingly recognised. Universities ignore student contributions at their peril if they wish to be responsive, world-leading organisations of the future.

In recent years, student-staff partnership interest and practice has focused on scaling up individual practices into institutional-level partnership schemes. There is huge variation in the nature of these schemes, but most are unified in attempting to support greater collaboration between students and staff, and in recognising the added value of bringing student and staff perspectives together to enhance research and practice.

This guidance is timely and highly practical. Although there are many student-staff partnership schemes in the UK and further afield, there is little evidence-based guidance available to those wishing to establish or sustain an institutional project-based partnership scheme. The guidance in this resource, based on research and the experiences of the two authors, offers support and advice on all the important stages of gaining support, designing, implementing, and evaluating a partnership scheme. The guide also highlights critical considerations such as the training needs of students and staff, the importance of ensuring inclusivity, as well as some of the practical challenges that may be faced along the way.

Whatever the particular focus of your institutional project-based partnership initiative, this guidance will be of value. In my own experience, inviting students to share ideas and creativity in any setting transforms what is possible. Working in partnership thoughtfully can change our higher education institutions for the better.



**Dr Catherine Bovill**, Senior Lecturer in Student Engagement, Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh.



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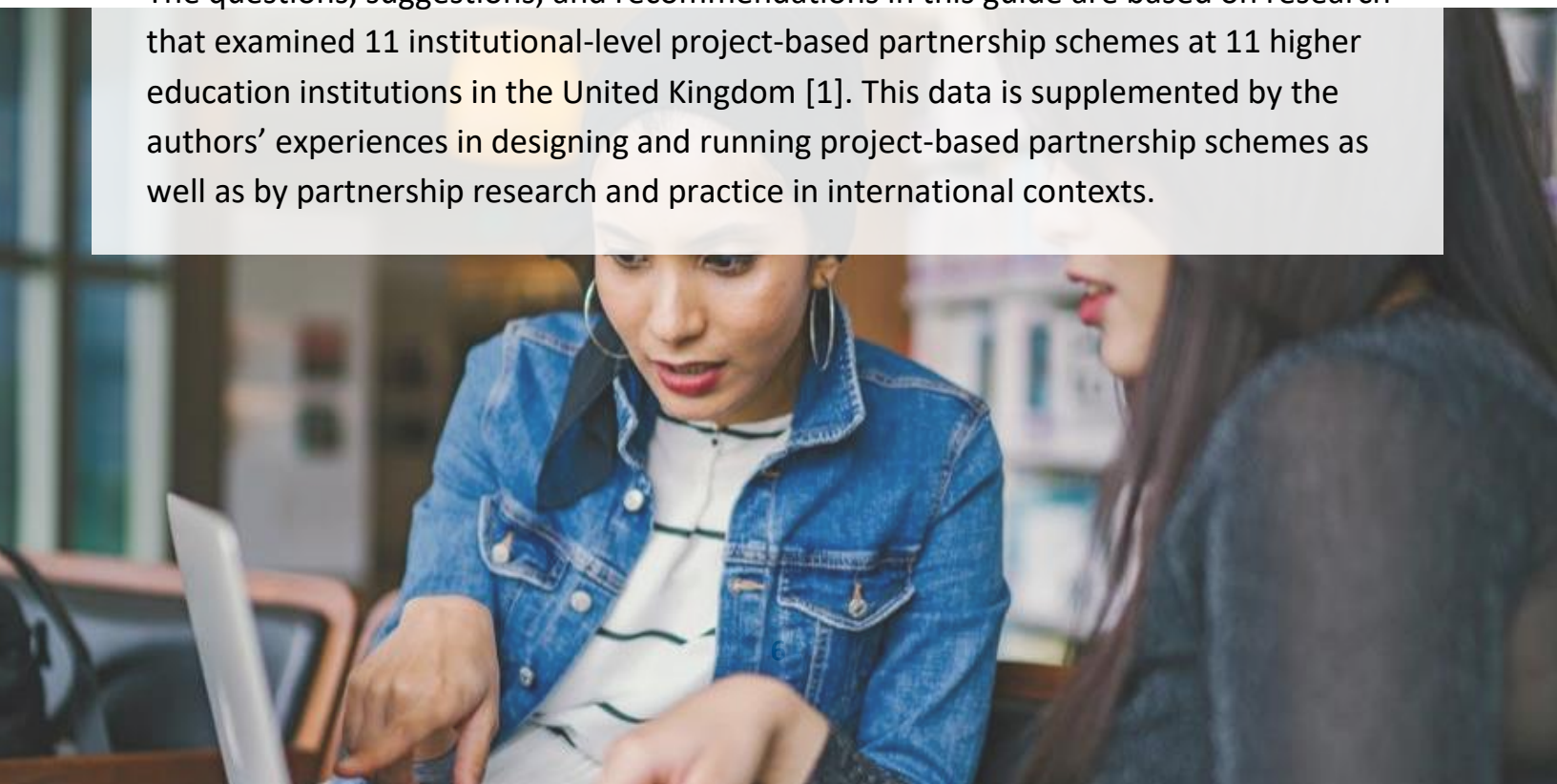
## Executive Summary

This practical guide is designed to support individuals, teams, or institutions in scaling up student-staff partnership (SSP or ‘partnership’, also commonly known as ‘students as partners’). The model presented here is a *projects-based model* which is one of the most common ways that institutions around the world have approached scaling up and embedding partnership within higher education.

