

IT IS EXPLAINED THAT ALL RELATIONSHIPS REQUIRE A LITTLE **GIVE AND TAKE**. **THIS IS UNTRUE**. ANY PARTNERSHIP DEMANDS THAT WE GIVE AND GIVE AND GIVE AND AT THE LAST, AS WE FLOP INTO OUR GRAVES EXHAUSTED, WE ARE TOLD THAT **WE DIDN'T GIVE ENOUGH**. (CRISP)

IT ISN'T MUCH FUN FOR ONE, BUT TWO / CAN **STICK TOGETHER**, SAYS POOH, SAYS HE. (MILNE)

ONLY SOMEONE WHO IS **READY FOR EVERYTHING**, WHO **EXCLUDES NOTHING**, NOT EVEN THE MOST ENIGMATICAL, WILL DRAW EXHAUSTIVELY FROM HIS OR HER OWN EXISTENCE. (RILKE)

**ALL WHO THINK CANNOT BUT SEE THERE IS A SANCTION LIKE THAT OF RELIGION WHICH BINDS US IN PARTNERSHIP IN THE SERIOUS WORK OF THE WORLD**. (FRANKLIN)

# A MANIFESTO FOR PARTNERSHIP

THE GREATEST PROBLEM WITH **COMMUNICATION IS THE ILLUSION** IT'S BEEN **ACHIEVED** (CONKOW)  
THE SECRET IS TO **GANG UP ON THE PROBLEM**, RATHER THAN EACH OTHER. (SMALLKAMP)

**SOCIETY IS INDEED A CONTRACT** IT IS **A PARTNERSHIP IN ALL SCIENCE**; A PARTNERSHIP IN ALL ART: A PARTNERSHIP IN EVERY VENTURE. (MONTAIGNE)

IF I ACCEPT YOU AS YOU ARE, I WILL MAKE YOU WORSE; HOWEVER IF I TREAT YOU AS THOUGH **YOU ARE WHAT YOU ARE CAPABLE OF BECOMING**, I HELP YOU BECOME THAT. (GOETHE)  
WHEN WE ARE IN PARTNERSHIP AND HAVE STOPPED CLUTCHING EACH OTHER'S THROATS, WHEN WE HAVE STOPPED ENSLAVING EACH OTHER, **WE WILL STAND TOGETHER**, HANDS CLASPED, AND BE FRIENDS. WE WILL BE COMRADES, WE WILL BE BROTHERS, AND WE WILL BEGIN THE MARCH TO **THE GRANDEST CIVILIZATION THE HUMAN RACE HAS EVER KNOWN**. (DEBS)

THE SOCIETY OF THE FUTURE WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY REQUIRE **INDIVIDUALS TO WORK TOGETHER**, TO CO-OPERATE MORE AND TO COME TOGETHER AS COMMUNITIES AND AS A WHOLE SOCIETY. WE WILL ALL BE **SOCIAL AND COMMUNAL BEINGS** BOUNDED TO EACH OTHER BY OBLIGATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES WHICH ENHANCE AND **TRANSCEND INDIVIDUAL INTERESTS**. (TAYLOR)

THE LONG HISTORY OF HUMANKIND... THOSE WHO HAVE LEARNED TO **COLLABORATE AND IMPROVE** MOST EFFECTIVELY HAVE **PREVAILED**. (DARWIN)



national union of students

## INTRODUCTION

I am passionate about education, and the sector surrounding it, but it strikes me that we can be capable of incredible doublethink. When I was first taught how to construct essays one thing, more than any other, was drilled into me: define your terms. For a few years now the higher education sector has talked about partnership. Time and time again we don't adequately define exactly what we are talking about.

When we don't attempt to define the terms of our discussions we risk confusion. Worse, we lose the opportunity to explore concepts and ideas. Discussion, disagreement and negotiation towards a set of shared values should be a hallmark of higher education.

We have spent enough time condemning consumerism in education, and now we need to articulate the alternative. Student engagement is a great concept but it needs to be deployed to radical ends. Students as partners is not just a nice-to-have, I believe it has the potential to help bring about social and educational transformation, as long as we know what we are trying to do and we maintain a critical attitude about the ways the concept is adopted and used.

We say we want to celebrate and share best practice; that can no longer mean that which simply works well. Our practice needs to be underpinned by our values. An activity really should make the reality of education closer to our vision before we single it out as "best practice."

This manifesto is an attempt at defining what partnership could mean, as well as explaining why I think students' unions are so important in creating and maintaining partnership approaches. At the heart of this document is the idea that individual civic engagement is strongest when it comes about through the collective, and that strong students' unions are core to any understanding of partnerships.

Framing discussions about students' engagement in education is important, but the most important thing is what we choose to do as a result of those discussions. That's a challenge I hope you will join me in rising to.

In unity,

**Rachel Wenstone**

Vice President (Higher Education)  
NUS

## FROM STUDENT ENGAGEMENT TO PARTNERSHIP

For some years now student representation has been something not to be simply tolerated, marginalised or confined to the students' union, but something to be embedded and woven into institutional decision-making at all levels. Other organisations in the UK higher education sector, including higher education institutions, have joined NUS in advocating for a greater voice for students, both within institutions and in the national policy process.

The student engagement agenda advocates for the idea that students should be active participants in the learning process, rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Although the practices around student engagement may be long-standing in some cases, student engagement as a policy priority is relatively recent. Students' unions have, in many cases, seized enthusiastically on the idea of student engagement as complementing the role of the union to enhance students' influence or 'make students' voices heard'. The idea of students as active participants in learning has led to numerous projects designed to support students to contribute to shaping their course delivery and content at higher education institutions around the UK. It has also had an influence on, not just the priority given to student representation at course level, but on perceptions of what student representation is intended to achieve.

We are now moving beyond a narrow focus on the validity of various systems of student representation and instead describing concepts linked to student identities and the potential of individuals to influence their environment. Hence, ideas such as students as co-creators of knowledge, the co-production of learning outcomes and students as collaborators and agents for change, have become common currency. This has led, to some extent, to a level of confusion: should attention be paid to the individual student's level of engagement with learning or to her participation in a collective system of student representation? Both, is the obvious answer, but this raises further questions

about the tensions between individual and collective engagement and how these might be negotiated.

At the same time, we see a shift from the concept of the student representative authorised to speak on behalf of students to the idea of students having an individual voice, unmediated by any representative system or sense of the collective. This may not be a bad thing, but it is something to be mindful of as the student engagement agenda continues to hold sway in the higher education policy arena. It suggests a potential change in the implicit purpose or function of students' unions away from individuals representing the student view behind closed doors and instead working to empower students as a collection of individuals each with their own unique 'student experience'.

**STUDENT ENGAGEMENT  
IS NOT HAPPENING IN A  
POLICY VACUUM**

If such a cultural shift is indeed under way then pausing to scrutinise and reflect on what is happening becomes a matter of some urgency. Student engagement is not happening in a policy vacuum and the current trend outside the teaching and learning community is towards positioning higher education as primarily a private good, measurable by career outcomes and student satisfaction scores. Senior leaders in higher education have little choice but to be influenced by their context, whatever their private opinion of government policy may be. Student engagement is a flexible enough (or even vague enough) concept to be appropriated by a wide range of interests, not all of which will be in alignment with those of students' unions. It also, for many, holds out a space for political resistance and organisational change, not least in resisting the burgeoning signs of a damaging market in education.

## WHY PARTNERSHIP?

Among the various concepts that cluster around student engagement, that of 'partnership' has gained significant currency. The student engagement toolkit produced by NUS and the Higher Education Academy in 2010 frames partnership as the goal of student engagement. The Quality Assurance Agency followed suit in the newly-released chapter of its quality code that deals with student engagement: QAA asserts that one facet of student engagement is student participation in quality assurance and enhancement processes and advocates a partnership approach to joint working in these areas. For QAA, 'partnership' entails the coming together of different parties to work on a shared goal, and the focus is on the logistics of coping with the potential for disagreement of values, perceptions or experiences.

These documents assume quite reasonably that 'partnership' is a concept best defined at institutional level as, not only will the look and feel of a partnership approach differ according to institution, but the process of debating partnership is a healthy and necessary step on the road to embarking on a partnership approach. Nevertheless, this approach may be in danger of question-begging through its failure

to provide a shared concept of partnership. The dangers of not asking the right questions may be illustrated through a conversation commonly to be overheard in parts of the sector: students may be partners in principle but can never be 'equal partners' because they do not have the necessary 'expertise' to engage with academic staff on an equal basis. This is what happens when an ill-defined concept is put in the hands of interest groups – the concept is interpreted ('partnership is about equality of expertise') and problematised ('students do not have equal levels of subject knowledge') in a way that disenfranchises students. Defining partnership differently may lead to a quite different outcome.

We are also in danger of applying the language or ideas of partnership to new or existing student engagement processes or specific one-off schemes and projects. Partnership must be a necessary goal of student engagement practice, but the existence of a course representative system, for example, does not in and of itself signal partnership. Let us be clear from the outset, the sum total of an institution's student engagement mechanisms does not equal partnership.

THE SUM TOTAL OF AN INSTITUTION'S  
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS  
DOES NOT EQUAL PARTNERSHIP

## THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENTS' UNIONS

The shorthand of 'students as partners' carries a multiplicity of possibilities, from individual partnerships between students and academic staff, to institution-level partnerships. In the student movement we value collectivism and democratic representation, but we need to ensure that the concept of the collective also serves the goal of individual student empowerment. While individual students may engage in various forms in their learning, the whole system of partnership must flow through the students' union as the collective voice of students. Democratic representation through an independent students' union must be at the core of any partnership project.

This is not to turn back the clock, but to assert the need for a new understanding of collectivism – one that can cope with the heterogeneity of students' concerns and dispositions while sustaining the possibility of solidarity among students in the great project of education.

Thus partnership should be between independent entities, such as an institution and the collective student body (the students' union), but it should serve the larger goal of supporting and facilitating the engagement of all students.

DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION THROUGH  
AN INDEPENDENT STUDENTS' UNION  
MUST BE AT THE CORE OF  
ANY PARTNERSHIP PROJECT

## CHOOSING PARTNERSHIP

The word 'partnership' is an attractive one, and hard to disagree with, but in order to make a meaningful choice we need to examine and reject the alternatives. This also ensures that when things get difficult we know why we chose to take this approach in the first place.

## REJECTING CONSUMERISM

The present government has made it clear that it considers higher education to be primarily a private good and that it believes that students will be assured of the best experience possible if they treat higher education as a consumer choice. The students as consumers model assumes that the experience of attending higher education is something that can be packaged and sold; it turns students into customers and teachers into service providers.

Conceiving of students as consumers is a thoroughly impoverished way of describing the relationship between students and their institutions, which ought to be one of mutual trust, care and respect. The power held by consumers is not the power to intervene and change things, it is the power to 'like' or to 'recommend to a friend', or to make a choice between five identical glossy marketing brochures. The consumer never grows, is never challenged, is never made to understand the vastness of the knowledge that exists and that has yet to be created. The consumer is not asked to imagine unthought-of possibilities.

Rejecting a consumer model is no small task. A narrative of 'competition' and 'choice' within a consumer model offers students a false and inflated perception of their power and encourage the mind-set of 'the customer is always right'. Students may rush to embrace this attitude even further as a way of distinguishing higher education from their experience of school, where choice is limited and, by and large, the burden of standardised testing means students are rewarded for receiving and regurgitating knowledge. Simultaneously, the consumer model reduces complex interactions to mere transactions and de-values the role and expertise of educators.

The consumer model could create a dangerous imbalance - the role of educators is reduced; students' power appears great, but is in fact limited to commenting only on what has been sold to them, and student satisfaction is substituted for learning. Tackling this mindset is a challenge that needs to be overcome, but it is also a reason to tread carefully in our framing of student engagement. If we seek to engage students merely in order to find out what they want and give it to them, we reproduce this dangerous narrative of consumerism and lose sight of the responsibility of educators to challenge and stretch students.

A CONSUMER MODEL  
OFFERS STUDENTS A  
**FALSE AND  
INFLATED  
PERCEPTION OF  
THEIR POWER**

In this context students as partners offers a valuable alternative to the rhetoric of consumerism. Regardless of whether students agree with the values and characteristics of the funding model in which they sit, they may adopt behaviours we associate with consumerism unless we offer a new and compelling way of thinking about learning. In the absence of policy changes, our shared challenge as a sector is to do our best to eclipse the effects of a consumerist model. By developing new practice and challenging behaviours, we can protect and grow the extent to which students are given the opportunity to experience the transformational effects of higher education.

WE OFFER A NEW  
AND **COMPELLING**  
WAY OF THINKING  
ABOUT **LEARNING**

T.S. Eliot asked, 'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?' Perhaps the knowledge we have lost in information about higher education is the potential for transformational experiences. Clear and accessible information is an important part of ensuring that students make the right choice for them; but most of this information tends to focus on transactional arrangements, such as contact hours and library facilities. In a consumer model we can reduce or overlook students' motivations for attending university or too readily assume that their motivations prior to arrival will guide their behaviours throughout their learning. Ultimately, we can end up underestimating students' openness to being challenged and changed. Partnership presents an opportunity to articulate to new and prospective students a broader picture of the learning experience and new dimensions to their role within it.

WE CAN  
END UP **UNDERESTIMATING STUDENTS'  
OPENNESS TO BEING CHALLENGED**

## RETHINKING APPRENTICESHIP

The other approach we may wish to reject in favour of partnership is that of student as apprentice. This can be summarised as the idea that traditionally a student attends university in order to gain mastery of a particular subject area. Students spend time with experts in order to become closer to expertise themselves and teachers determine curricula because they know what they are talking about. Advocates of this approach might be wary of 'too much' student engagement, such as involving students in curriculum design or peer review, on the basis that students cannot be expected to know what they want to learn in advance of learning it.

We do not necessarily need to wholly reject the apprentice model for students to be partners, but we do need to reimagine it. Students are apprentices in the business of student engagement; until primary and secondary schools adopt a similar approach many students will not have the language or the practice to hand to engage constructively in their learning or in the business of being an active member of a learning community. Students will need support and coaching to engage effectively as partners and this support could come from sources other than academic staff, including current students.

Of course students are not experts in subject knowledge, but they may have expertise that lies beyond the conception of university managers. 'Equality' is as much about respecting each other's views as it is about having similar levels of knowledge. Taking the conversation seriously is the first step towards acknowledging known and prospective forms of expertise that students bring to the table – not least a very clear sense of what is in the student interest. Student representatives increasingly take a role that is less about reporting what students think as part of a notional consultative exercise on the part of institutions, and more about engaging critically in decision-making from the point of view of the interests of students. To do this effectively takes leadership: the ability to assess where the student interest lies and argue for it, and the ability to listen to the various student constituencies to ensure their concerns are understood and that these are informing the debate. Atomised student feedback could never substitute for serious student representation, which is why students' unions are so necessary and important to partnership.

Rejecting both the consumer and apprentice models in favour of partnership will have an impact on the way we talk about higher education to prospective students and how we induct new students into it. Partnership may defy the expectations of some prospective students and run contrary to the experiences of past and present higher education students they have encountered. For others, it will meet or stretch an existing conception of higher education. Outreach, recruitment and especially induction will need a lot of attention, but a genuine ethos of partnership must be visible across institutional practice. Partnership should be something identifiable and meaningful to students from their first encounter with an institution through to graduation.

WE DO NOT NECESSARILY  
NEED TO **WHOLLY REJECT**  
THE APPRENTICE MODEL  
FOR STUDENTS TO BE  
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NEED TO **REIMAGINE IT**

## WHAT IS PARTNERSHIP?

The beginning of a partnership approach will in most cases involve work between an institution and its students' union to determine an institutional understanding of what partnership is. That said, it is possible to sketch out some broad parameters. We have already observed that the sum total of the student engagement activity at an institution does not equate to partnership; this is because partnership is an ethos rather than an activity. Activities emerge from the beliefs and intentions that underpin a partnership approach between the student body and an institution.

At its roots partnership is about investing students with the power to co-create, not just knowledge or learning, but the higher education institution itself. Knowledge and learning are, of course, at the heart of the higher education project, but higher education institutions do a great deal - and have the potential to do a great deal - that is currently perceived as peripheral to the business of student-facing learning and teaching. Community engagement, widening access, transnational education, research, sport, capital investment, educational development, knowledge exchange, engagement with public policy - these are all part of the educational project and prospectively the business of the student body.

A corollary of a partnership approach is the genuine, meaningful dispersal of power. Without a partnership approach student engagement becomes another initiative doomed to fall out of fashion when resources dry up or institutional

managers decide to go in another direction. Thus, partnership between institutions and students should be channelled through an independent students' union that can harness the power of the collective. Listening to and seeking feedback from individual students, after all, sits neatly in a consumer model. It is only when students are enabled to contribute to educational and institutional change that partnership is happening.

Some may argue that change can be secured solely through feedback. It is true that minor course glitches are best caught and fixed through a feedback mechanism, but relying solely on feedback, or on asking students what they want with a view to delivering it is problematic because it is unsustainable. Partnership means shared responsibility - for identifying the problem or opportunity for improvement, for devising a solution, and - importantly - for co-delivery of that solution. None of this can happen without dispute, so the question becomes whether that dispute is occurring in good faith on both sides and whether students and their representatives are enabled to take a full and active part in that debate.

Responsible student partners will not be satisfied with passing their demands up the chain and hoping that at some point somebody in charge agrees. Responsible student partners will work within the collective to determine what needs doing, why and how, and will work together with interested parties to make these imagined possibilities a reality.

BECAUSE **PARTNERSHIP IS AN ETHOS**  
RATHER THAN AN ACTIVITY

## INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

In order to create a system of partnership, we need to be serious about integrating our vision and beliefs with our approach to driving change, and frank about the difficulties that presents.

Many students' unions use a tried and tested model to drive changes in policy at their institution. First, we win the argument at a senior institutional level. Second, we shape the way the policy is implemented across the institution. Third, we inform student representatives at a local level that the policy exists and enable them to hold their course and departmental leaders to account. Where problems arise that cannot be dealt with by course representatives, they report back to students' union officers who use line management to enforce policy. If there is a good relationship between the leadership of the institution and the students' union this method can be both efficient and successful. However, taking this approach dooms us to forever fiddle with organisational structures rather than embarking on meaningful institutional change.

If we as a student movement want to truly be partners in education, we have to consider what that means for our practice. Partnership will not be achieved just through line management, though it must be achieved through leadership. Partnership means students and staff, at all levels, working together to achieve agreed goals. We have to move beyond defining a good relationship between an institution and a students' union as students' union officers and senior management working together. This will mean enabling academic staff, as well as students, to be part of the conversation on determining how partnership will work. Academic staff must be involved in

critical and informed dialogue about the values of partnership and the development of new practice. This can only happen if a partnership approach is dispersed throughout the institution, from course to senior management levels.

There is a risk that this argument could be misinterpreted, that 'partnership across all levels' is mistaken for an excuse for a lack of leadership or a lack of collective action. Let us be clear: decentralisation of power is not the same as individualism; collectivism is not at odds with heterogenous views. When we empower students to truly engage with their course, their lecturers, their area of study, we strengthen students' unions. We should not be afraid of that power. Yes, different students will have different views, but if we are still having conversations with our institutions about the student experience or the student view we have all missed the point.

An organisation run on collective values does not have to be monolithic. Accepting that the views of thousands of people are heterogeneous is not good enough; we must celebrate it. Higher education in the United Kingdom is the most diverse it has ever been, though still not diverse enough; it is a tragedy that, as the sector becomes more inclusive, the threat of the market and consumerism has persuaded many institutions to behave like business: centralising power, concentrating on experiences of individuals and pursuing a corporate identity. Many of the enriching qualities of diversity are lost if not only decision-making powers, but the power to determine what the problems are that need solving, are condensed into the hands of the few.

**WE NEED TO BE SERIOUS ABOUT  
INTEGRATING OUR VISION AND BELIEFS  
WITH OUR APPROACH TO DRIVING CHANGE**

## ACCOUNTING FOR HETEROGENEITY

Narrative at the national level tends to be dominated by the interests and experiences of full-time undergraduates studying in universities. Recognising this, and taking account of wider societal inequalities, we often see projects and policies investigating the experiences of specific groups of students such as part-time, LGBT, minority ethnic, postgraduate taught, postgraduate research, students with caring responsibilities, international students, disabled students, students from low participation neighbourhoods and more. Given that many of these possible student identities are likely to intersect, we arrive at as many possible student experiences as there are students. It is impossible accurately to represent this diversity if we assume that experience, identity and opinion are primarily shaped by one's position in the matrix.

In a context where policies tend to be made and applied centrally and where forms of societal discrimination continue there is not a valid argument for scrapping any system that enables groups of students who choose to interact on the basis of some aspect of their student identity to lobby for their specific concerns to be taken into account. But neither should we assume that we have the monopoly on knowing which groups of students may wish to articulate a shared set of concerns or interests.

Supplementary to a formal structure of representation of defined student groups there should be scope to facilitate students coming together for defined periods of time to work on a shared area of interest or solve a specific problem. If unions and institutions found ways to support and recognise such ad-hoc groups, it would enable more students to engage in areas they cared about and ensure they were heard without the need for tinkering with structures or for complex constitutional reform.

Bearing in mind equality and diversity, institutions and students' unions will need to carefully consider what barriers to partnership may exist for certain groups, either those without a strong tradition of engagement in representation, such as some postgraduate students, or those for whom personal circumstances present obstacles, such as lack of time or financial resource. Partnership cannot apply to only part of the student body.

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## THE BENEFITS OF PARTNERSHIP

In order to realise the many prospective benefits of a partnership approach we must accept from the outset that there will never come a point when the benefits, or indeed partnership itself, is achieved in full or forevermore. Partnership is a living and constantly evolving approach - a way of doing and discovering. Every new intake of students and the turnover of staff and students' union officers will bring new challenges and possibilities. It will require some consistent levels of support, resource and commitment, as well as the ability to be flexible and open to new ideas. We should be building partnerships that are robust enough to be able to cope with constant criticism, re-evaluation and the introduction of new evidence - the dispute and intellectual challenge that is the lifeblood of universities. This requires recognition that systemic change is the least of the challenges ahead and that deep thought and dialogue will also be required.

EVERY NEW INTAKE OF STUDENTS AND THE TURNOVER OF STAFF AND STUDENTS' UNION OFFICERS WILL BRING NEW CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

We should see plenty of benefits for people and relationships. As a result of partnership, we might see happier more engaged students. Engagement can promote a sense of belonging, which can be critical to student retention and success. Building the capacity of students and staff to engage and be engaged could offer new horizons for teaching and learning and provide opportunities to develop and share professional practice. Partnership implies a sense of responsibility for success for all involved, which could help create a stronger sense of community among students and staff.

In a consumer model we might simply ask students what they want - the result of which is likely to be an unrealistic and unimaginative shopping list. A partnership approach, on the other hand, would ask students what they care about. Rather than asking students what they want and then attempting to give it to them, we can help students and staff organise around the issues they are passionate about, with a view to making their learning environment better. As a result, we will see students whose fundamental belief is in their power to suggest innovations to shape their environment, an ethos that will serve them better in the wider world than a belief that the only power they can access is that of purchasing power.

As well as helping to counter unhelpful attitudes and behaviours, partnership reinforces many of the values at the heart of the student movement and higher education institutions: in particular democracy, collectivism and the extension of knowledge and understanding. It suggests that we learn and make better decisions through deliberation and in pursuit of consensus.

Partnership promotes strong students' unions and might offer a new phase in the relationship between students' unions and institutions. Creating and sustaining partnerships will require open and honest dialogue in order to make realistic commitments, identify barriers and agree approaches. Partnership will set the bar high for students' unions, but should provide them with the resources to help meet it.

The benefits of a partnership approach could reach beyond individual institutions. Partnership can and ought to be an asset of a higher education sector that takes seriously its responsibility to serve the wider public good. In the UK today many people have turned away from the democratic system, believing they have no capacity to have an influence or to effect change.

Civic-minded organisations are beginning to recognise that centralised policymaking is outdated, especially in the absence of largesse to dispense. There is no way of guaranteeing that centralised policy approaches are consistently understood and applied, never mind the fact that one single approach rarely fits local circumstances. The academic disciplines are an excellent example of the way that different local definitions, practices and priorities have a way of putting paid to the best-laid plans of the central administration.

Meanwhile, people become mistrustful and believe they are not well understood. Instead of contributing to a shared project of making things better, people retreat into at best defensiveness and at worst, torpor. Rather than trying unfruitfully to bring people to heel, central administrations could be exploring their role in facilitating a democratically engaged approach to policymaking, one that assumes that every citizen has the potential - the responsibility - to make a contribution. They might also invest in seeking to understand and share good practice.

WE MAKE BETTER DECISIONS THROUGH DELIBERATION

Higher education institutions have a function in civil society - that of knowledge creation and thought leadership. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to suggest how the world might be better and more just. Both the practice and the theory of students as partners have the potential to set a challenge to other organisations and institutions in civil society to adopt a participative approach and seek to enable those who ostensibly lack power to have an influence to shape the world for the better.

CENTRALISED POLICYMAKING IS OUTDATED

## HOW WILL WE KNOW IF PARTNERSHIP IS HAPPENING?

It is hard to measure an ethos, but results of a partnership approach should be visible in how institutions and students' unions work together and the results of that work.

At a very basic level, partnership should mean that students have some ownership in decision-making at all levels of the institution. In order for this to happen, some sense of institutional process (both formal and informal) would need to occur in order to determine where student engagement is weak, and consideration would need to be given to what support students would need to engage fully in decisions. Both the institution and the students' union would have the power to propose new or emerging areas of work, and both would be involved in the design and delivery of such work.

Institutions and students' unions could also take a partnership approach to specific areas of work. Access, retention, business or employer engagement and community engagement are obvious areas to start with. For each of these areas a slightly different approach would need to be worked out, based on agreed goals and responsibilities, and a framework for cooperation.

Formal statements of policy such as student charters and access agreements would be created, revised and implemented in partnership. These documents would not be seen as ends in themselves but as testimonials to an underpinning partnership approach.

Institutions and students' unions would co-produce events and activities designed to bring together staff and students to discuss different aspects of educational and service provision and how things could be different – not just soliciting student feedback, but intended to deepen understanding of different experiences and perceptions and generate shared ideas for how to move forward.

Induction would include support for students in understanding the ethos of partnership and its implications. Students and staff who engage in activism at local or national level, or who made a contribution to institutional change would be recognised and celebrated.

There would be facilitated peer support networks and peer-led learning opportunities to help students learn from each other and form partnerships with other students. Students might co-produce institutional guidance to students.

These are some examples, but there are surely much, much more that will emerge as institutions and students' unions consider how to take this work forward. In Scotland, institutions and students' associations are developing partnership agreements: documents that set out how joint work will happen and which areas need enhancement work in any given year. These are currently under development, but are likely to provide a valuable reference point for future developments in partnership.

## TAKING FORWARD STUDENTS AS PARTNERS

These ideas are intended to provide a starting point for developing ideas for partnership approaches, but they also form a set of principles that could shape any joint approach between an institution and a students' union to developing an ethos of partnership.

1. Choose partnership and choose it as an institution not as a clique of senior managers. Have the debates across the institution and commit to hearing what people have to say, in an open forum. Consider and reject the alternatives.
2. Invest in partnership. Recognise that much may need to change and that the change will take some time. Map out decision-making structures and have discussions about how it happens and what it ought to look like. Commit human and, where possible, financial resource to making it happen.
3. Work to break down barriers to partnership. These will probably be to do with people's capacity to engage, whether a problem of time, inclination or understanding. Expect people to struggle and have the support in place for when they do.
4. Set joint priorities for partnership. