Unrealised Potential: A survey of students as partners in Australian university libraries

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Abstract

Student partnership, a growing phenomenon in higher education, has transformed the way universities collaborate with students. Yet to date the academic library has rarely been examined as place for student and staff partnership to thrive. In this paper, we present findings from a national students as partners benchmarking survey conducted across Australian academic libraries, with responses from library staff representing 35 universities across six states (n=210). Our findings highlight that while many library staff see the potential benefits to student partnership, this potential is largely unrealised. Our findings further tackle the commonly perceived barriers to partnership specific to the library context, such as staff understanding of student partnership and its corresponding practices as well as challenges and barriers to student engagement. We conclude with a recommendation for more reflection in academic libraries on how to create a connected and relationship-rich culture of partnership.

Keywords: academic library, students as partners, student voice, library as a partner

Introduction

It is hard to imagine a contemporary academic library where connection and collaboration are not a routine part of professional practice. Engagement that is intentional and focused is now the norm for library staff. In honing a range of necessary skills, library professionals have developed a level of maturity that has resulted in rich and productive partnerships across the university: with academics and teaching and learning staff to embed information skills in the curriculum (Corrall & Jolly, 2019); with researchers to improve scholarly communication across the research lifecycle (Brown, Alvey, Danilova, Morgan & Thomas, 2018); and with other professional staff to develop shared services for student success (Melling & Weaver, 2012; Swartz, Carlisle & Uyeki, 2007). For many academic libraries, the 'library as partner' is a strong brand that anchors service frameworks, strategic plans, organisational structure, and institutional positioning.

Academic libraries have successfully positioned themselves as the heart of the university community, both metaphorically and through collaborative practices and structures. Examples of partnership between library staff and university colleagues illustrate the benefits inherent in partnership and reinforce the central role of the library (Cox, 2018). But these partnerships equally bring challenges, which has prompted theorised models of collaboration designed to improve practice and expand understanding of the complexity underpinning partnership initiatives (Pham & Tanner, 2015). Librarians' reflections on what makes collaboration with university staff successful also provide a basis for continually strengthening this area of practice (Atkinson, 2018). For libraries that adopt the library as partner positioning, however, the conceptualisations and methods of partnering with students in the library is still undertheorised.

In a previous paper (see Authors, 2020), we explored the literature relating to student and staff partnerships in the library and found that while there is a broad range of dimensions in which student voices could be embedded in library practices, there is unfortunately little understanding to where and how practice plays out in daily work. To move beyond considering where SaP might happen, to where it is happening, we conducted a national review of current and planned SaP practice in Australian academic libraries. Our aim was to investigate the extent to which our prior conceptualisation of SaP in libraries (Authors, 2020) is reflected in practitioner thinking and how student partnership is currently occurring in academic libraries, including barriers and future directions, as perceived by staff and University Librarians (UL).

Student partnership, commonly referred to as students as partners, is an increasingly discussed phenomenon across higher education contexts, both in Australia

and abroad. The approach, sometimes referred to as a practice or process, repositions students from recipients of teaching and learning experiences (or services) to active agents, or co-creators (Chng, 2019; Authors, 2019). Through partnership with students, staff and students are encouraged to collaborate, share ideas, and learn from one another's unique expertise. Framed as a reciprocal learning opportunity, partnership differs from traditional student roles, such as employing students as casual staff, or hosting focus groups with students, because partnership rests on principles such as shared responsibility, equal decision-making, and combating power imbalances that exist between the typical teacher/staff-student relationship (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018; Matthews, 2017). In teaching and learning and/or student experience literature the benefits of student partnership have further been well documented. Student partners, for example, often reflect on greater belongingness, self-efficacy, and perceived employability while staff report greater insight into students' lived experiences and stronger relationships with students (Authors, 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). However, as stated above, the literature on student partnership in the library context is relatively underdeveloped compared to classroom or governance contexts (Authors, 2020) and this gap suggests relationships with students that go beyond informing and consulting are not easy to explore or activate in the library context. Why is taking a partnership view of student engagement more difficult than other library partnerships that span institutional boundaries? With growing recognition of the benefits of SaP and increasing understanding of SaP through theorised accounts of higher education practice (Authors, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017) we believe that the time is right draw on the SaP literature to inform and bridge the current SaP gap in academic libraries and realise its potential.