The aim of this guide is not to present a single, ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to expanding partnership practices because, given the highly contextual nature of partnership, such an approach is unlikely to succeed. The purpose of this guide is to walk you through the multiple stages of scaling up a project-based model of partnership from gaining support and designing your initiative, through to implementation and evaluation. It aims to anticipate and answer the kinds of questions you might have as you progress through this process. Importantly, the guide encourages you to establish partnership values early and to revisit these regularly to ensure that your process of scaling-up partnership aligns with an ethos of partnership itself.

At each stage, the guide outlines suggestions for best practice and poses questions to prompt you to think deeply about how your initiative will work logistically as well as how you will foster authentic partnership throughout the process.

The questions, suggestions, and recommendations in this guide are based on research that examined 11 institutional-level project-based partnership schemes at 11 higher education institutions in the United Kingdom [1]. This data is supplemented by the authors’ experiences in designing and running project-based partnership schemes as well as by partnership research and practice in international contexts.



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## What is student-staff partnership?

Student-staff partnership (SSP or ‘partnership’, also commonly known as ‘students as partners’) is a way of thinking and practicing in higher education that re-positions students and staff as active collaborators in the diverse processes of teaching and learning – empowering students to be actively engaged in, and share the responsibility for, their own education [2].

Universities traditionally engage with students by listening to the ‘student voice’: asking students for their perspectives via surveys or course evaluations. Students as partners moves beyond seeing student perspectives as a source of data. Partnership actively engages students in the design, delivery, evaluation, decision-making, governance, and enhancement of teaching and learning [3].

SSP are values-based practices founded on:

- **A way of thinking** that positions students as partners, experts, and colleagues in – rather than evaluators of – teaching and learning [4].
- **A way of engaging** where teaching and learning is something that is *done with*, rather than *done to*, students [5].
- **A way of working** that nourishes partnerships based on respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility [2].

Importantly, partnership positions both students *and* staff as having different but equally valuable expertise to contribute to the process of teaching and learning [2, 6].

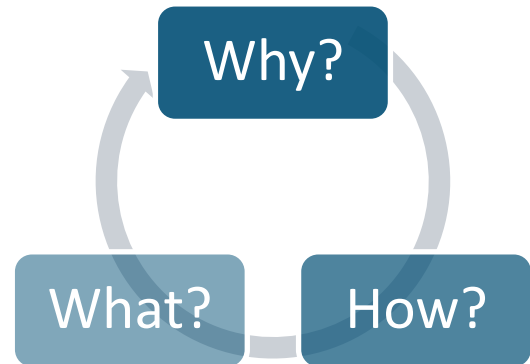
## What is the *project-based model* of student-staff partnership?

The model of project-based SSP is increasingly being adopted in efforts to scale-up partnership practices in higher education. This model views each individual SSP as a unique project – one where the goal, process, and outcomes are defined collaboratively by students and staff. While the focus of these projects can be on anything to do with teaching and learning – including what happens within the curriculum, in classrooms and online – the administration of the projects happens outside of the assessed curriculum.

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## Start with ‘why?’

[Research shows](#) that, when we hope to create change, it is best to start with the question ‘Why?’ It is natural, based on the way the human brain works, for us to just go straight into asking things like ‘how will it work?’ or ‘what will it look like?’ However, if you want to bring others along with you in that change – for example, encouraging uptake of your partnership initiative – we need to think about why such change is desirable or necessary and that questioning needs to come first. So, we strongly encourage you to follow these three stages of questioning as you develop your SSP initiative:



### 1. Why is partnership important or necessary for you and/or your institution?

This will stimulate discussions of values and goals. These should ultimately form the foundation of your initiative – being developed iteratively and reflexively, and revisited at every stage of development. As new partners come on board in later stages, you may need to reshape these values and goals to reflect those new perspectives.

### 2. How will partnership be developed and enacted in your initiative?

This goes down the path of discussing the process of adopting partnership in terms of, for example, identifying who should be involved and when? Will the process be co-created with students from the outset? How will that process align with your values and meet your goals? Existing SSP schemes have indicated that having widespread involvement in the co-creation of partnership initiatives is important for the successful implementation and uptake of those schemes.

### 3. What will partnership look like in your initiative?

This is the point where you begin thinking about what models of partnership will best meet your values and goals and other logistical considerations like what your initiative will be called. However, if you have decided to adopt a partnership approach to co-create your initiative at *Step 2*, things may need to slow down here before anything is set in stone. You need to acknowledge that much of the ‘what’ will come out of this process and, if others are involved, they will need to be able to have a meaningful say.

