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# Student-staff partnership schemes at two UK universities: the impact on student and staff identities, relationships, and solidarity

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## Abstract

This paper analyses a model of student observation of teaching at the University of Sheffield, inspired and directly shaped by an earlier scheme at the University of Lincoln. Student observation of teaching does what it says on the tin; it places staff and students into dialogue with each other about teaching practices, and offers a space outside of conventional approaches to evaluation where meaningful dialogue can be fostered. The paper outlines what each scheme does and how it operates, evaluates the success of the Sheffield scheme through data gathered through two instances of the project, and relates these insights to the existing literature on student-staff partnership. Themes derived from the data identify changes to student and staff participants' identities, their relationships with one another, and a deepening sense of solidarity between students and staff. A secondary finding focuses on the value of cross-institutional collaboration in projects such as this, where work may challenge conventional institutional expectations. We end by exploring the risks and opportunities for aligning this work with contemporary mechanisms of quality assurance, and policy discourses around teaching excellence.

## Introduction

This paper emerges from a dialogue, friendship, and shared commitment between the two authors to empowering students as active partners within higher education. It details and reflects on a scheme for supporting students to become critical friends to members of staff, with an overall aim of improving their teaching, the work of their department, and the experiences of future students. It is informed by dialogue and collaboration across two institutions, committed to improving teaching according to student experience; and it represents co-operation in an age of competition, adopting the principle of solidarity to inspire colleagues to lead in collaboration across organisational roles and boundaries (Neary and Winn, 2015).

The scheme at the centre of the paper is the Student Observation of Teaching, or SOOT, project at the University of Sheffield, run by Tim. However, this came directly from the Students as Consultants scheme at the University of Lincoln, designed and led by Jasper. Tim heard Jasper talk about SCOT at the Higher Education Academy conference in 2017, and felt it was the kind of work that could fit well with Sheffield. Drawing on his long-standing involvement with student engagement initiatives,

including a spell as a Fellow at the institutional centre for inquiry-based learning, he set up SOOT, which ran in 2017-18 as a pilot, and in a more fully-fledged form thereafter. Further information about both schemes is given in the paper, which also summarises some relevant literature, locates participant experiences in relation to existing research, and draws out some broader implications for the sector. Primary data comes from the SOOT scheme at Sheffield, with additional insights presented less systematically from SCOT.

So much for *what* the paper will be: it may be useful to explain a little about *why* we wanted to write it. There were three interlinked priorities, beginning with the fact that we are aware of a number of other institutions who were running similar schemes. We wanted to share our experiences (good and bad), so that others, whether in existing schemes or seeking to develop new ones, could learn from them. In turn, this might help build up stability, and a higher national profile for this kind of work: student partnership projects sometimes suffer the blight of being fixed-term projects, of interest to those who are predisposed to be interested, and we think they deserve better than that. As McCune (2019) emphasises, a teacher identity in higher education requires consistent work to maintain, as the deeper goals it attempts to pursue, such as supporting student flourishing, are not one-off events. Student partnership offers a stable platform from which teachers can build such an identity. And lastly, as has been well-argued elsewhere (O'Leary and Cui, 2018), partnership work with students offers alternative grounds from which to start a conversation about teaching excellence, and therefore a potential challenge to a narrow policy agenda concerned with the economic efficacy of higher education. At the time of writing the place of student voice within the landscape of higher education is perhaps a little uncertain because of the emphasis on datafication of the learning experience (Williamson *et al.* 2020), more focused on measurable metrics than human experience. Simultaneously, universities are facing significant change including increasing diversity of student populations, presenting a need to keep in step with student experience through skilled student voice activities. Given the positive policy moves in this direction (QAA, 2018), and the even more laudable institutional responses to these (University College London, n.d.; Edinburgh Napier University, n.d.), it would be a real loss to the sector to prioritise a superficial notion of student voice within crude metrics above a richer, deeper structure of student-staff partnerships.