In this paper, we present the outcomes of an Australian academic national review starting with a background to the project, methods, and survey participants, followed by results, major findings, and discussion of the implications for academic libraries and the SaP field moving forward. To our knowledge, this is the most comprehensive review of SaP in libraries to date. The results of our national review of SaP indicate a variety of perceptions of SaP, but generally library staff view the concept of SaP favourably, regardless of whether they are involved in SaP initiatives. Widespread adoption of working with students as partners, however, is hampered due to a range of challenges. These challenges have not previously been fully acknowledged or explored and contribute to a reluctance to embrace SaP by library staff. Using the outcomes of our study, academic library staff interested in SaP can more fully consider the issues and better identify where the gaps in understanding, knowledge, and skills might lie in their environment and take steps to address those gaps. Our intention in presenting the research results it so generate enthusiasm for SaP initiatives in academic libraries, to increase understanding of SaP and how it relates to academic libraries, and to provide a starting point for new initiatives. Importantly, our aim is to reinforce that the library is a key space for SaP, which shouldn't be overlooked, especially for libraries in institutions that have a SaP program in place. Our research highlights that, while there is huge potential for SaP in libraries, more action needs to be taken to turn the possibility of SaP into a reality, and to keep the library at the heart of the university for students.

National Survey of SaP in Australian Academic Libraries

In June 2021, the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) sponsored the research team to conduct a national survey of SaP in academic libraries. The survey was intended to understand the current perceptions and practices of SaP occurring in

libraries, as well as hear from participants about future goals or priorities relating to SaP initiatives. The survey was developed by the research team based on previous research by Authors, (2020) which mapped SaP across six domains including: space transformation, library governance, service excellence, resource design, research, and collection renewal. The survey questionnaire contained questions designed to elicit a mix of ordinal data obtained from Likert-scale questions, and qualitative data obtained from open-ended questions. The questionnaire was piloted with a group of ten library staff to ensure suitability of language and terms. Following the pilot, it was recommended to develop two separate questionnaires: one for University Librarians (ULs) (who are the directors of university libraries), and one for library staff. Because ULs are better placed to respond to questions about SaP at a strategy level, as well as future priorities, these questions were not included for the library staff. To keep the UL survey equal length to the staff survey, we also did not include a specific open-ended question about barriers to SaP, as through the pilot we also learned that most ULs were unsure of the day-to-day barriers of the practice. The pilot also identified a seventh domain of practice to those identified by Authors, (2020). The seventh domain, library learning and teaching, distinguishes between general learning and teaching partnerships and the more specific learning resource creation in the original six domains. Both surveys, and corresponding promotion and analysis, was approved by La Trobe University's Human Ethics Committee (HEC21220).

The survey was distributed through the Council of Australian University Librarians email list for University Librarians, with a request that ULs distribute the link to the library staff questionnaire to their staff. The survey was also promoted in the CAUL newsletter, which has approximately 1000 subscribers across the higher

education sector, and on social media platforms. In total the survey was advertised for approximately six weeks.