This guide covers all these stages across multiple sections but try to keep this overarching process in mind as you develop your initiative.



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## Understanding Your Context

Your context will greatly influence the shape that a successful project-based SSP scheme can take in your institution. Some of the things that you may wish to consider upfront – to get an initial lay of the land – are:

- ***Which institutional unit will operate the scheme?*** This will influence the goals and purpose of any scheme.
- ***What other support already exists for teaching and learning or student engagement projects?*** You will need to consider how you distinguish your scheme from existing projects or whether it is possible to combine, or collaborate with, them.
- ***What are the strategic priorities for teaching and learning at your institution?*** This may influence the priorities you adopt for the scheme in order to build support.
- ***Who are the key stakeholders for teaching and learning?*** You will want to make sure the scheme consults with them in development so that it meets or integrates their interests.
- ***What other partnership activity does the institution have?*** The more that you can create synergies between these, the more successful your scheme is likely to be.
- ***What resources can you create or draw on?*** This will affect the shape and scale of the scheme.
- ***Who can champion the initiative at a senior level?*** Bringing senior colleagues into conversations about SSP from the start and talking through your ideas and plans will be central to growing support.

Many of these questions are considered in greater depth below.

## Your Values and Goals

It is important to understand that partnership is different from ‘student voice’ as predominantly conceptualised in higher education. Universities tend to refer to student voice in a way that sees students as data sources where their opinions can inform changes in higher education, but the responsibility for enacting that change remains with staff. Partnership focuses on creating change together.

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***TOP TIP: Articulating your values and goals is something best done early and in partnership with students and staff working together – your scheme will be more inclusive and innovative as a result.***

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**Core values** of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility underlie partnership [2]. Other key values identified in the literature include: trust, courage, plurality, empowerment, inclusivity, honest, and authenticity [7]. Think about and clearly articulate which of these, or any other, values will form the foundation of your partnership initiative. See these as a springboard for everything within your initiative and revisit them whenever making an important decision.

You will also need to have **explicit but flexible goals** for what you and your institution might want to achieve through your partnership initiative. Are your goals the same as your institution's goals? If they align then this can make progress simpler, but if they are different you can see this as a way to opening up discussion about the values and aims of SSP at your institution. Where might your goals and values overlap or differ? How might you find common ground?

Partnership as an approach in higher education has many benefits such as: increasing a sense of belonging; developing ownership of, engagement in, and motivation for learning; enhancing academic achievement and resources; improving disciplinary and metacognitive learning; addressing educational inequities; building meaningful relationships and networks; and the development of important skills like collaboration and leadership. An extensive lists of benefits can be found in Tables 3 and 4 of [this article](#) [8]. Think carefully about what it is you hope to inspire, achieve, or change through your initiative and discuss these goals together with students and staff. Clearly articulate these goals and return to them frequently throughout all other processes detailed in this guide. Remember to be flexible – goals may need to adapt as you develop and progress your initiative.

## Gaining Support

Gaining enough support to get to the stage where you are ready to design and implement a SSP scheme is likely to be the most challenging and lengthy aspect of this process. Here are some questions to prompt your thinking about how to do this with some tips from research and practice.

### *Who will be your allies?*

You (and your team) will not be able to design and implement a SSP scheme alone. Who in your university will you need to collaborate with in order to gain wide-spread support for your SSP scheme? Think about what skills, knowledge, and networks you currently do and don't have and find allies to collaborate with who complement those.

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## ***From whom do you need support?***

These are the people or groups who you may not need to work with closely but who you will need to have on side. They might be a senior leader like your head of department or the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, or a group like the Students' Union. Flagging your intentions and involving them early will be key to developing their ongoing support.

## ***What existing advocates do you have?***

Having [advocates distributed throughout the institution](#) [9] will be critical for spreading the word and gaining support in diverse arenas. Who do you know who is already on board with or doing partnership that you can invite to be an ally? Build a network of these allies across the institution as your go-to mentors or champions.

## ***What is your partnership narrative?***

The concept and practices of SSP are quite different from the traditional model of teaching and learning. You'll need to do a lot of discussing with many audiences – and this can be a tricky sell for some. Develop a narrative around the process and value of partnership early – one that aligns with the interests of your audience(s) and the goals and values of your institution. You will need to develop multiple narratives for different audiences – think of them as [elevator pitches](#) – designed to spark interest and invite further engagement.

## ***What drivers can you leverage?***

These can be internal or external drivers that you can leverage to gain support – often in the form of providing reasons why your institution needs your SSP scheme. University strategy or policy will be a major internal one – what goals does your university aspire to that can be aligned with partnership? External drivers such as quality frameworks results can also provide leverage to gain support.

## ***What funding will you need and where will this come from?***

Sourcing funding can seem like an insurmountable challenge. You might have to be creative! Funding sources could include: the pot of money your senior administration team has for student- or education-related initiatives; your central teaching and learning/educational development unit; the student union; or even from external contributions. Be realistic about how much you need and consider ways in which existing structures can be leveraged to cut costs (could you integrate SSP into another existing student-facing scheme? Could existing staffing resources be reallocated to run the

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scheme?). Many schemes actually run with very little annual funding. If you are keen to achieve a more sustainable or larger-scale scheme you will probably want to gain enough resources to enable specific staffing for the scheme.

## ***Should you run a pilot?***

Showing partnership has positive impacts on your institutional context can be a great way to build support. You could run a pilot SSP scheme ([one example here \[9\]](#)) and use an evaluation of the pilot to demonstrate the benefits for individuals and your institution. Instead of a pilot, you could also collect case studies on existing partnership work in your institution and use those resources in the same way (for example, [here](#)).

## **The Design Process**

This is the point in your initiative when a lot of strategic thinking will take place! That means that all the following sections of this guide will be relevant here too. Having a solid design for your initiative in place before implementation will be key to the success of your initiative in the long run.

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***TOP TIP: If you are going to run a partnership pilot, consider having part or all of it focused on actually co-creating your scheme! [Here is an interesting and successful example.](#)***

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Research on other SSP schemes found that collaboration is key during the design phase. This collaboration is likely to be necessary at many levels. The majority of SSP schemes were situated in central teaching and learning/academic development units which then collaborate with key stakeholders in academic schools or faculties, students' unions/associations, governance committees, and Provost Offices. The individuals doing the design of your initiative should be those with vested interests, diverse expertise, and enthusiasm.

If you wish to adopt a partnership approach from the outset, then students should be involved right from the beginning of the design process. This may be through collaboration with the students' union, with student representatives, through consultation processes involving focus groups or surveys, or active partnership with individual students as members of the design team.

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## What Kind of Partnership is Right for You?

Partnership is a values-based ethos or mindset [10] which underlies practice, so what partnership looks like in practice is only limited by your imagination. Choosing which practices will be included in your initiative will depend on what is appropriate for your context, and what the rationale is for adopting partnership. Here are five common types of partnership that can happen within and outside of classroom settings:

- **Co-teaching** – students take on/share the responsibility of teaching, e.g. peer-assisted study sessions;
- **Disciplinary co-research** – students co-research (as partners rather than assistants) topics specific to their discipline, e.g. science research;
- **Educational co-research** – students co-research (as partners rather than assistants) topics focused on teaching and learning or the student experience;
- **Co-creation / co-development** – students co-create/develop aspects of the university related to teaching and learning and the student experience e.g. curriculum resources;
- **Co-review / co-enhancement** – students consult on or engage in processes of teaching and learning review, evaluation, or enhancement.

Consider which individual type or combination will be most useful in achieving the aims of your initiative. For example, if you wish to understand the current teaching practices at your university as a baseline for enhancement, you may wish to use educational co-research or, if it is an evaluative process, co-review. If you wish to re-design certain assessment tasks, courses, or programs, you might use co-creation. If you want students to gain a better understanding of disciplinary research in ways that empower them to become future researchers, then perhaps disciplinary co-research is right for you. Or, if you hope students will gain a better understanding of how learning happens and of their subject area, then co-teaching may be the way. For examples of these practices and reviews of relevant literature in these spaces, see [this report](#) [3].

Partnership can happen within, and external to, the curriculum, among student peers, with academic and professional staff, and with external stakeholders. Be clear and intentional about shaping where and with whom partnership is happening.



**PARTNERSHIP IS A  
VALUES-BASED ETHOS  
OR MINDSET WHICH  
UNDERLIES PRACTICE,  
SO WHAT PARTNERSHIP  
LOOKS LIKE IN  
PRACTICE IS ONLY  
LIMITED BY YOUR  
IMAGINATION**

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# Administration

## Location

Research shows that SSP schemes in other universities tend to be administered from the central teaching and learning/academic development unit. Not having a specific disciplinary association means such schemes can be open to all areas of the university. What is your context and where might be the most appropriate place to situate your initiative so that it is both student- and staff-facing? Whose support or collaboration might you need to find the right home for your initiative?

## Duration

How long will the partnership projects you administer last? This will depend on your goals for the initiative, but may also be influenced by factors such as student level, and the academic and financial years. For example, if one-year postgraduate students are to co-create the project, when is it realistic for them to do so? Can the project funding be rolled into the following financial year or can you guarantee new funding to make projects spanning several years feasible? Suitable timescales for students on longer degrees may differ, especially if their academic year is shorter. Offering a range of different project lengths at different start dates (within and outside semester times) is likely to be the most successful way to attract a diverse range of students and staff. Some programmes offer projects that last a year, or six months, or one semester. Others have effective projects that last just a month or two. Think about what duration is best supported by the resources you have and what is likely to work best for the partners engaging with the initiative. Sometimes shorter projects make it easier for time-pressed students and staff to engage and commit to projects.

