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Partnering to Investigate Employability and Retention in the Humanities and Social Sciences

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PARTNERING TO INVESTIGATE EMPLOYABILITY AND RETENTION IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Context of our Partnership

Over recent years both higher education funding and policy approaches in Australia as well as abroad increasingly have emphasised university students as active rather than passive recipients in their own education. As part of The University of Queensland's (UQ) Student Strategy 2016-2020, UQ is developing various university-wide initiatives that partner students with teaching staff, researchers, and industry to better support innovation and learning outcomes (UQ, 2016).

In this context, in 2016, one of UQ's six faculties, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS), embarked on a six-month, faculty-wide project to explore undergraduate student retention and employability using a 'Students as Partners' approach.

HASS is a large comprehensive faculty comprising seven schools, two research institutes, two museums, and several school-based research centres. It offers a broad range of programs to a large cohort of international and domestic students, including close to 8,000 undergraduates. Although HASS students report relatively high satisfaction with teaching and good overall satisfaction with their university experience, HASS has lower rates of student retention than other UQ faculties. Further, most HASS undergraduate students feel that it is important to gain opportunities to interact with industry and employers, but less than half agree that they get access to this (Institute for Social Science Research, 2016).

Our project was initiated to explore the issues of undergraduate student retention and employability. The project sought to undertake two main activities: to hold focus groups to unpack the relationship between the student experience and retention within HASS academic programs and disciplinary majors; and to pilot and evaluate discipline-based employability workshops that include 'idea to enterprise' approaches as well as traditional career experiences.

We decided that from the outset a core feature of the project would be the adoption of a collaborative approach with a primary focus on partnering with students who are currently enrolled in a HASS undergraduate degree. Such partnerships have frequently been found to contribute to more positive learning experiences and outcomes for students (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014). We also knew that HASS students were interested in collaboration. In a recent survey of over 1,500 HASS students, 55% agreed that that they would like to help improve the quality of teaching at UQ (Institute for Social Science Research, 2016).

By engaging HASS students in partnership, we sought to enhance the quality and outcomes of the project, generate learning opportunities for students and staff, and critically investigate student-staff partnerships as a potential avenue for future student-centred activities and

projects within HASS. We see great potential for involving students in teaching and learning projects and through this project, sought to determine whether our particular approach could be used more broadly across the university.

Our Approach: Partnership Project as a Work in Progress

As a starting point for establishing meaningful partnerships between students and staff, we sought out universities who have led the way in building student-staff partnerships in teaching and learning. We decided to adapt McMaster University's Student Partner Program, which offers paid "student scholar" positions for students who are interested in pedagogical research and innovation (MIIETL, 2016). Although we are not working on multiple projects as at McMaster, the approach was readily adaptable to the context of our specific project.

We wanted to have a student as part of our project team from the beginning so that we could include student perspectives in the planning and development of the Student Partner Program. Sarah joined the team early in the process and worked with us to conceptualise the Student Partner Program and other aspects of the project. We also held a brainstorming session with 21 undergraduate students from across HASS. The most popular ideas discussed by students were offering more internships embedded within the curriculum, providing more clarity around majors and minors (the structural components of our major academic programs), and building a sense of belonging through discipline-related initiatives. Although curriculum change was beyond the scope of the project, we were able to adapt the plan to include more discipline-focused activities for students.

We also established project-specific accounts with Twitter and Facebook, as a means to more easily communicate with students about the project and seek their interest and involvement. Activity on social media accounts has steadily increased since their inception and we have found that hosting face-to-face events has, in turn, increased social media activity. We now have a database, as a result of these outreach activities, of over 250 HASS students who are interested in staying connected to the project, attending project events, or participating in focus groups.

Most importantly, we developed the Student Partner Program itself and hired another 13 undergraduate students to work with us over the course of the project. The recruitment process was competitive and involved prospective Student Partners writing about their motivation, skills, and potential contributions to the project. We received an overwhelming response: 54 students attended our information session and 136 students applied for the 13 positions. The applications were diverse and included many disciplines and all year levels across the undergraduate degree program. Over half of the applicants were enrolled in a dual degree (students complete two degree programs concurrently and receive two separate degrees), with most dual degree students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts. Using a selection criteria matrix, the selection panel (which included an academic, a professional staff member, and a student) shortlisted and interviewed the most competitive applicants.

We believe that diversity of experience and ideas held by Student Partners was critical to the project. Marquis et al. (2016) found that their focus on a small, high-performing cohort of students had limitations in terms of student equity and opportunity. We sought to address this concern by recruiting students from a diverse range of backgrounds. Our Student Partner group includes a range of year levels from second to fifth year, both men and women,

domestic and international students, and students enrolled in different programs within HASS. Moreover, we did not make strong academic achievement a selection criterion and, as a result, we had students with mixed academic performances, which we believed was instrumental for reaching out to potential focus-group participants about their reasons for staying enrolled in or leaving HASS programs.

In our project, the Student Partners co-led focus-group discussions, managed and evaluated the employability events, analysed data, and helped shape the strategic recommendations presented in our final report. At the same time, both students and staff wrote reflections about their experiences so that we could learn how to best engage in student-staff partnerships to improve the student experience.

An induction program and handbook were developed collaboratively between students and staff. The induction gave our Student Partners an overview of the project and their work, helped them get to know each other, and exposed them to key skills that were needed for the program. Based on their initial feedback, students particularly enjoyed the variety of speakers and topics, and were keen to gain a better sense of their own individual roles in the project. We are now introducing them to their individual roles, and we are keen to see how our partnerships develop from this point.

Reflections as a Student Partner (Sarah)

My experience has been unique compared to the other students involved in our project in that I have been present during a lot of the initial planning and I was involved in the implementation of the project as a whole, including the recruitment of the other Student Partners. Contributing to the earlier stages of the project made me more aware of the aims of taking a partnership approach. This assisted me to develop an understanding of our common goals in taking this journey, and enabled me to enact these in the way I relate to my colleagues. I am interested in how we can translate this to other students who have not had such a heavy involvement with the idea of student-staff partnership.

From my perspective, negotiating my own place in the team has been the most challenging experience. Being at an early stage in my professional career, I am constantly reflecting on my own position in the workplace, and how my behaviour is perceived by the rest of the team.

While the idea of working in partnership has been clear from the outset, it is not a simple task to abandon all ideas of hierarchy, especially being so accustomed to the one-directional knowledge transfer process of the university classroom.

At the same time, I am aware that we are indeed operating in partnership and that if I leave the decision-making to my more experienced colleagues, I am not fulfilling my role as a member of the team. I think there is a lot of merit in embracing a strengths-based approach to partnership. For students involved, realising that every member of the team (including themselves) adds value through the contribution of their unique perspective will assist in adjusting to the non-traditional dynamics of student-staff partnership.

Moving forward, I see communication as the key to positive experiences in partnership. As we have already seen in our personal reflections and previous examples of student-staff

partnership, there can be a lot of uncertainty surrounding how to relate to others in this setting, while at the same time keeping the project goals in mind. I think that having frank conversations on a regular basis about how those involved are experiencing partnership, whether expectations are being met and what changes need to be made is the only way that we can see this approach succeed.

Reflections as a Staff Partner (Yvonne)

As project manager, I was inspired by Healey, Flint and Harrington's definition of partnership as "a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself" (2014, p. 7). At the very beginning, I worked closely with the project's leaders to identify ways to meaningfully engage students to plan and implement the project. I believed that involving students throughout the project would enhance our outputs and outcomes, particularly given that we were investigating how students' university experiences may affect their degree choice and future career ambitions. In essence, our work could only be enhanced by involving students in a project about the student experience.

Having not embarked on a student-staff partnership before, I have found having a student involved in planning decisions helped me to see new perspectives and, in turn, refine the project plan. Examples included ideas for social media outreach, strategies for getting students interested in our work, and input into the induction program structure and content. As with most new teams, we had to learn about each other's strengths and how we best worked together. Each of us has unique perspectives and skills that complement the experience of other team members. Having time to discuss our work together was an essential factor for building trust within our team.

As we started working with a broader range of Student Partners, I was interested to see how this teamwork and rapport translated across a larger group. During the induction, the Student Partners predominantly received information from project staff and academics as they might in a traditional classroom setting. The project team then started meeting individually and in small groups, which I hoped would help start breaking down some of the traditional perceptions of how student-staff interactions occurred. I wanted to foster a partnership where we each brought our strengths to the table and valued each other's abilities and experiences.

However, creating such a balance was challenging. I wanted to give students direction so that they were clear about what they needed to do, but I did not want to direct them so much that I stifled their ability to provide new ideas and help shape the project. I also wanted to be flexible with their study and other commitments while still getting the work done at the end of the day. Ultimately, to be successful the project needed to produce specific outputs and outcomes within a short space of time. It is by navigating these issues that I built my understanding and experience in order to become a better manager.

Next Steps: Partnership in Practice

Throughout the planning and initial implementation of the project, we had sought to keep students front and centre. Where possible, we developed key ideas and plans in collaboration with students. To build a strong partnership, we:

- Co-developed a **structure** that allowed students and staff opportunities to engage with each other on a regular basis, actively seek each other's perspectives, and expose students to opportunities to enhance their own employability. Students and staff co-created a program timetable that included a two-day group induction, weekly progress meetings, reflection sessions to explore the experience of working together and develop strategic recommendations for the Faculty, and an end-of-program celebration. Together we shaped the project by coming to shared understandings of the goals and what was required for us all to achieve them.

- Clearly identified and shared **expectations** about our partnership. Given the importance of communication and frank conversation, we met with Student Partners to share our expectations of each other. We wanted to understand the importance of professionalism and reliability, and decide how we were to work together to achieve the project goals in a short timeframe. Open communication and clarifying assumptions helped us avoid misunderstandings and issues that may have arisen from people feeling that they could not voice their views to the group.

- Allocated a significant amount of **time** to build rapport between students and staff believing that building strong partnerships takes time and deliberate effort. Making time for such activities was essential, as we worked in pairs and small groups on specific project tasks.

This project is only the beginning of our journey of partnership. There are many challenges and opportunities ahead and we hope to learn more about ourselves by learning from each other.

Acknowledgements

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