There were 210 participants in the survey, both library staff and ULs. A total of 191 responses were collected from the library staff with 139 (72%) completing the full staff questionnaire. A total of 19 ULs participated in the survey, with 13 completing the entire ULs questionnaire. While the survey was anonymous, the demographic data indicated that participants came from 35 universities across all six Australian states and territories (there are 39 CAUL member institutions in Australia). Staff were also asked to identify their work area within the library, and could select multiple, depending on their role, with a total of 220 responses, see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Library Staff Respondents by Work Area (n=220)
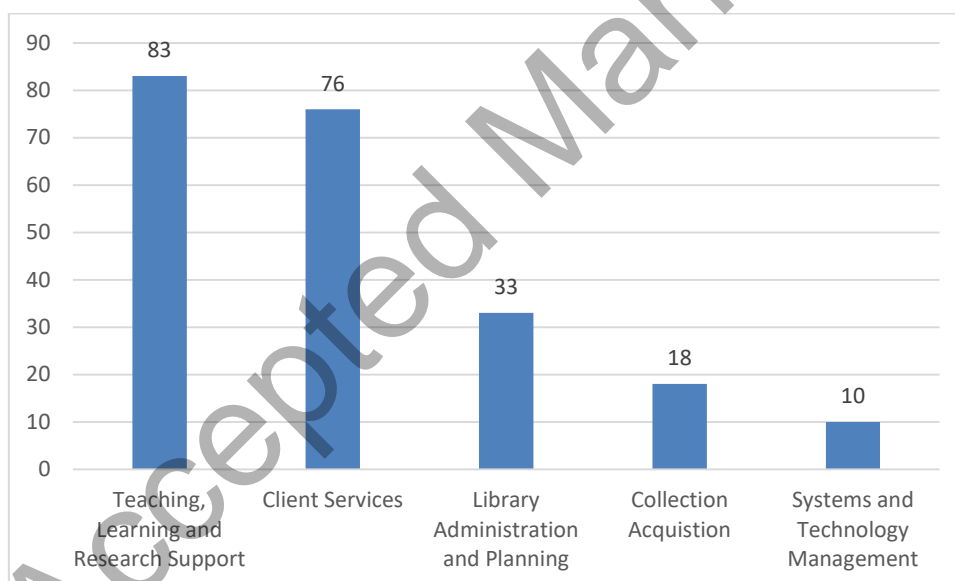
Staff also came from a range of higher education worker levels with 25 staff identifying as entry level, 91 identifying as mid-level worker, and 26 identifying as manager or above. We also asked staff to indicate if they currently interacted with or supported students in their day-to-day role. A total of 129 staff (70%) responded that they were in

student-facing roles, while 53 staff (30%) indicated they did not typically support students (i.e., non-student facing).

Our research included descriptive, quantitative, and qualitative data, and several approaches were taken to analyse the data. Descriptive and quantitative data was analysed using Microsoft Excel, and means, standard deviation and frequencies were created to uncover trends. Open-ended responses collected in the survey (e.g., what does student partnership mean to you?) were inductively thematically coded using Bazeley's (2009) 'describe, compare and relate' approach. Data was initially coded by the first author, and then subsequently analysed by the other authors. The group then later discussed major themes.

Results

A significant amount of data was collected through the survey. After analysis of the data by the research team, and a review of literature on how the findings add to existing knowledge, we present here the major themes or takeaways from the survey. These include: 1) defining SaP in academic libraries, 2) current engagement of SaP in libraries and 3) major barriers to SaP in libraries.

Defining SaP in Academic Libraries

In the first part of the survey, we aimed to understand how library staff and ULs currently understood the concept of students as partners. A total of 131 library staff and 13 ULs (n=144) responded, with the majority referring to SaP as a general recognition that students have a valuable perspective. As one staff member wrote,

> *'A mode and method of working with students that recognises the valuable experience and expertise that students have in educational institutions, and which engages students in meaningful work that draws on their experience and expertise to co-create and collaborate on projects with university staff.'*

Most responses also spoke to collaboration with students; however, many were practical in nature and often referred to specifically improving services or resources. For example,

> *'Working with students to complete tasks, finding out from them about gaps e.g., in what is explained by lecturers or the website, so they are able to complete their assessment tasks.'*