## Scale

How many projects and partners can you support per year or semester? This will depend on your resources, so be strategic about spreading your resources around to offer as many partnership opportunities as possible within logistical constraints. You may wish to start small in the first year with a plan for scaling-up in following iterations.

## Flexibility

Insights from practitioners running project-based partnership schemes indicate that: *flexibility is key*. Building flexibility into your scheme at every stage – from applications and training to reporting



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deadlines – is central in facilitating engagement from the widest possible pool of diverse groups of student and staff. This is about ensuring your scheme responds to the needs of institutions and individuals.

## **Ethics**

You should consider whether ethics for your initiative, or for the projects within your initiative, will be required and where responsibility for the ethics will lie. It may be with the individual projects, the department/faculty/school in which it will occur or with the SSP scheme centrally. This is likely to depend upon your context. Nevertheless, if they lie with individual projects, this could impact on the length or timing of projects to allow teams to apply for ethics approval. If it lies with the scheme, you will need to apply for ethics permission and plan how to ensure that team members understand the importance of research ethics and that all projects follow your ethical procedures. Whatever you decide, you will need to communicate this clearly and make funding/support conditional upon adherence to the relevant ethical procedures.

## **Recruitment and Selection**

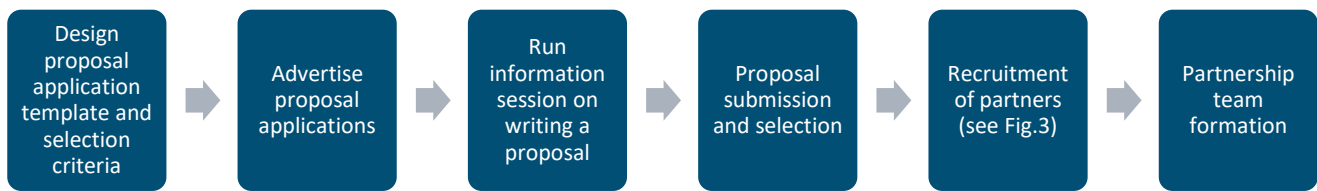
The project-based model of SSP sees each partnership as a unique project with a specific topic and partnership team. The recruitment of topics and partners is a critical stage: you want a range of topics that address the purpose of your initiative with a diverse mix of partners to foster creativity. Each stage of recruitment should be based on the values of partnership. For example, in selecting student partners, will you select those who are academically high-achieving, or those who show empathy and imagination in their application? Many schemes using this project-based model go through a recruitment process similar to the one outlined in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Overview of recruitment process**

### ***Recruitment of project topics***

Each SSP project will have a specific topic of focus. You'll need to consider how these topics are chosen. Some SSP schemes follow a process similar to that in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. Recruitment of project topics process**

The submission of proposals for projects can originate from different sources, including:

**Institution-led:** Topics defined and proposed by the institution. This would be most likely to come from alignment with strategy or policy based on institutional goals and may not require a recruitment or selection process for project topics.

**Staff-led:** Topics defined and proposed by academics/professional staff in the university. You need to consider which staff are invited to propose a topic, what the application process might look like, and how proposals are selected.

**Student-led:** Topics defined and proposed by undergraduate/postgraduate students in the university. You need to consider which students are invited to propose a topic, what the application process might look like, and how proposals are transparently selected.

**Collaborative:** Topics defined and proposed by students and staff together. You need to consider how students and staff form such collaborative partnership teams, how many students and staff are on a team, which students/staff are invited to propose a topic, what the application process might look like, and how proposals are selected.

**Externally-led:** Topics defined and proposed by external stakeholders. Some universities conceptualise partnership happening with external stakeholders as well – such as with community groups or organisations who work on common issues in partnership with students and staff within the university. You need to consider which stakeholders are invited to propose a topic, what the application process might look like, which students and staff may collaborate, and how proposals are selected.

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**TOP TIP:** Consider how power might play out throughout the recruitment process – for example, in staff- or institution-led projects, how will you create space for student partners to authentically shape that project?

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Think about which of these (or which combination of the above) recruitment options might best meet the goals of your initiatives. If you use a combination, consider whether you need to ring-fence funding for project proposals from different groups or whether all will compete for funding with each



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other. In our experience, students write as good quality proposals as staff and ring-fencing funding for students and staff can work against partnership by discouraging collaborative proposals. To ensure an even playing field and to encourage applications from those who may not already be engaged or confident, it is helpful to run a session on how to write an application.

