Students as Partners in Combined Honours at Newcastle University
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Six years ago the Combined Honours (CH) degree had major problems; students had no sense of identity or community, felt unsupported and disconnected from staff and each other. They felt neither part of the subjects studied (2 or 3 from 27), nor CH. The NSS scores were the worst at Newcastle and nationally in CH degrees.

On arrival, Colin drew on his scholarship and belief in student engagement, beginning by asking the students to identify the problems and propose potential solutions. The Student-Staff Committee was the perfect medium for this. His knowledge of innovative practice elsewhere, allowed him to promote that: e.g. peer mentoring - when students identified the potential of advice from experienced students.

The mentoring scheme is a flagship, extraordinarily beneficial for both mentors and mentees. Reaching all the first year, this provides excellent feedback, but also creates role models for ‘becoming a student.’ The early creation of a CH Society has aided social integration; offering a wide variety of ways to bring the students together. The CHS is entirely student led, whereas the SSC and mentoring are a joint partnership. These form the supporting legs of a holistic student engagement strategy which creates trust relationships early in the degree, a foundation for partnership. Mentoring has evolved, adding PASS (enhancing academic writing and skills) and graduate mentoring. The students recruit and train their successors and coordinate and lead the schemes, thus providing more responsibility and meaningful leadership roles.

The SSC has a student Chair and Secretary who are in full control of the meetings. Students outnumber staff members by 5:1. This creates an environment where students are genuinely empowered; staff are there to guide, inform, and assist, and thus the teacher-student power dynamic which can often stifle student voice is altered. Another innovation is that each student represents a small constituency of students, and two-way communication allows all to share issues and ideas. Working groups are formed to focus on solution for strategic problems affecting students and the degree; e.g. establishing careers and opportunities events in the form of ‘CH Week’ (which is student-run); and disparities on marking standards. This approach creates a system in which students and staff are equal partners who work together to consult the wider student body – via Student Forums as well as the constituency structure – and ultimately to co-govern the degree.

Although curriculum change seemed initially inaccessible (all modules were taught in other schools) the SSC have begun co-designing new modules: first, an independent studies final year module (addressing absence of opportunities to undertake dissertations, particularly one combining subjects); then three graduate development modules for students undertaking partnership roles/ projects (e.g. reps, mentors). External examiners have noted the outstanding quality of student work on these modules, indubitably because students completely own their work, and can reflect and self-evaluate. A great outcome of students undertaking projects within modules (which they present at a CH Conference) is that these projects involve identifying new schemes to improve the student experience. Internships are then created to turn ideas into practice; examples include buddy schemes for exchange students, widening participation, and developing intercultural competencies. Gaining academic credit in this co-curricular approach allows the student to invest more, be recognised, and to develop graduateness in a supported way.

New mechanisms of partnership take place within the modules. Students co-determine assessment criteria, weighting, and deadlines, and peer assess too. Although this can be a messy process, it ultimately results in
a sense of co-ownership and participation, militates against transactional ‘hoop jumping’ and encourages independent, creative work rewarded according to the students’ own terms. Moreover it enables yet more students to experience partnership as the curriculum covers all students.

Jenni researched offering a new module for her graduate development project, developing that via an internship. The module (running 2014/15) will provide first year students with an opportunity to integrate, cementing a collective CH identity. It will also enable sharing understanding between students of the interdisciplinary links across their subjects. Furthermore, the ethos of partnership will be instilled early in the degree, through the processes in this module.

There is a continuous process of developing new opportunities and reviewing and revising others. The transient nature of being a student demands the provision of exciting and attractive chances to get involved as partners. Our maxim is that if a student suggests an idea or wants to get involved it is our obligation to make that happen. Therefore we are always trialling new ideas within and alongside the main schemes – in an ethos of democratic, collective partnership.

All the initiatives are ‘joined up’ by:
- being overseen by the SSC;
- some students having multiple roles;
- the schemes mutually reinforce each other in spirit and practically (e.g. mentors promote all schemes, and vice versa)
- regular meeting of the Partnership Group (student scheme leaders and staff team)

It is manifest that this approach has been successful. The NSS overall satisfaction score in 2011-13 years has averaged 92% (up from 73% in 2008). The Partnership Group run our own annual cohort surveys asking 50+ questions (80% response rates). This year, 97% of students said their student experience was ‘good’ or ‘very good’. The proportion who feel part of an academic community has doubled (46%>90%) and feeling part of the CH community has trebled (18%>60%) since 2009.

We have promoted this approach widely, not least at external conferences and other events where we (staff and students) have delivered many keynotes and workshops. At Newcastle our peer mentoring scheme and student representation approaches have become templates for university-wide practice and policies. For staff this offers a sharing of our responsibilities with enthusiastic and innovative student champions of partnership – inspirational and rejuvenating for the staff and empowering and liberating for students. The trust placed in students in allowing them to prove that they are able and willing to co-manage their own path through university creates an invaluable opportunity to explore all their potential, create meaningful change and become active and engaged citizens. Surely this is the true purpose of Higher Education.