And another,

> *"I think it's about leveraging the knowledge and perspective of students to develop the services we provide, and to ensure that they are tailored appropriately for the university community."*

The practical responses listed above indicate that at least some of the respondents in the survey viewed partnership as a utilitarian endeavour, one that is undertaken to improve a product or service, rather than framed as a learning opportunity. This perspective is at odds with the commonly used definition of SaP as a 'a collaborative reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision-making, implementation, investigation or analysis' (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 6-7). What is missing from these descriptions is that they don't encompass the equal partnership that is a fundamental aspect of SaP. To illustrate further, 12 staff submitted definitions that were more aligned to traditional student casual employment, such as, "Students at any institution, who either volunteer or are paid for work that they do with the academic library in question. This work can be client-facing or back-end." (Staff response). Another wrote, 'Students who help their peers'. Another four staff wrote responses where their definition alluded to a mentor-mentee relationship, for example, 'That students are learning alongside rather than learning from us.' Finally, three staff submitted responses that critiqued the term and its assumed value, suggesting that

engagement with students is transactional and doesn't involve students as collaborators in mutually beneficial library service improvements (Schlak, 2018). For example,

> *'I wouldn't define students as partners. In an academic library our role is to provide access to appropriate information, and to assist users to find and use the information we provide. The word "partners" implies that people are working together to achieve a common outcome. That is not generally the interaction between an academic library and students.'*

We also analysed the library staff definitions of SaP compared to those submitted by ULs. UL's responses more closely resembled the Cook-Sather et al., (2014) definition, and interestingly the phrase 'decision-making' was much more common in the senior leader responses, as five of the 13 (38%) definitions referred to this, compared to seven of 131 (.05%) library staff. ULs also frequently used stronger language in their definitions such as 'we listen deeply to their priorities' (UL response), or 'a commitment to involving students as co-designers/collaborators in core aspects of the library business' (UL response).

Current Engagement of SaP in Libraries

Our results also mapped the current engagement of SaP in academic libraries. A total of 139 responses were collected from library staff on their perception of engagement in SaP across the six potential domains as outlined by Authors (2020) and the additional seventh domain 'library learning and teaching'. As can be seen from Table 1, respondents were asked to indicate if level of engagement across these domains on a scale, ranging from no engagement to high engagement, with an additional option for 'unsure'.

Table 1. Rate current engagement in SaP across domains (staff, n=139)

Domain	No engagement	Low engagement	Moderately engaged	High engagement	I am unsure
Library Space Design or Transformation	12.95% (n=18)	22.30% (n=31)	29.50% (n=41)	15.83% (n=22)	19.42% (n=27)
Library Governance	30.94% (n=43)	25.90% (n=36)	13.67% (n=19)	2.88% (n=4)	26.62% (n=37)
Service Improvement	4.32% (n=6)	25.90% (n=36)	38.13% (n=53)	20.86% (n=29)	10.79% (n=15)
Resource Design	18.71% (n=32)	23.02% (n=32)	24.46% (n=34)	11.51% (n=16)	22.30% (n=31)
Research	15.11% (n=32)	23.02% (n=32)	20.86% (n=29)	10.79% (n=15)	30.22% (n=42)
Collection Renewal	16.55% (n=23)	31.65% (n=44)	19.42% (n=27)	9.35% (n=13)	23.02% (n=32)
Library Learning and Teaching	10.07% (n=14)	24.46% (n=34)	28.06% (n=39)	25.90% (n=36)	11.51% (n=16)

The data shows the highest reported levels of engagement for SaP were in the domains of library teaching and learning and service improvement. Our survey also asked staff for examples of good practice, and the provided examples included peer support programs (library learning and teaching) and student survey responses about the library services (service improvement). There is debate, however, on whether these activities constitute mature partnership, and in particular, if surveying students, for example to gain their perspective on a service, is actually a form of partnership. Interestingly, our findings also highlight areas where the majority of staff indicated no or low engagement in partnership activities, including collection renewal (67% no or low engagement) and governance (57% no or low engagement).

