



Students' Role in Academic Development: Patterns of Partnership in Higher Education

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Abstract. Academic development becomes a central strategy to help universities be suitable settings for XXI century education. However, academic development itself needs to adjust to a new post-pandemic reality and new ways of learning. In this regard, engaging students has been targeted in several areas of research on educational quality, assessment and evaluation, as well as institutional change in Higher Education.

This paper focuses more specifically on the students' role in academic development. Firstly, we aim at offering an overview of current patterns found in the literature, of good practices of the student-teacher partnership in academic development in HEIs, and how different approaches might be integrated. Secondly, we propose a model for student-teacher partnerships in academic development as a sustainable and inclusive approach towards participatory democracy in higher education.

Keywords: Academic development · Students' role · Partnership · Higher education · Transformation

1 Introduction: An Era of Transformation in Higher Education

The EU2020 benchmark in Higher education (40% of young people in the EU with university-level qualification by 2020) was set a decade before 2020 became the year of the pandemic, with its unexpected consequences for all human activity. A “Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education” provided an overarching policy framework for national and EU policies to lead institutional changes towards the EU2020 benchmark. Some of the innovations required were competency-based approaches, flexible, personalised, diversified and inclusive learning pathways, better-informed evaluation, close relationships with society and the labour market, and global visibility of the learning offer [1]. This changing landscape was and still is challenging for the academic profession.

In such a setting, academic development becomes a central strategy to help universities to be suitable providers of XXI century education. However, academic development itself needs to adjust to the new post-covid reality and new ways of learning. Firstly, there is a need to reconsider scholarship in the digital world as contextualised within the

modernisation of higher education, focusing on the actual training needs of academic staff at several stages of advancement of their careers [2]. Secondly, it becomes important to emphasise the relevance of professional learning contexts, where institutional strategies and vision, important projects and careful support can make a difference.

In this context, many authors [3] believe that a crucial step to building an institutional culture of teaching and learning that searches for excellence is to put the student at the centre. How can this important goal be achieved? The real challenge is to value students' contribution not only within the classroom but to consider students a valuable resource (like academics and staff) to co-construct our universities as an enlarged educational community.

In this regard, the studies focusing on students' evaluation of teaching [4], student generated content [5], and peer assessment [6] are some examples of the richness embedded in engaging students in university's organizational change.

This paper deals with on students role in academic development. Firstly, we aim at offering an overview of current patterns in the literature and universities' good practices of the student-teacher partnership in academic development and how different approaches can be possibly integrated. Secondly, we would like to offer our own proposal for the student-teacher partnership in academic development as a sustainable and inclusive approach towards participatory democracy in higher education.

2 The Student-Teacher Partnership as Lived Democracy

Since we launched our Manifesto for Partnership in 2012, we've seen unprecedented strides forward in higher education in developing student engagement in teaching and learning, quality enhancement and institutional governance. We have consistently argued that higher fees and marketisation will not lead to improvements in quality, but rather honest conversations and constructive engagement with students [7, p. 3].

For many years, many claims have been made to recognise that education, and in particular higher education, is one of the main principal vehicles for social and economic development [8–11], and an instrument for the promotion of a sustainable future [12]. However, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) today appear to be stuck on a market-driven path that has lost sight of these wider social aims in education [13]. Many countries have seen a progressive implementation of policies designed to increase competition among universities for both public and private funding [14], in what has been characterised as “managerialism” in Higher Education [15].

Numerous institutional bodies that deal with higher education and various academics all agree that a real change is needed and that the role of students within universities, through a renewed idea of partnership can be a central piece of the HEIs modernisation [3, 16]. The relationship between teaching staff and students can no longer remain linked to the “customer-service relationship” model. Rather, it should be grounded on the principles of respect, reciprocity and responsibility, realising itself as a “student-faculty partnership” [3] with the co-responsibility of the students in all aspects of educational processes. This perspective proposes a partnership between students and staff, which is

about investing students with the power to co-create not just knowledge or learning, but the higher education institution itself [17].

Assuming such a vision, the Higher Education Academy (now Advance HE) states

“Partnership is a process for developing engaged student learning and effective learning and teaching enhancement. At its heart, partnership is about applying well-evidenced and effective approaches to learning, teaching and assessment with a commitment to open, constructive and continuous dialogue. Partnership involves treating all partners as intelligent and capable members of the academic community” [16].

While partnership approaches remain largely still under-theorised, student-as-partner (SaP) practices are emerging in today’s universities as a means to offering a more participatory agenda and transforming institutional cultures within an increasingly economically driven higher education context [18]. From within the Student Voice movement, [19] Cook-Sather and Luz (2015) see the partnership as a *threshold* concept. As [20] Meyer and Land say (2006), threshold concepts are “conceptual doors” or “portals” which, once crossed, lead to a transformational internal view of an object, of a subject’s landscape or even to a different vision of the world. Crossing a threshold leads not only to new ways of knowing but also to new ways of being. In this light, [19] Cook-Sather & Luz (2015) assert that introducing student-staff partnerships means pursuing a truly democratic education. An essential focus of the Student Voice movement is precisely that of democracy through education [21–23]. Within this perspective, some authors believe that democracy should be lived in daily experience to become a “mental habitus” of each one. [23] Fielding (2012) stresses that democracy is much more than a collaborative mechanism. It is mainly a way of living and learning, at the basis of which there is a common commitment to freedom, equality, mutual respect, and solidarity. Therefore, we need educational settings in which the concepts of authority and participation need to be reviewed, and offered students the space to share leadership, a space in which young people can express what they consider to be significant in their own education [24].

As Angus explains,

“In democratic organisations—indeed in any organizations in which there is genuine leadership rather than merely managerial coercion—such organisational shaping is never just a top-down process but is an engaged process involving all organisational players. The dialectical, relational view of leadership as a process incorporates the human agency of all members of the organization. [...]. Such leadership arises not from coercion and manipulation, but from relational collaborative, participatory processes” [24, p. 372].

Building on Fielding’s thoughts (2006; 2012) [23–26], we believe that in order for universities to foster more democratic learning environments, students must be empowered as active and participatory agents and work in partnership with academics and administrators. According to the author [23, p. 53], the most genuine partnership between students and staff is named *Intergenerational learning as lived democracy*, a transformative relationship in which a joint commitment to the common good is put into practice

and where there are occasions and opportunities for an equal sharing of power and responsibility. This is the best pattern of relationship between students and teachers to build a democratic fellowship, to teach and learn democratic citizenship, to promote democracy as a way of living and learning together.

3 Patterns of the Student-Teacher Partnership in Academic Development

Let us now reconsider the way in which student-teacher partnerships can be introduced and thus impact academic development. Many authors [23, 27] have noted that the students are able to actively contribute to the academic community by working with academics in designing courses and curricula through the adoption of participatory and collaborative methods [27, 28]. This approach has many advantages: on the one side, students feel part of the community, and this can sustain their motivation and increase the likelihood of them engaging in deep learning, developing hard and soft skills while confronting the challenging task of contributing to curriculum design. This might have very positive impacts on students' employability, success, and adaptability. On the other side, teachers have a unique chance to create a less hierarchical learning environment [27, 29] with more active learners who can make an effective contribution in the complex tasks of planning courses and curricula, which can foster their own motivation toward professional development.

The role of students as key actors and co-creators is obviously relevant in teaching and learning and curriculum design, but it becomes even more important in planning academic development initiatives for teachers to improve their pedagogical competences.

Academic development "aims to enhance the practice, theory, creativity and/or quality of teaching and learning communities in higher or post-secondary education" [30]. The literature and international practices worldwide have developed over the years a large variety of methods between formal and informal approaches as well as individual and group models [31]. All these strategies have the common aim to support professors in their professional path for improving the quality of teaching and learning; and who are better actors than the students to help guide this process? Learners can have relevant information, can share their perspectives and difficulties, can unveil points of view not yet considered, can bring suggestions, new ideas to the discussion that go beyond traditional teacher-driven ways of interpreting teaching and learning.