## *Selection of projects*

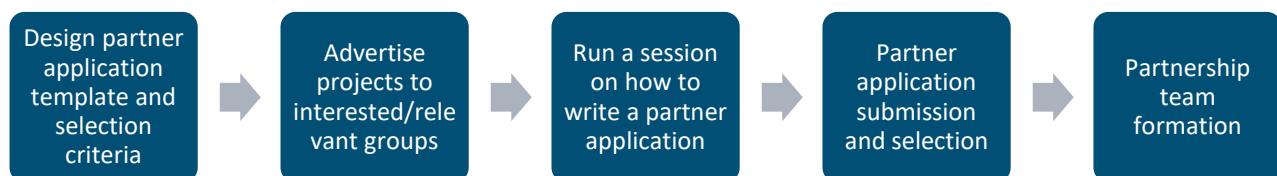
You'll need to consider how projects, once proposed, are selected and by whom. Best practice would be to have a selection panel comprised of students and staff working together. Where other SSP schemes have competitive selection of proposals, they use the following criteria:

- Authentic partnership approach outlined
- Alignment with university strategic priorities
- Achieves relevant goals (e.g. curricular enhancement)
- Relevant literature cited
- Enhances student experience
- Logistical feasibility
- Potential for broader impact beyond project
- Demonstrates measurable outcomes/impact
- Indicates plan for sustainability of outcomes

Consider which combination of these, or what other criteria, will help you to select projects that meet your initiative's goals and include a diversity of ideas. Communicate these criteria clearly to applicants as well as to the assessment panel.

## *Recruitment of partners*

Once you have selected your project topics, you may need to recruit further partners to collaborate on such topics. For example, if a student proposed a topic by themselves, you will need to recruit staff and maybe other students, as appropriate, to work in partnership on that project. A common way to do this is outlined in Figure 3.



**Figure 3. Recruitment of partners process**

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Running a session on how to write an application will be an important way to invite and support applications from those who may not be already engaged or confident enough to do so by themselves.

One way of selecting partners is via an application form whereby potential partners write short statements on why they would like to work on the project and what they will bring to it.

## ***Selection of partners***

As with the recruitment of projects, best practice is to involve students and staff in the selection of partners through the application process. Selection criteria for partners might include:

- Clear written communication and full, considered answers
- Enthusiasm for self-development and partnership
- Interest in enhancing the experiences of others
- Demonstrated capacity for reflection and ability to draw on previous experiences to apply those skills to the current project
- Consideration of what the partnership role might entail
- Demonstrated skills or background relevant to the project description
- Ability to represent the needs and desires of the diverse range of students and staff intended to benefit from the project work

The latter criterion is particularly important for student partners, to ensure that the outcome of the project does not disproportionately benefit students with greater social capital who are already likely to be privileged by practices within higher education. It is also an important criterion for staff, because if the views of certain groups of staff are the only views included, the outcome may not be practical for all staff to support and implement. With this in mind, criteria could include balancing out membership of the team to ensure the greatest possible representation of different groups of students and staff.

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***TOP TIP: Academic achievement is the usual criteria for competitive process in universities. However, partnership processes value other factors such as collaboration, thoughtfulness, diverse experiences, and empathy. Consider how your partner recruitment process is selecting for these kinds of factors to facilitate authentic partnerships.***

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Consider which combination of these, or any other criteria, will help you to select partners who will bring a diversity of ideas and experiences to each project.

## Training and Support

Partnership is a different way of working in higher education. As with any new process or skill, students and staff will need structured and explicit support to learn how to work in partnership. Therefore, it is important that partners are offered training and support in partnership throughout the partnership projects.

This training and support, like any learning, should be well-scaffolded. This may mean offering an induction, ongoing support throughout the project, and some form of concluding activities or resources.

When SSP schemes run a **first training/induction** for partners, these often include:

- Introduction to the concept and practice of partnership
- Partner introductions and teambuilding time
- Discussing ways to avoid or overcome common challenges of partnership
- Purpose/overview of scheme
- Outlining partner responsibilities and expectations for engaging in the project
- Logistical support
- Skills training (e.g. leadership, communication, teamwork)

**Ongoing support** for partners during their partnership projects will be important in supporting authentic partnership as well as keeping projects on track. Forms of ongoing support may include:

- Opportunities for written or conversational reflection (individual or collaborative among partners)
- Regular meetings with support staff
- Setting, meeting, and celebrating project milestones
- Development workshops (e.g. focussing on how to deepen or maintain partnership or overcome challenges).

**Summative or concluding resources** or activities are often offered at the end of a partnership project.


These can include:

- Giving a poster/presentation at a conference/event (external or designed specifically for partners)
- Reflection (individual or collaborative among partners)
- Feedback collection
- Written report or output
- Publication opportunities (e.g. journal or blog)
- Development workshops (e.g. focussing on how to extend partnership experiences and learning to other contexts)

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These training opportunities are often supplemented by a handbook or resources relevant to your context. You may also consider what other training and support partners may need for successful project completion – for example, if they are collecting data, will they need support in how to conduct focus groups or write surveys?