We also compared the reported rate of current engagement in SaP as reported by library staff to responses from ULs (n=14). By comparing the two it was clear that ULs were much more likely to rate the engagement as lower than staff. It is unclear if this is linked to ULs having a more mature understanding of partnership (as discussed in the previous section), or if practices are occurring without their direct knowledge or involvement. To illustrate, while 26% (n=36) of library staff indicated teaching and

learning as an area of high engagement, only 14% (n=2) ULs did. Further, while 67% (n=67) library staff rated no or low engagement of SaP in the domain of collection renewal, 86% of ULs (n=12) indicated their institution had no or low engagement in SaP in this space. See Table 2 for full results.

Table 2. Rate current engagement in SaP across domains (ULs, n=14)

Question	No engagement	Low engagement	Moderately engaged	High engagement
Library Space Design or Transformation	21.43% (n=3)	14.29% (n=2)	50.00% (n=7)	14.29% (n=2)
Library Governance	42.86% (n=6)	42.86% (n=6)	14.29% (n=2)	0.00%
Service Improvement	7.14% (n=1)	28.57% (n=4)	35.71% (n=5)	28.57% (n=4)
Resource Design	14.29% (n=2)	42.86% (n=6)	35.71% (n=5)	7.14% (n=1)
Research	35.71% (n=5)	42.86% (n=6)	21.43% (n=3)	0.00%
Collection Renewal	28.57% (n=4)	57.14% (n=8)	14.29% (n=2)	0.00%
Library Learning and Teaching	14.29% (n=2)	28.57% (n=4)	42.86% (n=6)	14.29% (n=2)

Our survey also specifically asked ULs about their priorities for SaP in the future. ULs were asked to rate the domains on a scale from no priority to high priority. The results indicated that, for the majority of ULs, service improvement was the highest priority (79%, n=11), while research, collection renewal, space design or transformation, and governance were the domains that each registered 1-3 responses in the no priority category (see Table 3).

Table 3. UL priorities for SaP (n=14)

Question	No priority	Low priority	Moderate priority	High priority
Space Design or Transformation	14.29% (n=2)	7.14% (n=1)	28.57% (n=4)	50.00% (n=7)
Library Governance	7.14% (n=1)	28.57% (n=4)	50.00% (n=7)	14.29% (n-2)
Service Improvement	0.00%	14.29% (n=2)	7.14% (n=1)	78.57% (n=11)
Resource Design	0.00%	14.29% (n=2)	50.00% (n=7)	35.71% (n=5)
Research	21.43% (n=3)	21.43% (n=3)	50.00% (n=7)	7.14% (n=1)
Collection Renewal	14.29% (n=2)	35.71% (n=5)	50.00% (n=7)	0.00%
Library Learning and Teaching	0.00%	14.29% (n=2)	28.57% (n=4)	57.14% (n=8)

While the survey results indicated that engagement with SaP was low overall, both library staff and ULs were very positive about the potential benefits of SaP. Of the 106 responses from library staff to the question 'What do you believe the potential benefits of SaP are, if any, for the library?', 103 responses related to reciprocal learning, understanding students' lived experiences, or helping to support engagement and belongingness, all of which are well aligned to literature in other areas (Dorney, 2013; Oddy, 2017). To illustrate, staff responses included:

> *'It could give us a better understanding of student needs, interests and challenges and help us collectively come up with solutions. It could help us question the way we've always done things and enrich our spaces, resources, services, and collections to be more welcoming and inclusive. It will help us connect with and build rapport and trust with even more students so we can continue learning from and working with them.'*

> *'It moves the conversation from what we think is needed to ensuring a range of voices are heard and wider range of needs met. It also helps target limited resources where needed most.'*

