



A Guide to Working with Students as Partners

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2023

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Introduction

This guide provides support for academic and professional staff at the University of Chester (UoC) who would like to work with students as partners for the first time or staff looking to enhance their practice in working with students as partners in their context and would benefit from further advice. It is based upon a systematic review of over 50 university guides, resources, articles and books on practicing students as partners (see key sources in bibliography), a collection of 16 case studies from across the University of Chester, and the words of advice from 14 colleagues based on their experience of working in partnership with students. It explores why working with students as partners is worthwhile; what is meant by working with 'students as partners'; and offers a framework for how you might approach partnership practices. The accompanying collection of [case studies](#), outlining different partnership activities from across the University (including different disciplines and departments – both academic and professional), offers insights into how this practice might be adapted to your context.

1. Why work with students as partners?

Working with students as partners is the antithesis of the 'student as consumer' model of higher education. Rather than adopting a transactional approach in which students are seen as passive recipients of education, working with students as partners is an act of resistance that acknowledges students as active agents in the production of knowledge and the university learning community. Partnership working is a catalyst for social justice, inclusivity, and transformation, by recognising the right of students to actively drive their educational experience. Whilst staff have significant expertise in their area (e.g. discipline, pedagogy, service), students have expertise in what it is like to be a student and how their experiences at the university might be enhanced.

Partnership differs from other student engagement mechanisms. Whilst all partnership practices engage students, not all student engagement is partnership. It reflects a move from students commenting on their experiences to which staff respond, to students collaborating with staff in decision-making processes to exchange ideas to enhance practice and enable meaningful change where needed. Large quantities of data are collected from across the university on the student experience. But whilst this data can indicate problems (e.g. dissatisfaction with an aspect(s) of their experience; evidence that students are not grasping a key concept), rarely does it specify a clear solution. Working with students to provide a more contextualised understanding of the data and to identify desirable developments is more likely to lead to appropriate and sustainable changes.

By working in partnership, students and staff can dismantle traditional hierarchical relationships and learn from one another to identify implicit assumptions, critically reflect on experiences, and explore new ways of learning and working in higher education that consider diverse perspectives. Working together in this way builds relationships between students and staff which have been demonstrated to enhance student learning, student retention, and graduate outcomes.

Recognition of the wealth of benefits of such practice for staff, students and the institution (Figure 1) is now reflected in key criteria in the [Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework](#) in which universities need to demonstrate how students have been engaged as partners in the enhancement of provision across the institution. It is also likely to improve outcomes in the [National Student Survey \(NSS\)](#) (especially the 'student voice' section), and the [Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey \(PTES\)](#).

Working with students as partners aligns with the [University of Chester Citizen Student Strategy](#) in which citizen students contribute to the university and wider community as engaged learners. Working in partnership with students, rather than 'doing to' or 'doing for' students, engages them in their education. By developing inclusive knowledge building partnership learning communities, students are engaged as citizens in "learning environments characterised by discovery, self-awareness and a sense of belonging" (The University of Texas at Austin 2023, no page).

In summary, working with students as partners invites us to reconceptualise the nature of higher education, and "consider new ideas about who the scholars are in universities" and how they might work together in partnership to build inclusive scholarly knowledge-building communities (Brew, 2007: 4).

"Decades of research on student engagement conclude that student-teacher relationships, alongside student-student interactions, 'are the most significant factors contributing to undergraduate student learning, motivation, identity development, well-being, graduation rates, and post-graduation career and civic outcomes' (Mayhew et al. 2016)."

*Cook-Sather & Matthews
(2021:243)*

"Students are keen to support change. They have great ideas and are the experts at being students!"

*Dr Katharine Welsh (Geography
& Environment, UoC)*

Figure 1: Benefits of working with students as partners

Staff

- Inspired by student insights into enriching the student experience.
- Collaborative learning from and with students.
- Development of practice that would not be possible to achieve on their own.
- Improved understandings about teaching and learning.
- Greater confidence in pedagogic practices and decisions.
- More sustainable change and development of practices and materials.
- Stronger more meaningful relationships with students underlined by deeper engagement.
- More supportive working environments which promote empathy, trust and understanding between students and staff.
- An egalitarian, socially just, and inclusive approach to enhancing education.
- Co-writing and publishing opportunities with students on partnership activities.

