6th International Conference on University Learning and Teaching (InCULT 2012)

# Staff-student partnership in practice in higher education: the impact on learning and teaching

Joy Jarvis[a], Claire Dickerson[b], Lewis Stockwell[c]

[a,b,c] *University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, AL10 9AB, UK*

**Abstract**

This staff-student collaborative project involved six small project teams each composed of staff and undergraduate students studying within the University of Hertfordshire, UK. Each project team engaged in a mini-project designed to research an aspect of learning and teaching to develop learning and teaching and to enhance students' employability skills. The 'student researchers' from the small project teams were also members of a larger coaching group that met with the project lead and other experienced colleagues and undertook joint enquiry. Students used reflective logs as one means of recording data on their developing employability skills and their learning from the project. Evaluation activities included documentation of all coaching group workshops and collecting quantitative and qualitative data for each learning and teaching research project. The usefulness of this data was evaluated by staff members in relation to its impact on their module planning. The main implication of this approach is that staff-student partnership in learning and teaching has a significant impact on learning and teaching development and enhancement, learning to learn, raising the profile of research into learning and teaching, and employability skills and attributes. The student researchers came to a much deeper understanding of learning and teaching, and became much more aware of their responsibility for their own learning and committed to enhancing the learning of others. Members of staff noted that working with students had been 'extremely inspirational'- seeing students work with other students and what they could achieve that could not be achieved by members of staff.

*Keywords:* staff-student partnership; student-staff partnership; learning and teaching; research

## 1. Introduction

This paper presents a student-staff collaborative project carried out at the University of Hertfordshire, UK in 2011-2012 designed to pilot a process for enhancing undergraduate students' employability skills through student-staff collaboration in learning and teaching. The project involved six project teams each composed of one

_____

\*Corresponding author. Tel.: 01707 285678.
 *E-mail address*: j.jarvis@herts.ac.uk

member of staff and one or two undergraduate students studying within the University Schools of Education, Humanities or Law. Each project team engaged in a separate small research project designed to investigate an aspect of learning and teaching to both develop learning and teaching and to enhance students' employability skills. The eleven 'student researchers' from the small research project teams were also all members of a larger coaching group that met fortnightly throughout the academic year with the  project lead and other experienced colleagues from the three Schools. In these fortnightly group workshops staff and students worked together to design the small research projects, discuss ethical and other issues relevant to the research, and to carry out joint enquiry. Students used reflective logs as one means of recording data on their developing employability skills and their learning from the project. Members of the coaching group designed an employability skills portfolio in which students could document their developing skills and attributes and map these against University expectations.

Research literature of particular relevance to the student researcher and student as enquirer roles reported in this paper includes work relating to pupils as researchers in schools (Thomson and Gunter, 2006) and students as researchers in higher education (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011). This project sits within the context of initiatives to link research and teaching more closely in university settings, including through enquiry-based teaching and learning in higher education (for example, Brew, 2003).

This paper briefly outlines the history and setting for this project. It then describes the project and the method of evaluation. Some findings from the evaluation are presented as key learning points and discussed in the context of the impact of staff-student partnership in learning and teaching and the implications for using this approach in higher education. It also presents the method and findings from one of the small-scale research projects.

## 2. The staff-student collaborative project

### 2.1 The setting for this project

This project took place within the Faculty of Humanities, Law and Education at the University of Hertfordshire that has a student community of more than 27,200. The project built on a highly successful Faculty 'student researcher' project at the University, which had previously been evaluated. Resources from this earlier project had been disseminated to support students, practitioners and institutions through a free access report and journal article (Graham and Jarvis, 2010) and video available on YouTube (University of Hertfordshire, 2011). Although members of staff at the University were already proactive in developing students' employability skills, University-based research had identified a need for focused strategies to embed this work into academic life. Research conducted elsewhere identified potential for skills development in learning and teaching projects (Cook-Sather, 2011). This current project was designed to develop and disseminate a process for linking employability skills development, learning and teaching enhancement and student-staff collaboration.

### 2.2 The aim of the project

The main aim of the project was to pilot a process for enhancing undergraduate students' employability skills through student-staff collaboration in learning and teaching. Additional aims developed during the project included:

-   to enhance students' understanding of the learning process;
-   to engage members of academic staff in reflecting on learning and teaching;
-   to encourage staff to work with students as partners in relation to learning and teaching;
-   to encourage staff to use findings from educational research to inform their own teaching practice; and
-   to raise the profile of research into learning and teaching within the Faculty.

*2.3 The project team*

   Project team members included: undergraduate students from the Schools of Education, Humanities and Law; Associate Dean of Learning, Teaching and Employability; Head of University Centre for Coaching and Mentoring; Senior Lecturer with relevant expertise of student-staff projects in schools (Roberts and Nash, 2010); researcher; and Faculty academic staff.  Additional stakeholder views were provided through a Reference Group.