Major Barriers to SaP in Libraries

Lastly, our research sought to understand the current perceived barriers to SaP in the library. We received 104 responses from library staff on the barriers, ranging from time, resourcing, motivation from students, as well as cultural barriers. To illustrate, 37

responses related to either a lack of time (students or staff) or a lack of resourcing. This is a common barrier found in other SaP contexts (see Coombe et al., 2017; Authors, 2020) however many library programs occur outside of the curriculum and therefore were perceived by library staff as harder to promote than discipline-based SaP. For example, '[The main barrier is] Visibility of these library programs for students - for example, when can we market/promote them so that they fit into the student cycle?' (Staff response). Finding time as a library professional staff member, who may not have student engagement as part of their role was identified as a challenge. For example, 'Time for busy library staff to engage with students, unless there are library staff where student engagement is a recognised part of their role. Finding students with relevant interest and enthusiasm for library work.'

Another frequently mentioned barrier was the perceived lack of motivation or engagement from potential student partners to collaborate with the library (n=28). For example, one staff respondent alluded to this barrier with, 'Students simply don't engage when we try to 'partner' with them. They do not respond to surveys, follow the library on social media, or know why they might want to do so (don't know how we can help them).' It is striking that this staff member considers responding to surveys as about partnership, rather than perhaps considering how the library could authentically work with students to understand how to make student participation in surveys and library activities more appealing and relevant to potential students. In this category, staff also frequently mentioned not just finding willing students, but finding the 'right' students or a large enough number of students. As one staff member reflected, 'The only barrier would be finding large enough range of students willing to give input. All students are on a different journey.' This view perhaps links to how library staff conceptualise student partnership; perhaps in conceiving partnership as a means to seek and gather

data to identify student trends, the importance of seeing and valuing partnership for each student's unique lived experience is obscured.

The third most cited barrier related to culture or ways of working. Staff touched on aspects such as manager approval, traditional 'closed-off' product or service development, or simply an uncertainty on how to approach students. One response sums up several of these threads,

> *'Unfortunately, at my Library, many library staff members are disconnected from the experience of students. Either they never went to university and are not tertiary qualified or did so decades ago when university was very different. This creates a significant understanding gap for the current experience of university education. Most staff are not equipped to fill this gap with professional learning or research on their own - due to said lack of training, expertise, and education. Additionally, staff often fear they will be replaced with student workers paid at a lower level, which creates resentment and an unwillingness to engage with students as partners work.'*

Another response shows that library staff need to connect more closely with academic staff or students outside of the library in order to build relationships that can later lead to partnership opportunities. As one staff member reflected, 'The library needs to network outside of the library to see what opportunities there are to work with student groups. This requires close liaison with faculties where there are capstone or professional practice programs.'

Arising from some comments was also a sense that while the library increasingly engaged with students, this was often too superficial to lead to real change. For example, one staff member wrote,

> *'Librarians often want the perspectives of students only when it suits them, and this is a barrier. We take advice from students when we have students engage in the re-design of the website. Instead of designing the website to teach students about the research lifecycle, we say 'students told us they use this term'.'*

As the above quote highlights, going beyond user-experience questions around language or website layout, to deeper questions around how to include students as part of the

design process so the resources are fit-for-purpose and interrogation of how to develop the resource so it appeals to students, with is difficult and challenging.

Less common responses were also related to staff roles (e.g., working with students was not part of their role) (n=15), the difficulty in finding diverse students to participate (n=4) and other responses such as a barrier with working from home (due to COVID-19) or lack of software. An additional four responses related to the need for student training or supervision to support partnership, and while these responses constitute a small percentage overall, they perhaps highlight a perception by some library staff that student partners require upskilling before they can engage. This links to the larger theme of a cultural barrier to SaP in the library context, where staff may not understand SaP or see its potential value. For example,

> *'Most students as partners do not have teaching training or a communicable pedagogical basis to their lessons/methods.'*
>
> *'Students do not understand the scope of library services and support.'*