## Literature review

Student-staff partnerships around teaching development have a relatively brief but rich history. Alison Cook-Sather at Bryn Mawr College in the United States has led work in this area since 2007, and has written about it extensively and to the benefit of the wider field (e.g. Cook-Sather 2002, 2010). Her work has been developed through comparisons with similar schemes in other national contexts as well (Bovill *et al.*, 2011; Bovill *et al.*, 2016), and a very helpful summary and analysis of "partnership learning communities" published by the Higher Education Academy (Healey *et al.*, 2014). In

addition, a broader review of the value of student-staff partnerships for learning has been published, in the very first issue of a journal devoted to this topic (Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2017). There is overall then a sense that the fundamental groundwork for identifying the value of student-staff collaboration in teaching development has been firmly laid. A consistent body of evidence identifies benefits for students:

> *Through working in partnership with faculty to analyse, affirm and revise classroom practice, students develop a more informed critical perspective within and beyond classrooms through multiplying their own angles of vision, discerning and analysing professors' pedagogical intentions, recognising themselves and classmates as a community of learners, and revising their worldview. In addition, they build greater confidence, capacity and agency as learners and people through taking more responsibility as learners, becoming active researchers of learning and refining their communication skills. (Cook-Sather and Luz, 2014, p. 1098)*

As this quotation makes clear, the benefits for students are both individual and collective, and a similar pattern can be discerned for staff participants as well: not only does collaborative work with students offer them new sources of inspiration and challenge, it helps shift the culture of institutions towards collaboration and the co-creation of knowledge. This is particularly important for staff who self-identify as under-represented within the academy (as explored by Kupatadze, 2019), as it helps all participants develop a more inclusive sense of belonging. Indeed, the whole thrust of the literature about student-staff partnership is towards dissolving hard boundaries between categories of "student" and "staff", and creating instead new hybridities of identity: "This partnership identity seemed to provide a space where partners could move away from distinctions between group identities of 'us' and 'them' to a shared space of 'we' as partners" (Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2018, p. 21). We return to this in discussing our data through the theme of "solidarity". It's also worth noting that as student observation projects, our schemes have a family resemblance to staff observation schemes; for instance, the cross-institutional SHED scheme in Scotland for educational developers to observe one another's practices (Bovill and Cunningham, 2019). This also sought to bring into conversation colleagues who may be in more marginal positions, and recognise the value that comes from exchanging practices across institutions; contrary to a logic of competition between HEIs, the SHED scheme sought to develop cross-institutional collaborations.

No matter how it is pursued, the formation of teacher identities in higher education is already a complex practice, and one that involves many interlocking factors. Van Lankveld *et al.* (2017) map out some factors influencing the development of teacher identity, including five relevant psychological processes: a sense of appreciation, a sense of connectedness, a sense of competence, a sense of commitment, and imagining a future career trajectory (summarised in a diagram, p. 332). These intersect with contextual factors that help or hinder the development of such an

identity; and relevant for our argument is that contact with both students and staff development programmes helped the development of a teacher identity, while wider contextual factors, such as neoliberal management practices of scrutiny and metricised assessment, hindered its development. The datafication of higher education practice has been explored by, amongst others, Sabri (2013), Williamson *et al.* (2020), and McNay (2021), and is perhaps part of the challenge in the current context of higher education that student-staff partnership can address. Student identities too are contested and complex, as Kenway *et al.* (2019) make clear; the classroom is a site for experimenting with new identities, and the limits that are placed around it give direct shape to the possibilities that might result. Relationships between individual staff and students can be more or less transformative, or open to the possibility of others changing; but it is only through structural approaches, such as sustained attempts to work in partnership, that the potential benefits of new ways of collaborating can be fully realised.

Reweaving identities and relationships in the academy is, at the risk of labouring an obvious point, not a politically neutral activity, and one that has significant implications for what institutions are, what they do, and how they do it. As the HEA-led summary of student-staff partnerships puts it, this practice points towards "cultural change in the academy" (Healey, Flint, and Harrington, 2015, p. 56), and this change has to be grounded in values and beliefs. O'Leary and Cui (2018) make a strong case for prioritising student partnership in the current climate of the datafication of "teaching excellence", but even more deeply than this contemporary relevance, there is something _politically_ significant in wanting to reframe the roles of students, staff, and the institutions in which they meet. This is perhaps seen most clearly in the work of Mike Neary and Joss Winn, who first introduced the notion of "student as producer" in 2009 (Neary and Winn, 2009). They then developed their work into considerations of "co-operative higher education" (Neary and Winn, 2015), a model which takes institutions beyond traditional formulations as either public or private places of higher learning. Within their local instantiation of co-operative higher education, the Social Science Centre in Lincoln, all participants are designated with the term "scholar", reinforcing that all are there to learn and teach, no matter their background or formal qualifications (Neary and Winn, 2015). They are also keen to work "in, against, and beyond" the institutional forms that constitute higher education, and their catalytic principle of solidarity - "sharing a commitment to a common purpose inside and outside of the institution"(Neary and Winn 2015, unpaginated) - underpins the collaboration outlined in this paper, where throughout, we have made materials accessible to each other and anyone else who is interested, rather than seeing them as the property of an individual or an institution.