Support doesn't just need to be offered centrally though. Team members need to support each other – so it's worth considering how you can help the team to form, perhaps by facilitating an initial team meeting or by inviting the teams to a more social welcome event. It is also important to recognise that while all partners are likely to feel vulnerable, this is particularly true of students who are being asked to critique the ideas of staff and offer their own perspectives to people who they are likely to believe are more qualified than them. You should therefore consider whether it is necessary to have good practice guidance about students working in pairs (or larger groups) with staff, so that they can offer each other peer support. You may also want to partner junior students with older ones who are more familiar with the university context.



**AS WITH ANY NEW  
PROCESS OR SKILL,  
STUDENTS AND STAFF  
WILL NEED  
STRUCTURED AND  
EXPLICIT SUPPORT TO  
LEARN HOW TO WORK  
IN PARTNERSHIP.**

## Reward and Recognition

### *Rewarding and recognising students*

Just as no one likes to work for free, students need to be recognised and rewarded for the valuable contributions they make by engaging in your SSP scheme. Research shows the most common way of doing so is through payment [1] – usually as a stipend or bursary. Importantly, paying students is one of the best ways to invite engagement from a diversity of students – as discussed in the section below on 'Considering Inclusivity'. Ways of recognising students can include:

- financial payment;
- a participation certificate;
- a professional reference for future employment opportunities;
- development opportunities such as additional skills training or attending a conference;
- vouchers;
- course credit;
- contribution to an institutional award scheme;
- addition to formal studies transcript;
- invitation to a celebration event; and
- opportunity to present experience at a showcase.

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Consider offering a number of these to provide incentives and recognition of engagement and contributions. However, bear in mind that the incentives offered will influence the sustainability of the scheme. Too little, and you may not get the inclusivity or commitment from students that such a scheme requires. Too much, and the demands from senior management to demonstrate outputs are likely to be stronger and come earlier. You also need to consider the additional benefits and drawbacks of different reward systems – for example, processing small payments may involve a lot of administrative work, whereas providing a celebration event may help to develop a cohort, but only if partners want or are able to attend. You should also consider how you can avoid the relationship becoming transactional rather than transformational. For example, asking for students to evaluate the difference they have made to their peers' experience can help them to develop a sense of commitment to enhancing their community. Similarly, think about how you can provide space that is explicitly for relationship building throughout partners' engagement with the scheme – this includes relationships within teams, among teams and between scheme staff.

## ***Rewarding and recognising staff***

Formal ways to recognise staff can be harder to identify but are no less important than recognising students. Ways of recognising staff can include:

- a professional reference or certificate to provide evidence for career progression, award nominations, or grant applications;
- invitation to a celebration event;
- opportunity to present experience at a showcase;
- development opportunities such as additional skills training or attending a conference; and
- allocation of time to accommodate partnership work, for example, through a secondment.

Consider offering a number of these to provide incentives and recognition of engagement and contributions. We strongly recommend that you consult students and staff about the ways that they would like to be recognised, and investigate how reward and recognition works for similar schemes at your university, such as student ambassadors, employability awards, and students who participate in quality assurance mechanisms like departmental reviews.

## **Outputs**

Will partners be required to produce certain outputs? If so, what will these look like? Many SSP programmes ask partnership project teams to produce a written report, some sort of reflective component, or a case study on their project. If possible, these outputs should be useful for both you and for the partners writing them.

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Partners will need to put a lot of time and effort into producing the various outputs from their projects. Consider how you will showcase these to recognise these contributions. This can also be an important way for partners to evidence their work for future jobs. Ways to share these outputs could include:

- a showcase event with posters or presentations
- collected case studies and/or outputs collated on a university website
- publication in a university blog or magazine
- publication in an academic journal

## Impact and Evaluation

It will be important to conduct ongoing evaluations of your impact to demonstrate successes (e.g. for future funding applications) and to continuously improve the initiative over time. Some of the things you may wish to understand or evaluate could include:

- Partners' motivation for involvement
- Experience of partnership project
- Benefits from involvement
- Challenges faced in the process and how they were overcome
- Impact of the project
- Feedback on administration of the initiative
- Feedback on support throughout the initiative (e.g. induction, training etc.)
- Recommendations for future partnership projects/ initiatives.

Below are a few ways you might collect such data.

### *Demographic information*

Collecting detailed demographic information from partners applying for and engaging in your initiative is critical. This information will inform you as to who in the university is, or is not, engaging. This points you towards areas of improvement and increased uptake. For example, if you are not attracting any applications from the School of Mathematics, who in the school might you engage with to advocate and raise awareness? Or, if you have few applications from people of colour, are there ways in which your recruitment processes might be improved to be more inclusive?

### *Analysis of project outputs*

If you ask partners to submit a report or case study, you could see these as learning opportunities. What information might partners share that indicate the impact of the initiative or points for improvement? How could you use these outputs to help promote the SSP scheme further?

A photograph of four diverse individuals (two men and two women) standing outdoors in a grassy area. They are all smiling and holding up large, colorful speech bubbles. From left to right, the bubbles are blue, pink, teal, and orange. The background shows a clear sky and some trees.

## **Survey**

You might ask partners to complete a short survey at completion of their project to collect impact data and inform future improvements.

## **Focus groups or interviews**

For more in-depth understanding of partners' experiences of the initiative, you may wish to speak with a cross-section of students and staff through focus groups or interviews.

## **Impact studies**

To better understand the impact of individual projects and the scheme more broadly, you may wish to follow up the impact that they have had upon the stakeholders a year or two after the project has officially ended.

## **Sustainability**

Ensuring sustainability of initiatives like this in higher education can be tricky. Here are some approaches SSP programmes take to make their schemes sustainable:


- continuous revision or improvement to keep the scheme 'fresh';
- demonstrating positive outcomes and impact;
- aligning impact with university strategy/expectations;
- ensuring continuing departmental and senior support;
- procuring continuing financial support;
- retaining core individual(s) with strong commitment to partnership;
- maintaining community demand and engagement;
- embedding schemes into university processes; and
- ensuring that the initiative is not attached to, or reliant upon, one person.

## **Considering Inclusivity**

One of the limitations of current SSP schemes is the extent to which they can include a diversity of students and staff. For example, any scheme that is funded is also likely to have a cap on the numbers of partners who can be involved for either administrative load or financial reasons (where partners are financially rewarded). This cap means that such schemes are also likely to have selection processes which, by nature, include some while excluding others. These are some of the pragmatic realities of a project-based model of partnership.

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It is critical that these initiatives are inclusive and not implicitly biased to select students and staff based on the privileges associated with certain social locations, identities, and backgrounds. For example, data from both the United Kingdom and the United States indicate that students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds face disproportionately greater barriers to academic success in higher education in ways that are not predicated on academic capability [11-13]. Further research indicates that in many SSP programmes, funded projects are more likely to engage already super-engaged and privileged students [14]. This is problematic, particularly in light of the fact that partnership experiences can be extremely beneficial in fostering agency and empowerment in students from historically-marginalised groups [15].



**IT IS CRITICAL THAT THESE INITIATIVES ARE INCLUSIVE AND NOT IMPLICITLY BIASED TO SELECT STUDENTS AND STAFF BASED ON THE PRIVILEGES ASSOCIATED WITH CERTAIN SOCIAL LOCATIONS, IDENTITIES, AND BACKGROUNDS.**

Suggestions for supporting a diverse range of students and staff in engaging with partnership initiatives have been made in this guide. For example, making initiatives open to all students and staff, running workshops to assist students and staff in the writing of applications, selecting projects and partners on a diversity of criteria rather than solely on academic achievement, and offering financial recognition for engagement. You may also consider further actions such as integrating positive discrimination into your recruitment processes and targeting certain cohorts in your marketing efforts so as to explicitly address some of the systemic barriers which prevent minority groups from engaging with such opportunities.

## Challenges

It's useful to go in with 'eyes wide open' to some of the challenges you might face. Here are some common challenges identified by SSP schemes:

- Financial scalability for increasing participation
- Engaging those beyond the already engaged
- Balancing competing aims and expectations
- Communicating partnership as a concept and overcoming resistance
- Lack of measurable impact
- Lack of awareness of the scheme
- Lack of dissemination of practice beyond the scheme
- Managing administration in overly-bureaucratic environments
- Spreading the scheme uptake beyond its original location within the university.



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Ways to address these challenges can be found throughout this practical guide and, importantly, many challenges can be pre-empted and prevented in the design phase.

## Alternative Partnership Models

As outlined in the above two sections, the projects-based model of partnership has various limitations. One primary challenge is that this model can be resource intensive to administer at much larger scales.

An alternative (or perhaps, additional) approach to scaling up partnership is through partnerships that take place within classrooms and online involving whole cohorts of students. This approach may overcome some of the challenges faced in the selection of students that raises concerns regarding inclusivity [16, 17] and extend the reach of partnership practices to greater numbers of students. For example, one teacher working in partnership with a class of 300 students will reach many students with far fewer administrative requirements [1].

Practices where individual teachers work to enhance relationships with their students and to democratise their classrooms and online teaching spaces can take many forms. Some examples can include students writing their own essay titles in collaboration with the teacher, co-designing module marking criteria, co-designing the module evaluation, or negotiating what topics will be taught and who will teach these topics in forthcoming classes [2, 18, 19]. The critical factor is that all students in the class are invited to work in partnership on elements of learning, teaching, and curricular design thus making the benefits of partnership more widely accessible.

You may wish to consider how these two different models complement each other in the process of embedding partnership in your context, or if you can adopt or integrate both approaches.

## And Finally...

Don't be scared to give it a go. Very few schemes work perfectly in their first year, but running something gives you a basis to build from and information about what works and what doesn't work in your context. Partnership is often a new and different way of working for students and staff, so it's worth acknowledging that it's normal to feel a bit uncertain and vulnerable. However, the potential benefits [8] are great and if you are all in it together, providing each other with support and honest, respectful feedback, you will all learn and improve over time.

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