Students

- Increased confidence and self-efficacy in a wide range of skills including teamwork, leadership, project management, interpersonal skills, problem solving, critical thinking, innovation, communication, organisation, research, decision making, persuasive arguing, networking, negotiating, empathy, reflection, self-evaluation, self-awareness, and resilience.
- Development of wider knowledge of discipline/pedagogic learning and/or university structures and services.
- Recognition of partnership work through awards, accredited learning, payment, certificates, and/or references.
- Experience of being actively involved in creative and innovative approaches to making evidence-based decisions which influence change with the aim of improving the student experience.
- Enhanced employability and job prospects through demonstrable experience of working within a large institution to instigate change for portfolios, applications and CPD.
- Identity shifts to perceive each other (i.e., other students and staff) as partners leading to stronger relationships that promote trust and empathy between students and staff.
- Improved learning environment and a stronger sense of belonging within the institution through more frequent and meaningful interactions with staff.
- Increased motivation, enthusiasm, responsibility for, and ownership of, their learning.
- Traditionally underrepresented students find partnership increased their confidence in navigating the tacit knowledge of academic practice and structures.

Institution

- Investing in student-staff partnership transforms cultures and enhances an institution's success.
- Developing a distinguished external reputation for working in partnership with students.
- Increased student retention through an enhanced student experience, sense of student belonging, and empowerment.
- Transformed teaching and learning with enhancements across the institution through new activities/initiatives.
- Staff who feel more supported, engaged, and have a sense of belonging in the institution.
- Supported students who feel more confident, engaged, and achieve greater success in their studies.

2. What is meant by working with ‘students as partners’?

‘Students as partners’ is an umbrella term for numerous reciprocal and collaborative based practices in higher education including students as co-creators, co-producers, co-inquirers, change agents, pedagogical partnership, and student-staff partnership. Students as partners encompasses these variations whilst recognising that students may collaborate both with each other and with staff. Fundamentally, collaborative working with students as partners is about building meaningful relationships that challenge traditional teacher-student dynamics and breaking down hierarchies to reposition students and staff as colleagues and peers to one another. Such practice is illustrated in the accompanying [case studies](#) across six areas of partnership activity: learning, teaching and assessment; curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy; subject-based research and inquiry; scholarship of teaching and learning; beyond learning, teaching and research; and integrated approaches. Partnership is a way of working together underlined by mutual respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility that is done with rather than done to students.

Conceptualising students as partners in their learning and educational experiences challenges dominant assumptions about whose knowledge and voices are valued in higher education and shifts our focus from staff to students – from the teacher to the learner (Box 1). This approach recognises the different expertise students and staff bring to a partnership. Whilst students are experts in being students in their context this does not mean dismissing staff expertise but rather offers additional insights and perspectives from which to work together to enhance education.






Box 1: The fundamentals of pedagogic partnerships

- Students have valuable knowledge of and important perspectives on teaching and learning
- Student partners are not subject matter experts
- Reciprocity in partnership does not mean exchanging exactly the same thing
- Faculty partners do not have to do whatever students say
- Partnership is not about finding what is wrong and fixing it
- Pedagogical partnership is about exchange, not change for the sake of change
- Partnership is about sharing power, not giving it up or taking it away
- Partnership is a process, not a product (although it can lead to products of various kinds)

Source: Cook-Sather, Bahti & Ntem (2019: no page).

Figure 2 illustrates the differences between informing students, consulting students, and involving students, from partnering with students, or students being in control of the activity with support from staff.

Figure 2: Student engagement continuum

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	PARTNER	CONTROL
					
GOAL	To provide students with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and solutions.	To obtain student feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with students throughout the process to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood.	To partner with students in each aspect of the initiative from identification to solution.	Students design and lead initiatives that matter to them and are in control of final decision-making.
STYLE	"Here's what's happening."	"Here are some options, what do you think?"	"Here's a problem, what ideas do you have?"	"Let's identify the issues and work together to develop a plan and implement a solution."	"You care about this issue and are leading an initiative, how can we support you?"

Source: Louth, Walsh, & Goodwin-Smith (2019:13)

Partnership may be practiced at a range of levels from working with an individual, or groups of students, to working with a whole cohort. Students may be selected, elected, or recruited to work as partners. It is important to remember that context matters; there is no one size-fits-all, no single approach will be effective in every situation. Partnership practices should be adapted to suit the specific contexts.