In the interests of keeping the ULs questionnaire brief, we did not specifically ask ULs to indicate the major barriers to SaP, however, we did ask ULs to indicate any existing examples of SaP in the library context. UL responses indicated strong engagement with student associations or committees on a university-wide level (e.g., not library specific) and that existing practice in the library was often 'ad hoc'. Responses indicated a desire to have more intentional SaP engagement through frameworks or models, support for student and staff training, and resourcing for paid roles or gift cards. As one UL reflected,

> *'To engage with students in a genuine student partnership we currently have very little to offer other than goodwill. We don't have tools or training and have limited resources, so can only really offer a little staff time. Last year we applied unsuccessfully for internal funding, to fund staff time and training, so funding and preparing grant applications support would be helpful.'*

Discussion

From our results, several significant threads have emerged about how student partnership is being integrated in the academic library context. Our first finding, around a novice understanding from staff about what constitutes student partnership, is particularly relevant as the way a staff member conceptualises partnership will likely have a flow on effect to how they embed or support the practice (Matthews et al., 2018). For example, if the prevailing staff belief is that partnership is only applied to improve a service or product, rather than framed as a learning opportunity for the staff member(s) to better understand students' lived experiences, staff may be unable to realise the full potential of the approach. It is also likely that if the staff member does not perceive partnership to be a reciprocal learning opportunity that the activity itself may be inappropriately designed, with student partners potentially unable to share their voices or expertise. Interestingly, as we found in our survey results, it appears the ULs have a more nuanced understanding of the potential benefits of partnership compared to library staff, with many indicating phrases such as shared decision-making in their definitions. However, given our sample, where only 19 or 39 ULs of Australian universities responded to the survey (and only 13 of those completed the survey in its entirety) it is reasonable to assume that those who opted to respond to the survey have an interest in the SaP space and may therefore have a more nuanced conception of SaP than their peers. Moving forward, it is critical for ULs to encourage and support library staff to engage and practice SaP approaches, including their professional development in SaP definitions, theoretical underpinnings, and implications for practice.

Another key finding from our research was how SaP practices have unfolded to date in Australian academic libraries. As could be seen from the Likert-scale questions,

most respondents indicated the greatest adoption of SaP in the dimensions of library teaching and learning. From qualitative survey responses we further saw that many of these teaching and learning examples related to peer mentoring programs or the development of student-facing workshops on study skills. Yet, while library teaching and learning is an important dimension in embedding student partnership in library practice, it is far from the only space that partnership would add value to the library. As outlined by student partnership scholars (e.g., Bovill & Bulley, 2011; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2016) partnership can occur in a wide breadth of activities, and it is in the areas where perhaps it less easy to integrate where the greatest benefit could be gained. For example, in our research we were surprised to see so few respondents indicate student partnership in the dimensions of collection renewal or governance of the library. Potentially, however, it is in these spaces where power imbalances, staff politics and tension are likely to occur that student partnership may be most needed. Through a better understanding of students' perspectives and ideas, library staff can reflect and work with students on goals and strategies to better support student cohorts.

Highlighted through our findings are also the barriers that many staff perceive to be blockers to embedding student partnership in the academic library. Of the 104 responses from library staff many referenced well known barriers to student partnership found in the literature, such as university services or classrooms, time, resourcing, and perceived disinterest of students. Some of the cited barriers, however, are also distinct in the library space and merit specific discussion. For example, library staff shared that it was challenging to advertise or promote student partnership projects to students as they did not have access to in-class promotion or teacher-student recommendation. Rather, library staff must rely on recruiting student partners through other means, such as social media, flyers, and callouts. This is problematic, as was discussed by a few

participants, namely because of the equity implications. If library staff can only promote student partnership through non-curriculum channels, they may only be able to reach the most engaged student cohorts, for instance, the ones who follow the university on social media or attend the library regularly. In the future, it is important for libraries to reflect on how they can leverage their relationships with other teams at the university, for example, first year subject coordinators, or staff working in disability support services, to help promote programs and raise awareness to all cohorts of students about opportunities to have their voices heard.