As Bovill, Cook-Sather & Felten [27, p. 142] suggest, it is important to carefully analyse the academic context, and identify appropriate co-creation opportunities. In fact, there are different approaches [32] for including students' voice in faculty development initiatives, from models where learners are heard and consulted as significant actors of educational change towards more complex ones in which students become co-creators and experts, with a more active role as drivers of the change.

Among others, we present here four well developed approaches of students' participation in academic development processes, that imply different intensities of the student role and that might be applied to university contexts depending on the characteristics of each specific situation. They all have in common the opportunity for mutual exchange between learners and teachers by drawing on the resources of both and building

a community where they work together towards the improvement of the whole academic experience [33–35]. Our aim is, first of all, to offer an overview of current patterns in the literature and universities' good practices of student-teacher partnerships in academic development, highlighting different ways in which young students and academics can work together to face the complex challenges of higher education. Secondly, we also aim to interpret these models within a common framework, by offering our view on how different approaches can dialogue with each other and how they can possibly be integrated. Finally, we would like to offer our own proposal for the student-teacher partnership in academic development as a sustainable and inclusive approach towards participatory democracy in higher education.

A first approach that is already well-known and disseminated is called *Hearing the Student Voice*. It aims at collecting and using feedback from students in order to develop and thus improve the quality of the courses and curricula. Students are engaged in reflective processes for continuous educational change as relevant and legitimated stakeholders that can provide meaningful information for academics to decide how to act to enhance quality. For students to feel safe in sharing their comments and truly belong to the community it is necessary to create an environment in which dialogue and mutual exchange between students and teaching staff can take place in a constructive and effective way, to be then transferred into concrete actions [37]. For students, being heard means becoming an active part of the academic community and contributing to their motivation and engagement [37]. There are a variety of methods to listen to students' voices such as questionnaires, online discussions, focus groups, meetings, blogs and reflective commentaries, etc. For this approach to work, it is important to help teachers relinquishing control over pedagogical planning [27] and find a new balance in working with students, as happens, for example, in research with master's and graduate students.

Another approach is called *Students as Learners and Teachers* (SaLT), where the students serve as consultants for academics and professionals who work within the academic context, in order to foster dialogue and collaboration between members of the university community [38]. In detail, the model aims to facilitate a process through which students and teachers collaborate to generate dialogue about teaching and learning through meetings, seminars, in-class observations and scheduled briefings [33]. Student advice and concrete suggestions for improvement are therefore considered fundamental to the pedagogical development of the whole academic context [39]. Each experience can become good practice also for other colleagues and other contexts; all experiences are discussed within curricular meetings organised by each program, becoming a shared culture of teaching and learning.

A third approach interprets *the learner as a researcher and instructor* in academic development programs. According to this perspective, the students have the ownership of designing and carrying out research projects to investigate specific issues and problems of their institution. Those projects that achieve creative and sustainable solutions are then included in professional development activities devoted to academics; in these cases, students play the role of instructors sharing their research outputs and informed suggestions to professors. Therefore, their role becomes central not only for academic development but also to foster the academic system as a whole [28]. This approach

emphasises the research process as a means by which the student promotes the link between research, learning and teaching [40].

A final approach, which we consider as a sort of synthesis of the previous approaches, proposed by Healey, Flint & Harrington (2014) [41], is called *Partnership Learning Communities*. It is presented as the union and overlapping of four macro-areas of student engagement and student voice: a) learning, teaching and assessment; b) subject-based research and inquiry; c) scholarship of teaching and learning; d) curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy. The first area, “learning, teaching and assessment” concerns collaboration and active involvement of students in their own learning, and is the most common form through which participation can be promoted [42]. This implies the use of inductive methods, active learning strategies and approaches based on experiential learning, transformative learning, self-directed learning, often helped by technology-enhanced environments. Relevant methods can be used to facilitate participation, also in assessment practices, such as peer assessment, self-assessment and the use of feedback. The second area, “subject-based research and inquiry”, concerns student involvement in the research process, allowing them to learn autonomously while developing collaborative skills [42]. Student involvement in research calls for learners being active not only in their learning but also in a collaborative effort to inquire and discover new knowledge, developing linkages between research and teaching. The third area is the well-known “Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)” based concept of [43] Boyer (1990) and involves researching and theorising teaching and learning within a discipline and then communicating and disseminating the findings [44]. Felten et al. (2013) [45, p. 63] call for expanding an inclusive approach to student engagement in SoTL by “encouraging a diversity of student voices to engage in co-inquiry with faculty. Inclusive engagement has tremendous potential to enhance student and faculty learning, to deepen SoTL initiatives, and to help redress the exclusionary practices that too often occur in higher education”. Finally, the fourth area is “curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy” and concerns the least developed partnership. This goes beyond involving students in course evaluations and in departmental staff-student committees to engage students as partners in designing the curriculum and giving pedagogic advice and consultancy [42].

4 RE-FL-EC-T Innovation: A Proposal for an Inclusive Sustainable Approach of the Student-Teacher Partnership in Academic Development

As the final aim of this paper, we make a proposal for the student-teacher partnership in academic development towards a sustainable and inclusive approach and participatory democracy in higher education. Such a proposal has been developed through our own teaching contexts. In fact, in our experience academics express some concerns and difficulties in implementing approaches where students become real change agents and where initiatives are student-led. Even when teachers are willing to relinquish some of their control to establish a more democratic collaboration, they see new approaches as time consuming in their already busy schedule. They also believe there is a strong need for professionals, such as academic developers, to build a bridge between students and

themselves. In other words, it seems that the establishment of fully student-led initiatives require resources and long planning.

Indeed, in our experience we tried to find a balance between student agency and sustainability. We developed a model that can be implemented by every teacher in every course with small amounts of time and resources. A very helpful tool is a website/learning platform where teachers and students can share their perspectives and where students' anonymity can be assured.

The approach is called *RE-FL-EC-T INNOVATION* and is divided in four steps.

- *RE*calling practices by teachers: every academic in their own course starts with recalling what happened during the teaching and learning process, reflects on events which occurred and highlights some thoughts in writing (a sort of auto-ethnography).
- *FL*asback scaffolded by teacher narratives: these narratives are shared, so students can reflect upon the teacher's experience, integrate their opinions and build a joint commentary about the process of teaching and learning within the course. This phase requires "all" students to participate in commenting on the teacher's narrative in a shared space.
- *EC*hoing the students' perspectives: teacher and students all read this common text and prepare for a discussion.
- *T*eaching *innovation*: students and teacher jointly inquire and analyse these narratives and co-construct improvement of learning, teaching, assessment and, in general, the overall experience to generate new practices.

The *RE-FL-EC-T INNOVATION* approach is flexible and can be applied at different stages of a course, i.e. in the middle of it, or towards the end of it or after the course has ended. Depending on when it is implemented, the improvements can be applied immediately or in the following year.

The model is built on a collaborative inquiry but does not require a lot of time and effort, nor does it imply particular training for academics and students. This is because in our view it is *sustainable* and implementable in every course.

Moreover, if *RE-FL-EC-T INNOVATION* is implemented in every course of a programme, results can be shared and become a source for curriculum design and enhancement.

Moreover, the simple actions outlined above require a strong student-teacher partnership. Though the model is initially teacher-led with the teacher sharing his/her vision, this action can be seen as an offer, a gift, opening a wide space to all the students to integrate and propose their own initiatives. The very act of asking students to write (whether done anonymously or not) rather than speak aloud, allows all students (and perhaps not only the most motivated ones or the least shy) to share their opinions, so it offers an inclusive approach. In the end, the teacher learns from this exchange, with a focus on his/her practice: this is the precise moment in which professional development can move further, in a balanced action with the improvement of teaching as part of higher education INNOVATION.

As Blanchet (2018) [46] recalls, bringing students into professional development offers several advantages: to help teachers to set clear goals and tasks to collect students' voices; to create relationship between teacher and students towards the good of the

academic community; to scaffold students' engagement, collaboration, autonomy and responsibility; to better tailor academic development thanks to students' feedback.

Our hope is that the empirical evidence we are working on, and which we invite others to work on, demonstrates how this model can become a source of joint (professional) learning and growth, which also sets the basis for the democratic construction of university life. There, the students can have the freedom to become critical thinkers [47] and to really contribute to educational change.

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