In summary, students as partners is characterised by:

- Reciprocal and mutually beneficial learning – all partners learn from one another and gain from the process of working together.
- Dialogue, negotiation and exchange – all partners are recognised as having expertise to contribute to the partnership.
- Shared responsibility – all partners have shared accountability and responsibility for the process of partnership and how the partners collaborate, not just the outputs from the partnership.

"There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that 'listens' to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes."

Dunne in Dunne and Zandstra (2011:4)

3. How to get started working in partnership

Step 1: Identify a partnership opportunity

Depending on the area that you work (academic or professional department) the opportunities for partnership practice will vary. Staff who are teaching, for example, might identify an opportunity for partnership in a class-based activity, or on the design of a new assessment. While staff who are supporting students might identify an area of their practice where student input would improve the delivery of that service. The opportunities are wide-ranging and can relate to anything in which student input would help to enhance that area of activity.

Don't feel the need to develop a large project all in one go. Keep it small and get a feel for working in partnership first. Choose something that is manageable within the time and resource constraints that you have. See whatever you do as a pilot. No matter what happens, whether you feel it goes well, or it could have gone better, you will learn from it, and that will help you develop your practice for the next time.

Step 2: Discuss with your colleagues (other staff and students)

Once you've identified a possible opportunity – talk to people. Talk to others who work in your area about your idea and get feedback on it. Talk to both the staff and students that you work with in your context. Where appropriate, see if they might like to work with you on the project. If the norm in your department is to get agreement for the project from your Line Manager, do so. Develop your plans further based on the discussions you've had.

Step 3: Consider how you might approach working with students as partners

Approaches to working in partnership will vary by people and context. There is no right way to approach the practice rather it should be discussed within the partnership team. The next section provides a framework to help you develop your practice and how you might approach working in partnership with students.

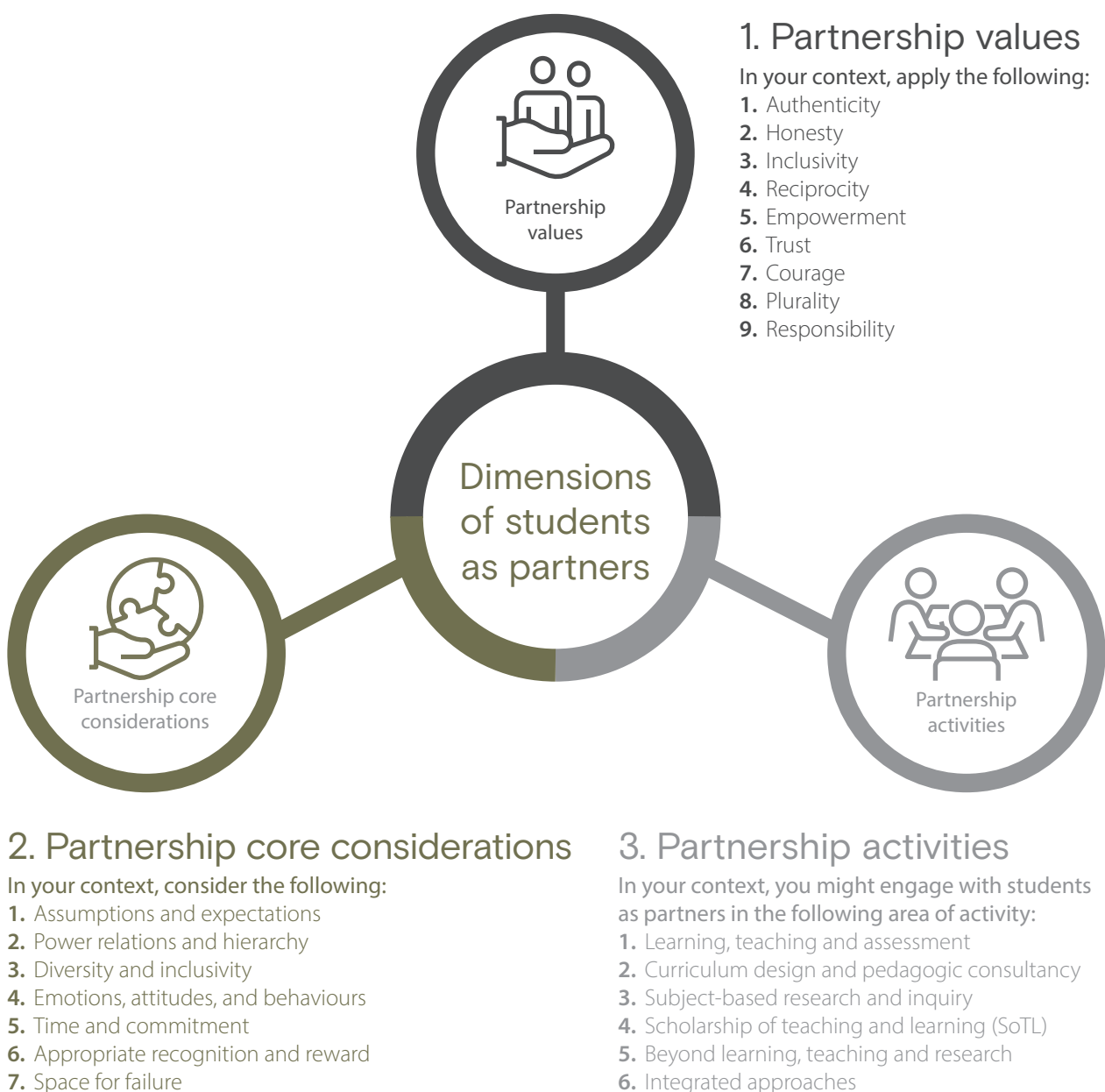
Step 4: Seek further support and advice (if necessary)

If you find you want to discuss your ideas on how you might get started with your first partnership project then please email caid.uif@chester.ac.uk to arrange a meeting with one of the University Innovation Fellows.

4. Approaches to working with students as partners

Each partnership is unique, hence the approach to working with students as partners will vary between partnerships. The following tools are designed to help you consider how you might develop your partnership practice. The first framework (Figure 3) explores the three dimensions of working with students as partners: partnership values, partnership core considerations, and partnership activities. These should be reflected upon in relation to the specific context of your planned partnership work. The second framework (Figure 4) provides a series of suggested prompts, underlain by the dimensions, for reflection at different stages within your partnership activities.

Figure 3: Dimensions of working with students as partners



*Acknowledgement: The dimensions of this framework were inspired by
The Professional Standards Framework (AdvanceHE, 2023)*

4.1 Partnership values

Partnership values underpin students as partners partnership core considerations and partnership activities.



1: Authenticity: the rationale for all parties to invest in partnership is meaningful and credible.

2: Honesty: all parties are honest about what they can contribute to partnership and about where the boundaries of partnership lie.

3: Inclusivity: there is equality of opportunity and any barriers (structural or cultural) that prevent engagement are challenged.

4: Reciprocity: all parties have an interest in, and stand to benefit from, working and/or learning in partnership.

5: Empowerment: power is distributed appropriately and ways of working and learning promote healthy power dynamics.

6: Trust: all parties take time to get to know each other and can be confident they will be treated with respect and fairness.

7: Courage: all parties are encouraged to critique and challenge practices, structures and approaches that undermine partnership, and are enabled to take risks to develop new ways of working and learning.

8: Plurality: all parties recognise and value the unique talents, perspectives and experiences that individuals contribute to partnership.

9: Responsibility: all parties share collective responsibility for the aims of the partnership, and individual responsibility for the contribution they make.

Source: AdvanceHE (2016:5)



“‘Humility’ features a lot, alongside being open and honest in that we are all learners and we can all learn from each other.”

*Dr Michelle Tytherleigh
(Psychology, UoC)*

“Students often know exactly what they want but lack the confidence to enact it; so patience is key.”

*Dr Anthony Cliffe
(Academic Skills, UoC)*

4.2 Partnership core considerations

Partnership core considerations are informed by partnership values and should be reflected upon as part of undertaking effective students as partners activities.



1: Assumptions and expectations: Partnership can be practiced in a range of ways depending upon the aim of the engagement, the time available, and the contextual constraints. There is no 'perfect' partnership no matter how experienced the partners may be. Consider the different assumptions and expectations of all parties and work towards a common understanding of what to expect within your partnership.

2: Power relations and hierarchy: Higher education identities, learning and teaching relationships, and individual motivations to participate in a partnership are all entwined with power relations and hierarchies. Power differentials may not be overcome entirely, but we can discuss ways in which all parties might 'push back' against them.

3: Diversity and inclusivity: There is no single student experience, individual experiences are influenced by their contexts, e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, disability, class, etc., we can potentially learn most from those students who are marginalised because they are often the students we hear from least. Consider how to embed flexibility into your partnership practices to enable students from diverse backgrounds to engage (e.g. working arrangements and sharing of views).