Another frequently raised barrier to discuss and highlight is the library staff perception that students lacked motivation to engage in partnership with the library. While it is well known that current students often have competing interests, not only around coursework but potentially work or carer commitments, low responses rates on surveys, for example, are likely due to students feeling over-surveyed, as well as reporting feeling like surveys rarely 'close the loop' on student feedback (Authors, 2021; Shah, Cheng & Fitzgerald, 2017). It is important to remember that the basis of successful partnerships between students and staff is relationships, and therefore, the key the driving student engagement in such interventions or projects should first be creating mechanisms to support deep and meaningful relationships with students (Felten & Lambert, 2020). Methods such as survey, interviews, or focus groups, do not create ample opportunities for students and staff to engage in dialogue and build trust or mutual respect, which are critical pillars for student partnership. Libraries could consider approaches to embed partnership and consider mechanisms that would allow for greater bonds to form between students and staff.

Finally, aligned to the above findings, was the overall theme of library staff indicating that the current culture was not conducive to student partnership. For

example, library staff spoke of themselves, or colleagues feeling disconnected from students or being so stretched in their roles that they could only engage with students superficially. This likely relates to the specific workplace pressures that were exacerbated by COVID-19 and the emergency shift to online delivery in recent years. However, similar to how COVID provided an opportunity for academic libraries to re-think their service model, the recent contextual changes could also provide a catalyst for academic libraries to re-consider how they work with students. Rather than run students as partners initiatives or projects as one-offs or as needs basis, libraries could remodel innovation and decision-making processes for ongoing partnership with students. This could include having a well-supported and active student advisory group, supporting students to lead regular staff training sessions, or funding students to run interventions for their peers, supported by library staff. These changes could result in a significant shift in how library staff see students and help to underscore the value of including students in future library work.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study had several limitations. The first was that our survey sample was a self-selecting sample. While all ULs and library staff were invited to participate in the survey, not all chose to do so. It is likely that many of those who opted to not participate in the study, may not have had an interest in student partnership and our results therefore may be prone to an overly positive bias of student partnership. However, as we still detected relatively low levels of engagement or understanding of student partnership, this only further contextualises our findings that academic libraries have significant progress to make to embed student collaboration in their practices. We also note that of the 210 responses to our survey, only 152 participants completed the entire survey, which may indicate that if the survey was to be used again in future years, or a

new context, it may need to be adapted either to include less open-ended responses or have less questions.

In the future it would be valuable to continue to regularly survey and benchmark how student partnership unfolds in the academic library, not only in Australia but in other countries as well, including the re-use of our survey questionnaire. International benchmarking may reveal further insights and ongoing comparison of varying levels of student partnership in academic libraries would add to understanding the complexities of the drivers, or blockers, to student partnership, which can occur within a single institution or across jurisdictions. Our study also did not include the voices of students, either those who have partnered with the library, or those who might in the future. We look forward to others building on this research and including important student perspectives and experiences of partnership in the academic library.

Conclusion

This paper highlights that while there is growing interest in student partnership in higher education, including in the academic library, there is much unrealised potential for this approach. Our survey to explore conceptualisations of student partnership in the academic library, as well as current levels of engagement, demonstrate that the practice in the academic library is in its infancy.

While partnership and collaborative work is key to any academic library, in instances where the potential partner is the student, there is more reflection and focus needed. To embed partnership, we recommend that university librarians and staff consider how to create a culture of student partnership. Given that many library staff see the potential benefits to student partnership our call to action for university librarians is to realise this potential: to support staff to understand the value of this important approach, and to put in place student partnership plans and initiatives that improve

services by transcending existing transactional relationships between the library and its students.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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