*2.4 The project design*

   This staff-student collaborative project involved six project teams each composed of one member of staff and one or two undergraduate students studying within the University Schools of Education, Humanities or Law. Each project team engaged in a separate small research project designed to investigate an aspect of learning and teaching to both develop learning and teaching and to enhance students' employability skills. The eleven 'student researchers' from the small research project teams were also all members of a larger coaching group that met fortnightly throughout the academic year with the  project lead and other experienced colleagues from the three Schools. In these fortnightly group workshops staff and students worked together to design the small research projects, discuss ethical and other issues relevant to the research and carried out joint enquiry within the larger group. Students used reflective logs as one means of recording data on their developing employability skills and their learning from the project. Members of the group designed an employability skills portfolio in which students could document their developing skills and attributes and map these against University expectations.

*The research projects*

The purpose and setting of the six small-scale research projects were as follows:

1.  An evaluation of the process of assignment support for the students' first piece of assessed work (Year 1 Bachelor of Education (Honours) – School of Education)
2.  Development of employability skills on a practice-based module (Year 2 Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Education Studies – School of Education)
3.  Using the electronic voting system (EVS) homework facility and online 'teach yourself' pre-session materials in  teaching English grammar  (Year 2 - School of Humanities)
4.  Students' responses to a new skills based module (Year 1 – School of Humanities)
5.  Student teaching students about assessment and feedback at university (Schools of Humanities and Education)
6.  Using online lectures (School of Law)

The method and findings from one of the projects carried out in the School of Humanities is provided below in more detail as an example.

*The coaching group workshops*

   These fortnightly two-hour workshops for students and staff were held from October 2011 – June 2012.  The topics explored during the workshops included: an introduction to the project and project planning; management of administrative and ethical issues, for example, confidentiality; using reflective logs; engaging in practical research activities such as developing evaluation questions; an introduction to coaching; and identifying learning and employability skills. During the sessions participants engaged in discussions and activities relating to a range of employability skills and using whole group, small group and one-to-one approaches involving students and

staff. Activities included collaborative 'mini-projects' such as the preparation of the research methods resource, presentation on findings related to 'What is a good learner/student in higher education'; development of an employability portfolio based on the Challenge, Action, Result model, and a flyer for new students ('Making the most of your first year').

Although it had been expected that the work carried out in the coaching group workshops would relate specifically to the small-scale School projects, as a result of the later than expected start date for some of these projects and a developing understanding of student needs, the mini-projects were conducted with the group of student researchers in order to model and develop understanding of research into learning and teaching.

## 3. Evaluating the staff-student collaborative project

### 3.1 Evaluation activities

Evaluation activities included documentation of all coaching group workshops. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected for each learning and teaching project as appropriate. For example, using questionnaires, collage representations of learning journeys, groups of students assuming the role of 'module planners'. The usefulness of this data was evaluated by staff members in relation to its impact on their module planning.

### 3.2 Main evaluation findings

Some of the evaluation findings are presented here as key learning points from the project:

*Process*
- The process of undertaking these projects must include the development of mutual trust and agency, which is essential for sustainability.
- An appropriately supportive environment is needed if students and staff are to be engaged in learning and teaching enhancement.
- Students and staff working together (at the same level) is very important rather than students or staff leading.
- The importance of developing a range of outputs to meet different stakeholder needs in order to build understanding of the topic.
- Paying attention to the change process is important when managing a project.
- The importance of flexibility in design of the learning and teaching projects to ensure agency for staff and students and applicability of work to different disciplines and settings.
- The importance of mutual trust and seeing each other as co-learners.
- It can be challenging to engage staff in enquiry into learning and teaching particularly for disciplines outside Education.
- The value of having mixed discipline work and of having involvement of external staff and students reinvigorates the process and helps to ensure that the approach is applicable in a greater variety of settings.
- As part of the change process it is important to engage in a wide range of activities that are linked to the project e.g. book study group, lunch time discussions around aspects of learning and teaching, which both connect people to ideas from the project and also enrich the project itself.

*Outcomes*
- Student-staff partnership working can have a wide range of benefits for both students and staff. These include: increased employability skills; greater understanding of the value of reflection and research on learning and teaching; and the enhancement of learning and teaching practices.
- Student and staff employability skills were enhanced (as evidenced by successful interviews for new roles)

-    Interest in enquiry learning in disciplines has been developed through this project
-    Students feel part of the University, they feel valued, what they say is noted and taken seriously.
-    Students see themselves as learners, taking responsibility for their own learning.
-    This project has demonstrated that small-scale learning and teaching projects can have institutional impact. This has been recognised by the University of Hertfordshire Pro Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience)

### *3.3 Method, findings and outcome from the small-scale research study in the School of Humanities*

Sixteen students on a level 5 compulsory grammar module were interviewed by the student researcher. The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded. Analysis of the interviews identified a range of opinions on the use of online pre-teaching materials – some students found these helpful while others said that they would have found it easier being taught the material directly by the tutor. The students engaged with the materials at very different levels, some spending up to three hours on using the pre-session materials while others spent less than an hour.  Some students skim-read the material while others undertook all the activities. Some met with other students to talk through the materials in advance of the session. Perhaps not surprisingly there was a correlation between the amount of time the students engaged with the pre-session activities and completing the homework tasks and the students' achievement in the final assessment.

The learning and teaching approach of this module, which also included group work in sessions and campus based lectures, significantly increased the number of students who achieved high marks. There were a small number of students who did not succeed. The blended learning approach, which involves a significant investment in time and expertise on the part of the lecturer, has proved successful for many students. It is suggested that for those who do not succeed, more time spent sharing approaches to learning, practising in groups, perhaps with student mentors, could enable them to learn with the materials. It is essential that time is spent on 'learning-how-to-learn' if students are to be enabled to be as successful as possible.

## 4. Implications for future practice

The immediate priority was to draw on the findings from each of the six research projects to continue to develop learning and teaching practice within each School. One of the student researchers who graduated in July 2012 has now been employed as a Student Engagement Coordinator to support academic colleagues within the Schools to develop similar projects in the next academic year. An additional key feature of his role is to work with students, assisting with training them to undertake roles in relation to learning and teaching such as student representative roles. Working with students around understanding learning is important if they are to make a subsequent contribution to learning and teaching (e.g. on Module Boards and other quality enhancement and development processes). The Student Engagement Coordinator is also responsible for coordinating and supporting students as they undertake mentoring roles in relation to learning and teaching; and coordinating and connecting students undertaking student-staff enquiries into learning and teaching.

The main implication of this approach to working together is that staff-student partnership in learning and teaching has a significant impact on a number of different areas of learning for both students and staff. These include learning and teaching development and enhancement, learning to learn, raising the profile of research into learning and teaching, and employability skills and attributes. The student researchers came to a much deeper understanding of learning and teaching than they had had prior to the project, and became much more aware of their responsibility for their own learning and committed to enhancing the learning of others. Members of staff involved in the project noted that working with students had been 'extremely inspirational'- seeing students work with other students and seeing that they could achieve what could not be achieved by members of staff.

Drawing on the examples of discipline-based enquiry reported by Healey and Jenkins (2009), this project could be extended to relate to the curriculum of each discipline. Additional projects could be used to develop undergraduate students' employability skills and attributes through enquiry learning in their discipline-based modules, and to embed enquiry-based employability skills development into School programmes of study. Small

scale student-staff partnerships could be used to enquire into institutional learning and teaching quality enhancement processes. These projects could take place within several Schools across the University and be evaluated by student researchers, drawn from each module cohort, who would work in partnership with members of staff. These roles would provide significant learning opportunities for employability skills development and for learning and teaching practice enhancement.

## Acknowledgements

## References

Brew, A. (2003). Teaching and Research: New relationships and their implications for inquiry-based teaching and learning in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development,* 22(1), 3-18.

Cook-Sather, A. (2011). Layered learning: student consultants deepening classroom and life lessons. *Educational Action Research,* 19 (1), 41-57.

Dunne, E. and Zandstra, R. (2011). Students as Change Agents - New ways of engaging with learning and teaching in Higher Education. Bristol: ESCalate, Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Education. Available from: http://escalate.ac.uk/8242.

Graham, S. and Jarvis, J. (2010). Developing and Listening to Student Voices through a Student-Staff Research Project. *Blended Learning in Practice,* July, 61-64. Available from: http://www.herts.ac.uk/fms/documents/teaching-and-learning/e-learning_journal/EJournal_FinalJuly2010.pdf

Healey, M. and Jenkins, A. (2009). Developing undergraduate research and inquiry. York: Higher Education Academy. Available from: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/resources/publications/DevelopingUndergraduate_Final.pdf

Roberts, A. and Nash, J. (2010). Enabling students to participate in school improvement through a Students as Researchers programme. *Improving Schools,* 12(2), 174-187. doi: 10.1177/1365480209106590.

Thomson, P. and Gunter, H. (2006). From 'Consulting Pupils' to 'Pupils as Researchers': A Situated Case Narrative. *British Educational Research Journal,* 32(6), 839-856. doi: 10.1080/01411920600989487.

University of Hertfordshire (2011). UH Learn from Feedback. Available from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HbbCNIr-z4