Part of why Neary and Winn seek inspiration from the co-operative movement as a radical challenge to traditional structures of higher education is that their starting point for collaboration - thinking about students as producers - was at risk of being co-opted by institutional agendas, made safer and more performative (Neary and Winn, 2015).

A similar danger is also identified by theorists of student voice, who recognise the potential for a radical concept of authentic engagement with the diversity of student experiences, to be recuperated by an agenda that is happy to position students as consumers of the product of higher education. Fielding (2004), for example, highlights a tension between those who pursue the "manipulative incorporation" of student voice for "the bolstering of an increasingly powerful status quo", and those who intend a future that is "more engaging, more imaginative, more democratic, and significantly and sustainably different to the one we are likely to inherit" (p. 296). While we would clearly seek to position ourselves towards the second pole that Fielding outlines, we are aware of the dangers of co-option for both of our schemes, and have worked hard to retain their critical independence at the same time as make the most of institutional structures that could support them. Tim, for example, has repeatedly pushed against attempts to bring SOOT under the banner of performance management, something that staff would be compelled to undertake when "problems" were identified in their teaching. If these attempts had been successful, it would have been a clear weaponisation of the student voice to further an institutional agenda of performance management. Student-staff collaboration schemes such as those reported here, bring to the fore these potentially different agendas relating to student voice, and add to the mix other complexities about power dynamics and appropriate understandings of student and staff responsibilities. These are well-explored by Seale *et al.* (2014), who use first-person narrative accounts to reflect the range of experiences in a student-staff collaboration.

So while the theoretical underpinnings of student-staff dialogues around teaching are well-established, and the merits and positive impact of such projects well-evidenced, that does not make them any easier to carry out. This chimes with our experiences of SCOT and SOOT, and in the next few pages, we outline each of these schemes. We then return to the literature to explore further the effects one scheme has on identity, relationships, and an underlying solidarity between students and staff, and end by identifying possible future directions for national developments in this field.

## Overview of the schemes

Student Consultants on Teaching was piloted at the University of Lincoln in 2012, in the College of Social Science. Based on its success here, it was rolled out across the university from 2013 until 2019. Subsequently, this practice informed the development of a student panel with students recruited across disciplines to consult with staff on their plans for teaching delivery in a blended Covid 19 context. Around 14 students were recruited and trained each year to give feedback to staff on their teaching, and then students and staff were arranged into pairs, to explore a particular issue within the staff member's teaching and provide feedback in an area of practice. At an institutional level, it has proved a highly effective form of student engagement, and it has connected positively with existing peer review of practice arrangements. This means that staff who participate in the scheme can receive different views of their

teaching to prompt their ongoing professional development (similar to the “lenses” on practice outlined in Brookfield, 1995). The interdisciplinary nature of the scheme has had particular benefit so that, for instance, in Health and Social Care it has opened up pedagogy in this science-based discipline to a wider range of epistemological perspectives.

Jasper gave a paper about SCOT at the Higher Education Academy conference in 2017, and, following the principle that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Tim realised that something similar could be developed in his own institution. So Student Observation of Teaching at the University of Sheffield began with a pilot year in 2017-18. This involved 22 staff and 16 students (9 undergraduate, 7 postgraduate), with the balance of numbers meaning that students could work either with an individual member of staff, or with a small group. In the 2018-19 the scheme was launched properly, with accreditation through the Higher Education Achievement Report, and a more systematic approach to student recruitment; this led to participation from 16 staff and 36 students (22 undergraduate, 14 postgraduate). These represented 25 different departments, and the balance of numbers meant that students worked in small groups with a single staff member. Further demographic data was seen as unnecessary and was therefore not collected, a consideration which has presented challenges when analysing the project retrospectively.

Since these beginnings, both schemes have continued to evolve. For instance, during the pivot to online teaching during Covid-19, Jasper, at the request of the Vice-Chancellor, built on his SCOT experiences to develop a new student panel approach to explore the collective student experience. In practice, this meant recruiting and training groups of students from a wide range of backgrounds and programmes, to give feedback to staff on their teaching proposals. What’s helpful about this development is that it drew back in learning from the Sheffield SOOT scheme; for example, pairing up students and staff over academic years to enable trust and collaborative relationships to build through activities, including closing feedback loops by demonstrating to students how their feedback has been incorporated in new arrangements. The dialogue between schemes has therefore remained open, and there has been an emphasis on continuing development throughout.

In both schemes, the basic structures are extremely simple; students and staff volunteer to take part; they are trained, and have explicit conversations about key principles such as confidentiality, mutuality, and trust that underpin the schemes, as well as some of the practicalities; and then they are put into small groups to work together. In SOOT, these groups are across departmental boundaries, in an attempt to minimise differentials in power between students and staff, as well as to maximise the inherent intellectual interest of learning about something new, while in SCOT they are within disciplines to maximise the value of subject-specific insight. Although SOOT is, as the name indicates, grounded in observation, how this is defined is very broad - students sitting in on face-to-face teaching, either as a one-off or over a period of time;

students and staff discussing a shared artefact, such as module evaluations or a virtual learning environment; and students running focus groups with other students, to get a more longitudinal perspective on the staff member's teaching. In terms of outputs, in SOOT Tim asks for a brief reflection from each member, where they have complete control over how much and what they said; and in SCOT Jasper noticed the additional benefits of the SOOT approach involving pairing up staff and students across an academic year, and subsequently adapted his scheme to enable more sustained staff-student partnerships for learning. In both schemes, there is a delicate balance between allowing pairs or groups autonomy in pursuing their own interests, and retaining a sense of focused purpose and support, a balance that is maintained through careful use of shared workshops and individual check-ins.

## Research methods and methodology

Throughout the instances of SOOT reported here, Tim offered participants opportunities for reflection, with the primary purposes of deepening participants' engagement, improving the scheme for future instances, and gathering data for research into the project. The research centred around the question, "What has been the impact of SOOT on participants' learning and teaching?", and in keeping with this open, experiential question a qualitative approach was adopted throughout the data collection and analysis (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). The instruments used to gather the data were in the 2017-18 pilot, four questionnaires spread throughout the duration of the scheme to monitor developments in near-real time (with an overall response rate of 26%); and in 2018-19, a self-submitted reflection form at the end of the project, of which there were 28 (a 73% response rate). Questions on both instruments followed each other closely, inquiring into the impact the scheme had on participants' thinking about learning and teaching, their sense of relating to students or staff, and, in the reflection form, an open prompt of, "Tell me a story about what participating in SOOT was like for you". All participants had the opportunity to participate in each stage of the data-gathering process, and full ethical approval, including for use of the data in publication, was granted from the University. All names used below are pseudonyms.

For analysis, the data was compiled and coded in an open manner, seeking to address the core question of what impact SOOT had on participants' learning and teaching, whether positive, negative, or mixed. Following Wellington (2015), Tim undertook five stages of working with the data; immersing himself in it, reflecting on what it suggested, analysing it to pick apart the details of different contributions, synthesising it to bring together common themes, and finally relating it to existing literature. An initial cycle of the process was completed relatively rapidly, with provisional analysis complete soon after the end of the 18-19 academic year; however, further refinement and (particularly) relationship with the literature continued throughout the prolonged writing period of this article, until December 2022. The final result was a tripartite arrangement of interlocking themes, of identities, relationship, and solidarity, and this is the structure utilised in the explanation of the findings.

Due to practical circumstances, data analysis was carried out by Tim alone, and an obvious development to the research process would be to broaden that so there were greater opportunities for multiple perspectives on the data to emerge. In subsequent instances of the scheme, there has been a more sustained approach to data collection, including follow-up evaluations with participants three months after their involvement ended; and an effort to increase response rates (which, in the pilot year data, sometimes fell as low as 31%). It seems difficult to avoid the paradox, though, of participants who are more engaged with the process choosing to complete optional evaluation activities, although to some extent this is mitigated by all of the evaluation instruments emphasising the importance of honest feedback, including elements that were more challenging. Despite the small scale of the research and the organic, evolving approach taken to data collection, we are confident that the data collected addresses the core question about participants' experiences, and does so in a manner that welcomes perspectives on the process that are not uniformly positive. The analysis offered reinforces extant literature in the field in particular ways, but also offers some space for pushing it further, by detailed reference to one particular scheme of partnership for professional development.

**Findings from the SOOT scheme: identity**

One theme emerging from the analysis was how SOOT impacted participants' understandings of their identities - for staff in a way that underscored and strengthened existing identities, while for students in a way that opened new possibilities. To take these in order; staff comments regularly highlighted the value SOOT had in reinforcing their identity as teachers within a research-led institution. For example, one staff participant noted:

> *There IS a community of practice at the university around teaching, it's just a shame it isn't very overt, or very well supported by [the] university as a whole" (2017, staff, Jackie, original emphasis).*

Taking part in SOOT was a chance to reconnect with this community of practice in a structured and supported manner, and to underline practices that are important for teachers, but perhaps a little risky:

> *I have confirmed to myself that working with students as producers in learning and teaching development can be a very positive experience (2017, staff, Susan).*

Midway through the pilot year, Susan reported "this has been a very positive reflective exercise already", and Zoe, another staff member, noted afterwards that "when talking about my teaching to anyone new it helps me reflect on what I am doing and why". So opening up their practices to external scrutiny, whether from students or anyone else,

allowed teachers to identify more completely with their role within the university. This fits with existing literature about teacher identity, for example van Lankveld *et al.* (2017), who, in their synthetic review, note that "contact with students and staff development programmes were usually described as strengthening teacher identity"; SOOT offers both of these within a single package.

Student identities were perhaps more significantly affected by participation in SOOT. They became more active in their engagement with learning:

> *[SOOT] gave me the bit of courage to push myself to actually step out of my comfort zone and try new learning methods myself (2018, student, Betty).*

And, as with staff, they became more aware of the choices they were already making in their performance of their learner identity because these became the focus of a conversation:

> *Hearing a lecturer's position on modern teaching for the first time gave me a fresh perspective on some of my own learning practices (2017, student, Matt).*

The observation scheme introduces a third term into the broadly dyadic relationship of learners and teachers, and in so doing, gives participants permission to move out of their traditional roles and into something new. This is powerfully expressed by one pilot year participant:

> *Having to write down notes and be observant of everything was challenging but also rewarding as it enabled me to really look through the lenses of both students and the professor and blend into the background rather than my usual role of lethargic student frantically mashing buttons on her laptop keyboard (2017, student, Peach).*

Echoing Brookfield (1995), the language of "lenses" is helpful here in showing how similar situations can be regarded differently when placed within special conditions; in SOOT, a requirement not to focus on the content of the teaching, but to consider how learning was being supported. This gives student participants more distance from their ordinary assumptions and practices, and potentially leads to a transformation in their relationship with staff:

> *I think my interaction with staff, in general, could rely more on communication and respect, and less on seeing them as a superior authoritative person (2018, student, Aarti).*

**Findings from the SOOT scheme: relationships**

Indeed, how students and staff relate to each other was an explicit focus of several

contributions to the data. As noted throughout the literature (e.g. Kenway *et al.*, 2019), conventional classroom settings are sites of contested knowledge and differential power, including tensions in the relationships between students and staff. SOOT therefore offers a valuable space for constructing these relationships differently, and perhaps more closely to the vision of "radical collegiality" advanced by Michael Fielding (1999).

The new kind of relationship prompted by SOOT was expressed directly by a student participant, saying:

> *This was [...] one of the very few times when I had the feeling that I am in the same team as my teacher and we are working together towards the same goal (2018, student, Betty).*

The unusual nature of the collaboration was also highlighted by staff:

> *It was great to get insights and questions from a student from a completely different department [...] It can be difficult to have [...] frank discussions when [...] there is always (no matter how much you ask for feedback) the students' awareness that you're the one grading them (2018, staff, Fred).*

The final sentence calls attention to how sensitive staff are to power differentials within the student-teacher relationship, a sentiment also expressed by a staff participant the previous year: "It's impossible to achieve a neutral relationship in this context, which is why this project is so important" (2017, staff, Sasha).

Yet while the new kind of relationship fostered by SOOT is clearly beneficial, it would be naive to assume that this was the case for all participants. Indeed, it would belie the complexity of experiences noted by Seale *et al.* (2014), in their helpful analysis of varieties of experience within the same collaborative project. Not all of the relationships within SOOT worked; "familiarity is key", said Peach, a student participant, about what made their project successful, and without time to build this familiarity between students and staff, the rest of the project was unlikely to be effective. Limitations of time were explicitly identified by four participants as an impediment to participation, and, in the 2017 instance, industrial action explicitly took staff away from time they could spend on additional projects such as this. Of course, time is one of the factors more pressured and measured within the neoliberal academy (cf. McNay, 2021), and is identified by McCune (2019) as a key factor in maintaining a teacher identity within higher education; so it is a resource of great value, placed under significant pressure.

An unexpected finding was that the presence of a student observer acted as an emollient in relationships _between staff_. Engaging in an observation process (not necessarily with a student) helped staff give their teaching visibility amongst academic

colleagues, and enable forms of cooperation that otherwise may not have been achievable:

> *It was useful to have [the observer] there, I think it helped the whole teaching team to discuss the module, 3 of us have taught it in previous years and one of us is doing it for the first time, so we were able to bring up our prior experiences and discuss ways forward with teaching (2017, staff, Jackie).*

Clearly, there was a predisposition amongst participants for working in partnership, as they had volunteered for the scheme, including in its pilot year. Students tended to be already involved with activities such as student-staff committees or other forms of student representation; and staff also voiced a history of collaborative working. For instance, Arnie, one of the staff participants in 2017 said "I try to involve all students I teach in a conversation about their learning." SOOT placed that attempt at collaboration and fostering student agency on a more formal footing, encouraging students to be more active and autonomous in their learning. This resulted in a number of student participants suggesting changes in their own courses of study based on their experiences in other departments.

**Findings from the SOOT scheme: solidarity**

So what SOOT helps move students and staff towards is an alternative form of organisation within the university, which is not grounded in differentiation between students and staff, but recognition of their shared underlying purpose in seeking to develop and extend knowledge; to follow Neary and Winn (2015), organisation based on solidarity. As noted by Mercer-Mapstone, Marquis, and McConnell (2018), student partnership work offers the possibility of moving from "us" and "them" identities, to those of "we". By stepping outside of the normal power dynamics between students and staff, SOOT utilises dispositions common to all participants, such as curiosity, readiness to learn, and seeking a more authentic knowledge of the other party. Strikingly, both students and staff in 2017 used the same phrase in identifying one benefit of their involvement:

> *It's been eye-opening to learn about the teaching in a different Faculty (2017, staff, Samir)*

> *It has been eye opening to see how approaches to teaching and learning vary from department to department (2017, student, Dorothy).*

With eyes more open, participants can see more clearly how learning and teaching happens across the university, and therefore understand in a richer way the experiences of more participants. It also enables them to see each other more clearly:

> *[Participation in SOOT] has challenged me to make sure I don't speak from someone else's perspective or assume I know what it means to be a student (2017, staff, Leila).*

As Brookfield (1995) emphasises, it is unscholarly to assume that one knows what one's students are thinking and feeling, leading to a requirement for forms of inquiry that are sympathetic, collaborative, and grounded in deeper structures such as respect for one another. This emerged through the data in presenting SOOT as a positive alternative to traditional forms of student evaluation:

> *It was really interesting to hear honest perspectives from students that had been collated and considered [through a student-led focus group] rather than the "stream of consciousness" type responses one often gets in student feedback surveys (2018, staff, Paul).*

"Honest" perspectives are valued here, generated through thoughtful processes of human discussion rather than the externalisation of opinions through distancing mechanisms such as module evaluation forms. As Sabri (2013) and McNay (2021) warn, the datafication of teaching performance imperils some of the most significant benefits of higher education in terms of interpersonal growth and the taking of risks within supported environments. SOOT, SCOT, and related forms of student-staff partnership re-open the possibility of this richer engagement, between individuals, and linking individuals and ideas. The final quotation from a student summarises both the challenges SOOT is intended to address, and the efficacy of its attempt to do so:

> *I am happy to have achieved something and could act as a bridge between students and the academic department. This is one of the best experience [sic.] for me at The University of Sheffield (2018, student, Hassan).*

## Discussion

It is satisfying that findings from analysis of SOOT are congruent with the broader literature. In the systematic review carried out by Mercer-Mapstone *et al.* (2017), a large proportion of participants in student-staff collaborative projects reported a stronger sense of identity, including enhanced understanding of one another's positions, more trusting relations, and a stronger sense of community solidarity. These are also findings we have identified in our own activities.

It is also helpful that some of the challenges identified in the literature have emerged from our data. The students and staff who have chosen to be involved are often those who are most active in other areas of student-staff collaboration, and spreading the net more widely - perhaps to include those who might benefit most from the opportunity - is going to be an ongoing task. At least part of this challenge can be addressed

through following the logic of collaboration, and enhancing the involvement of student partners in the running of the schemes themselves. This is true to the vision of culture change reflected in Healey *et al.* (2014), and the equally radical reframing of higher education as a co-operative enterprise in Neary and Winn (2015), and has been given further credibility through the developments undertaken with SCOT in these pandemic times. While we wouldn't want to underestimate the social disparities the pandemic brought to the fore, in the narrow terms of student-staff partnership work, learning online played a role in creating new opportunities for collaboration, with students and staff thrown into a situation that was more or less novel for each of them. This fostered opportunities for new identities and relationships, which have emerged, for instance, in 2021 SOOT groups containing learners based both in the UK and overseas, each exploring different facets of a shared teaching and learning experience.

Recreating student-staff relationships returns us to the debates about student voice, and making sure that we are avoiding the side of "manipulative incorporation" that Fielding (2004) warns against. In SOOT and SCOT, there is an effort both to listen to students as individuals, working in particular circumstances with small numbers of staff; and as a collective, trying to shift the debate about teaching quality away from one predicated on measures relating to student satisfaction and other consumerised metrics. Our schemes are built on the shared premise to develop more equal staff-students partnerships in which students' expertise as learners is shared with that of staff as teachers, and both become better informed about one another's perspectives and contributions through development activities. This is only possible through better-quality relationships between each group, and a willingness to reflect on identities given and created.

Throughout this article, we have tried to call attention to the likely limitations of our sample, and we are clear that the students who have volunteered to take part in our activities cannot speak for all other students. However, there is nothing intrinsic that limits collaboration with students; it is, as identified throughout the literature, more a matter of expectations, structures, and mindset, both on the part of individuals and institutions. To work most productively with a diverse student body, let alone to address the priorities of a widening participation agenda, we need to continue diversifying the decision-making structures and processes that inform teaching. Student-staff collaboration can be one engine for driving this diversification, and, as described by Cook-Sather (2016), can provide some of the "brave spaces" required for sustainable pedagogical innovation that is grounded in a commitment to social justice.

It is perhaps worth noting that wherever we have talked about this work to staff in other institutions, we have been met with a warm reception. We have tried to meet this warmth by being open with our materials with colleagues who are interested in establishing their own schemes, and thereby continuing a virtuous cycle, hopefully for all involved. There seems to be an appetite amongst staff to work with students in

different ways, perhaps aligned to the co-operativist movement highlighted by Neary and Winn (2015), and to histories of cross-institutional professional development (e.g. Bovill and Cunningham, 2019). Students also seem willing to step outside of their suggested roles, as they volunteered for both schemes, and were thoughtful in their reflections of how their identities and relationships shifted as a result. As champions of this way of working, we have always seen the schemes as the property of a broader scholarly community rather than individuals or institutions.

An obvious facet of talking with colleagues at other institutions about our schemes is that what we say about what seems effective, is often embarrassingly simple. There are hygiene factors - regular contact between participants, agreeing priorities, following through on commitments, and recognising vulnerability on all sides - that need to be got right, otherwise the whole thing doesn't fly. Similarly, the support that's put in place to make these more likely to happen is again very straightforward: everyone needs a measure of self-awareness, and can sometimes be prodded in that direction; pairings between staff and students need to be monitored, with both sides having a red cord they can pull in case of emergencies; and the benefits of sticking with the process need to be spelled out at every available opportunity (cf. Bovill *et al.*, 2016). In many ways, all of this is largely a reminder of good pedagogical practices, where establishing good relationships, clear communication, and offering permission and support to be open-minded are all virtues to pursue. Yet the focus has become somewhat sharper in recent years, with iterations of TEF seeking to raise the profile of teaching in institutional provision. We are, therefore, trying to balance on a tightrope: to do good things for what we think are good reasons, while others might be encouraging us to do them for reasons to which we might feel less sympathetic. And just as on a tightrope, we cannot stand still and expect to remain successful - we must press on, evolving our practices as we go, and continuing to have confidence in the power of the approach.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

What, then, to do with the insights generated through this approach? Working across the grain of the institution clearly has benefits to students, staff, and the institutions that they shape and which are shaped by them; yet it also presents tensions with the wider policy context in which higher education takes place. Reshaping identities and relationships in a new context of student-staff solidarity sits poorly alongside attempts to position students as consumers of a higher education experience, where providers can be compared on grounds presented as neutral, but which in reality are likely to reflect entrenched differences within the UK education system and society more broadly. There is perhaps value in the suggestion from Neary and Winn (2015) of seeking to work "in, against, and beyond" policy structures; little good may come from the wholesale replacement of unique student experiences with a singular notion of the student experience, yet to stand apart from such discourses risks missing the good that can come from paying attention to the notion of experience.

If we were, then, to work *within* existing policy structures, a potentially exciting space is opened for collaboration with both national bodies for staff in higher education (such as AdvanceHE), and students (such as the National Union of Students). Perhaps an overarching framework could be developed for recognising both individuals and schemes that effectively enable student-staff collaboration. This creates the added potential for cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional approaches to reinforce established student representation and quality assurance arrangements, by training and supporting students to engage in more extensive, sustained and impartial conversations with staff. Such a proposed structure would chime with employability initiatives while also adding something distinctive: it would prioritise students as change agents in their current position, rather than seeing them as accumulating social capital for an imagined future (cf. Mendes and Hammett, 2020). It would also help incentivise institutions and individuals to progress these areas of work in uncertain and changing times, perhaps most obviously through units of academic development, who are often already familiar with mapping provision onto external standards such as the UKPSF.

At the same time, we can seek to work *beyond* these policy structures. Akin to Freire's vision of a pedagogy for liberation that is never complete and always in-process (Freire, 2013), we could champion the potential for these partnership schemes to provide a consistent space for new relationships and identities to be built, and in the same breath accept that these spaces are always fragile and will need to be remade themselves, just as the new relationships they foster are recreated. This is a hard path, and one fraught with difficulties; if time is one of the most pressured elements of contemporary higher education, it is schemes like this, sitting outside of what is sometimes called an institution's "core business", that are perhaps most likely to suffer. One formulation of this question would be whether the risks of this approach are outweighed by the benefits that come from new opportunities emerging from constant reinvention. But even that may go too far in accepting a rational frame for making the choice, while teaching, as Darder, an active developer of the Freireian tradition, reminds us, is an act of love (2017); potentially student-staff partnership schemes offer a space for regrounding *every* aspect of the academy in a deeper logic of solidarity, and that includes the justification for their own existence.

In either case, a fundamental possibility for development has to be the closer involvement of students in the organisation and running of such schemes. This feels intellectually important, as it would be most true to the vision of collaboration that the schemes champion; however, it does present challenges, including in not all parties being ready to engage in such collaboration, or motivated to do so. Collaboration cannot be made compulsory, otherwise it loses its potential power for transformation. At the same time, the relatively fast turnover of students through an institution, and slow changes within the staff body, gives some grounds for expansion over time. As outlined in Little (2011), the challenge becomes using staff to hold together a network

of students where the individuals move on, but the overall project retains momentum and purpose. This will be the next frontier for student-staff collaboration, and in so doing, it may continue to disrupt and chip away at some of the conventional assumptions about what and who higher education is for, whose knowledge counts, and whose voices should be heard.

After all, both SOOT and SCOT are predicated on incredibly simple assumptions: students want to learn, and staff want to develop their teaching; they are perhaps more likely to effectively achieve these aims through collaborating in a structured community than individually; and that insights and new ways of collaborating developed through one experience, can, with appropriate support, be transferred to other experiences, perhaps more clearly within the mainstream of what students and staff do every day. Developing a sustained and meaningful professional dialogue between students and staff requires time for the relationship to unfold in all its richness; but the first step towards this is to give all parties permission to behave differently, and support to begin the conversation anew.

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