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Emily Parkin
Northumbria University

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AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT ON STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH THE LENSES OF OUR DIVERSE STUDENTS

Emily Parkin, Student Experience and Enhancement Manager (Accessibility & Inclusion), Student, Library, and Academic Services, Northumbria University, UK

The Accessibility & Inclusion Team at Northumbria University exists to improve student success for underrepresented groups. This includes providing financial support, specialist one-to-one support, and group support, some of which is tailored for specific student groups, such as students estranged from their families. To achieve this effectively, we aim to avoid making assumptions about our diverse students' expectations or experiences, and therefore embed student voice mechanisms throughout our service. One such mechanism is working in partnership with our underrepresented students to address gaps in student success in line with our Access and Participation Plan (APP) (NU, 2019). This introduction provides a background of how the scholarship project—of which this Special Issue forms a part—was initiated, and how it aims to contribute to improving student success both within and beyond our institution.

Drivers for Improving Student Success

Alongside wider social justice goals there are usually institutional, national, and international drivers for improving the success of underrepresented students, and which enable resources to be allocated for this. There is a growing expectation on higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide to address inequalities for both staff and students. These inequalities remain prevalent (Jackson & Holzman, 2020; Lamb et al., 2020; Symonds, 2020) despite policies and charters that aim to improve them, such as Advance HE's Race Equality and Athena Swan charters in the United Kingdom (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019; Schmidt et al., 2020).

A core aim of 'widening participation' (WP) work worldwide is to enhance the social positions of students through access to higher education (HE), which, traditionally, was only accessible to an elite group. HE policy in the United Kingdom particularly focused on improving social mobility (Harman, 2017), following Lord Robbins' observation that only the privileged had access to HE, and his recommendation that "courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so" (Robbins, 1963, p. 8). However, it has become evident that merely getting *into* HE is not singularly effective in improving the social mobility of individuals from non-traditional backgrounds, and that remaining on a course and achieving good degree and graduate outcomes is just as important (Thomas, 2020).

Macro-level policy in England aims to address this through the expectation that HEIs that charge higher-level tuition fees must publish outcomes gaps in an APP. The APP must also publicly state the institution's aims and measures for addressing any outcomes gaps, which are approved and monitored by the sector's regulatory body, the Office for Students. The aim of access and participation planning is to "improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education" (OfS, 2020, p. 3).

At Northumbria, one key aspect of addressing any existing gaps is to develop a stronger understanding of the barriers facing underrepresented students. This can only be achieved through authentic opportunities for students to share their voices and through opportunities to critically reflect on institutional barriers. This scholarship project is one example of a project enabled by resources aligned to Northumbria's APP that used the principles of partnership (HE Academy, 2015) to meet those aims.

Can Partnership Projects Help Meet APP Aims?

It is argued that staff–student partnerships can have a positive impact on student success (Healey et al., 2014; Holen et al., 2021) and, therefore, engaging underrepresented students in partnership approaches to enhance student success could have both a collective and individual benefit on student outcomes.

Partnership intends for students to “actively participate in shaping and co-producing their education, rather than merely receiving it passively” (Williamson, 2013, p. 8). However, this opportunity is not always accessible to underrepresented student groups. This project offered a way to engage specific students by removing barriers to engagement in partnership through “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6–7). A requirement for the successful delivery of the project was that we were able to pay students for their time, emotional labor, and expertise of their current lived student experience. It was intended to complement our existing student voice mechanisms (such as Student Representatives).

Northumbria's APP states: “At the centre of our plan is engagement to help us to understand our student body” (NU, 2019, p. 14). This project intends to embed learning from ‘student as partners’ literature to deliver this statement through meaningful engagement with the intended beneficiaries of Northumbria's APP. The aim is to improve both the individual successes of the students involved and the collective success of the target APP groups through learning from the ‘student voice.’

Student engagement—or, more specifically, working in partnership with students—is a key concept that is becoming embedded within the mechanisms the sector uses to hold providers to account against their regulatory—and reputational—commitments. Specifically, there is a growing expectation for providers to work in partnership with students to assure and enhance the quality of their provision. For example, the Quality Assurance Agency's first guiding principle on student engagement states: “Student engagement through partnership working is integral to the culture of higher education, however and wherever provision is delivered—student engagement is led strategically, but widely owned” (QAA, 2018, p. 4).

However, partnership does not come without its challenges, and a key consideration is how inclusive partnership can be (Felten et al., 2013; Trowler, 2015; Marquis et al., 2016). Weller and Mahbul (2018) suggest the extra-curricular nature of many partnership approaches to quality assurance can, intentionally or unintentionally, reinforce mechanisms of working with students that “fail to acknowledge difference”—by, for example, excluding already marginalized or ‘time-poor’ students through expecting them to be able to volunteer for opportunities. Other elements that may impact the diversity of students engaging include

student self-efficacy, selection practices, physical location of students, or faculty assumptions about students (Felten et al., 2013). As Trowler suggests (2015, p. 307), “slapping on a coat of ‘student partnership’ without exploring the differing positionalities and interests of these students and their institutions is also unlikely to achieve much.”

Student engagement can be inclusive by acknowledging the importance of reflecting individual and intersectional voices instead of taking a homogenous approach (Trowler, 2015), which should have a positive impact on the APP outcomes and, more importantly, individual students.

Northumbria University has recently introduced Faculty Access and Participation Directors, invested in a new Student Inclusion Team within the Accessibility & Inclusion Team (with the remit of supporting the success of underrepresented student groups), and provided resource for a large variety of projects to ensure the success and progression elements of the APP are deliverable.

This is one such project that intended to center our student voices alongside these institution-wide step changes. Voices that are authentic, honest, and courageous and are being shared to encourage further partnership working based on trust, reciprocity, and inclusivity. At Northumbria we will be creating shared spaces to critically reflect on our students’ stories and creativity. We want to learn from our students’ diverse voices and enhance the inclusivity of our practice, to better support the success of our underrepresented students.

With our students’ trust and consent we welcome you to join us, directly or indirectly, in our critical reflection.

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