4: Emotions, attitudes, and behaviours: Partnerships are fundamentally about relationships; as such they are emotive experiences. Like all relationships, vulnerabilities may be laid bare and there is the potential for conflict. Consider how partners will manage both the positive and negative emotions that may emerge through the course of a partnership and plan approaches to addressing conflict.

5: Time and commitment: The timeframe of a partnership activity may be limited by external factors such as budgetary constraints (e.g. funding amount and/or completion required within the financial year) or the timetable (e.g. length of session and/or nature of room). But most commonly time is a factor in terms of what people feel able to give. Typically, people find time for things they believe to be important. Consider the variable amounts of time all parties can commit to the partnership to enable the goals that are important to them to be achieved.

6: Appropriate recognition and reward: Partnership can occur at many different scales, from an in-class activity with a whole cohort, to a single student working on an extended project for several months. Students may be compensated for their time through incentives (e.g. vouchers), academic credit (e.g. Work Based Learning), volunteering recognition (e.g. Higher Education Achievement Report), or remuneration (e.g. UniJob). Consider what can reasonably be achieved in relation to the compensation resource available and scale the partnership activity accordingly.

7: Spaces for failure: Working in partnership is challenging, it requires courage and risk taking. All parties need to feel safe to try new things and not be fearful of the consequences should things not go to plan. Consider what 'failure' might mean within your partnership and how to make space to support one another should you not achieve your desired outcomes.

4.3 Partnership activities

Partnership activities are the range of different areas in which working with students as partners may occur. Activities should be underpinned by the partnership values and partnership core considerations. Examples of activities in each of the activity areas can be viewed in the accompanying [case studies](#) from the University of Chester.



1: Learning, teaching and assessment: Students can be engaged as partners in their learning, teaching and assessment by acting as peer learners, for example, by teaching each other and assessing each other's work. This includes activities such as working as a whole class to design the assessment criteria for an assignment; or working in groups to understand content, and then presenting their findings to the rest of the class.

2: Curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy: Students may work with staff to co-design curriculum at different scales, e.g. an activity, a session, block of sessions, module, and/or programme. Students may also act as pedagogic consultants to offer individual staff advice on their teaching through activities such as teaching observations. They may also work with staff to address a specific focus, e.g. decolonising the curriculum, or developing inclusive teaching and learning practices within a programme.

3: Subject-based research and inquiry: Students may be engaged as partners with staff on research projects, e.g. through work based learning or a UniJob paid position. Alternatively, a whole class may be partners in conducting inquiry-based learning, e.g. through an undergraduate class working together to design a research project, and then pooling the collected data to produce a larger data set to analyse.

4: Scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL): Working with students as partners is one of the five principles of effective SoTL (Felten, 2013). This includes activities such as co-researching, co-presenting, and co-authoring about their learning and teaching experience and making evidence-based changes to the curriculum as a result.

5: Beyond learning, teaching and research: This area of activity includes working with students as partners in activities beyond learning, teaching, and research such as governance, strategic planning, quality assurance, estates, volunteering in the community, marketing, recruitment and admissions, and other extracurricular activities.

6: Integrated approaches: Integrated approaches encompass activities that involve more than one activity area.

Source: Developed from Healey, Flint & Harrington (2014: 25)

"There will always be a power dynamic. Do what you can to mitigate this by acknowledging this at an early stage and making sure you are not involved in assessing students, during or after the process if, for example, you are researching together."

Associate Professor Val Gant (Health & Social Care, UoC)

Finally, in applying the dimensions of working with students as partners to your practice, Figure 4 provides a tool for reflection and discussion both within and between different partnerships. The prompts here are designed to support your decision making at different stages of your partnership. This includes initiating working with and involving students, commencing and building a foundation to your partnership, developing and establishing your partnership, reflecting on and evaluating your experience, and finally, celebrating working with students as partners and sharing your experiences.



“Spend time putting together an induction and include a workshop on staff-students working in partnership. This really helped to set the scene and how the team would work together on the project.”

Charlotte Gleeson (Learning & Information Services, UoC)

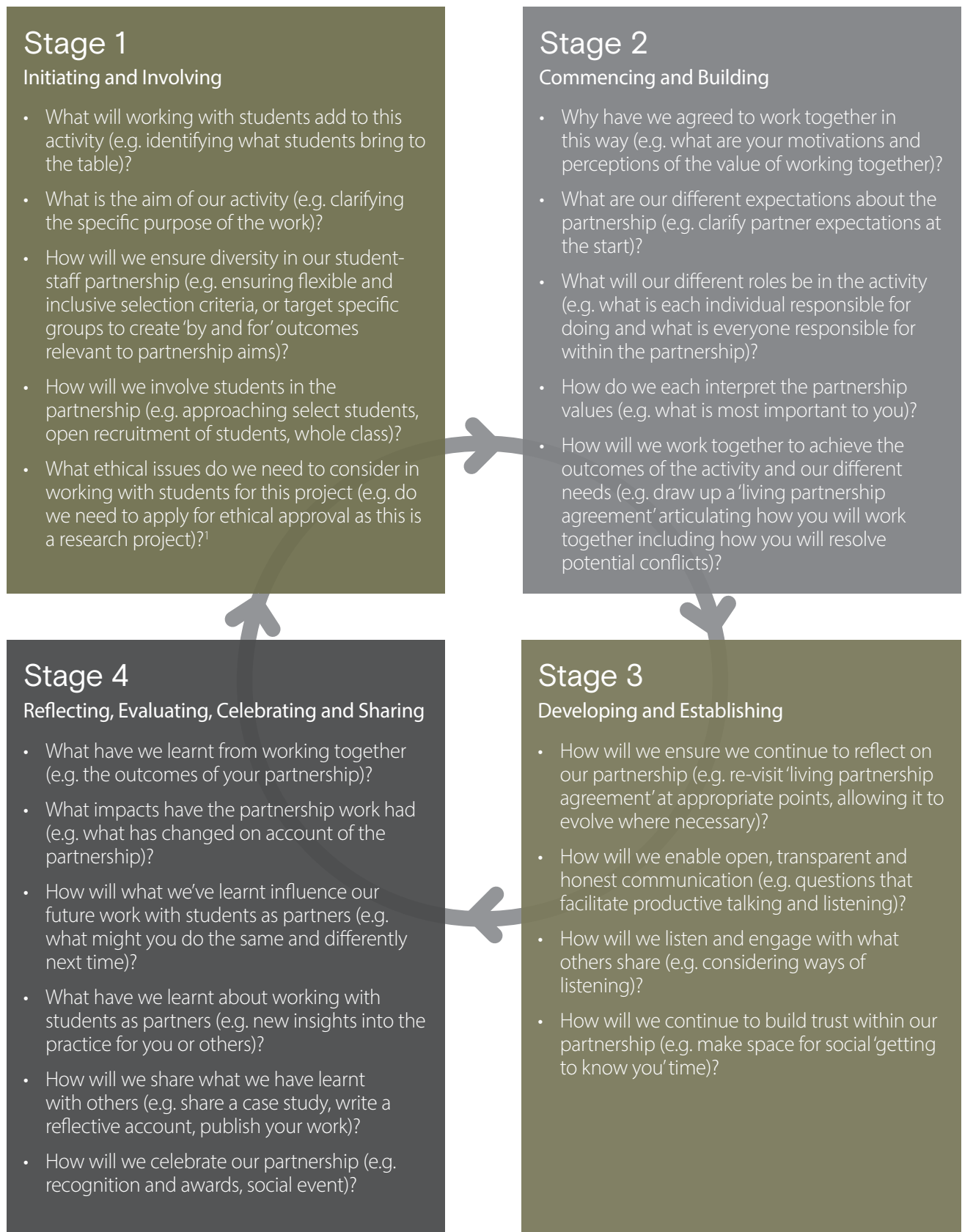
“Consider what additional skills/guidance/support students might need to help them find appropriate and professional ways of responding to the material and to the wider ambitions of the project.”

Dr Hannah Ewence (History & Archaeology, UoC)

“Make it fun. When we worked on this project I had my own office and was able to make drinks and brought in cakes and snacks whilst we planned the project.”

Associate Professor Val Gant (Health & Social Care, UoC)

Figure 4: Prompts for developing partnerships



¹ For further information on ethics and students as partners see: *Students as partners and ethical considerations in SoTL research* and *A guide to ethics and student engagement through partnership*.

Contact: caid.uif@chester.ac.uk for further support in developing your partnership

“Overdeliver and under promise.”

*Wayne Connor-Scahill
(Health & Social Care, UoC)*

“It is important to have some clear aims and to explain these to the students so that they can see what they are working towards.”

Dr Helen West & Dr Jo Close (English, UoC)

5. Conclusion: Join the partnership learning community

This guide offers support for people who wish to develop their partnership practice at the University of Chester. Working with students as partners is not for everyone or for every context. Partnership is an ethos, beyond a single project or activity, in which the university recognises the value of student insights into their experiences and seeks out partnership opportunities in all aspects of their work. By incorporating these perspectives into all that we do, the institution can enhance the student experience, and evolve an ever-developing educational experience fit for the modern world.

If you would like to learn more about students as partners at the University of Chester, please join [‘SaP Chat’: The Students as Partners Institutional Network](#) by clicking the hyper link and requesting to join the Team.



It should be “the norm, not the exception, that students are engaged as co-partners and co-designers in all university and department learning and teaching initiatives, strategies and practices.”

(Healey 2012)

6. About the author: Ruth Healey

In 2004 having just finished my undergraduate degree, before I started my Masters, I was asked to manage the organisation of the first International Network for Learning and Teaching in Geography in Higher Education (INLT) international collaborative writing groups (ICWGs), held at Strathclyde University, Glasgow. During the breakout sessions I had little to do, so as a student with an interest in social geography I went and sat in on the discussions of the group about 'teaching for social transformations'. As the discussion continued the group invited me to share my views as a current student. Unexpectedly, to me, they found my insights useful to the extent that I went on to contribute to the writing of what became my first academic publication. The legacy of my involvement was that all subsequent INLT ICWGs have aimed to have a student member in each group. This was my first introduction to what has since been called 'students as partners'. I started exploring 'students as partners' as an academic in a subsequent INLT ICWG in 2014 (Moore-Cherry et al. 2015). I have continued to work in this area ever since. I am one of the inaugural editors of the [*International Journal for Students as Partners*](#) (2016-present). I am a National Teaching Fellow (2017), a Fellow of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (2019), and a Professor of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (2023).

7. Further resources

- Cook-Sather, A., Bahti, M. & Ntem, A. [*Pedagogic partnerships: A how-to guide for faculty, students, and academic developers in higher education*](#) (2019)
- Council of Australian University Librarians. [*Students as partners toolkit*](#) (2023)
- Healey M., Flint A. & Harrington K. [*Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*](#) (2014)
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- Healey, M. & Healey, R.L. [*Essential frameworks for enhancing student success: Student engagement through partnership*](#) (2019)
- Healey, M. & Healey, R.L. [*Students as partners and change agents in learning and teaching in higher education*](#) (2023, regularly updated)
- Healey, R.L. [*The benefits of hindsight: Lessons learnt from leading my first cross-department student-staff partnership project*](#) (2019)

8. Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to colleagues from across the University for sharing case studies of their innovative and exciting students as partners practices in their contexts and taking the time to share their advice on approaching working with students based on their experiences. Particular acknowledgement goes to colleagues who commented on an earlier draft of this guide: Anthony Cliffe, Michelle Cordingley, Rebecca Falcon, Mick Healey, Katherine Leighton, Hannah Perkins, Peter Scorey, and Deborah Wynne.



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Case Studies

Learning, Teaching and Assessment

Module Partners and 'Cake and Conversation' meetings: From quality assurance to quality enhancement
Empowering students to enhance their own learning experiences
ASk Dissertations
Student Empowerment Group
An effective approach to eliciting student feedback: Reflections from a Module Partner

Curriculum Design and Pedagogic Consultancy

Designing and developing courses through staff-student partnerships – processes, experiences and engagement
Students as module creators
Neurodiverse Inclusive Social Work Education

Subject-based Research

Cestrian English project research assistants for work-based learning
Collaborative autoethnographic research with MA Social Work students
Imperial legacies, sacred spaces
Retracing Footsteps: Capturing the changing landscapes of Yr Wyddfa / Snowdon
From BA dissertation to collaboration: Furthering student experience in academia and research

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

A research project investigating good practice for working with students with dyslexia
An exploration into the diversification and decolonisation of reading lists within the curriculum

Beyond Learning, Teaching and Research

Students as recruiters
Student-led projects – Chester Healthy Eating Workshops (CHEW)

Integrated Approaches

Student Race Advocates
Student Engagement/Experience Officers Scheme

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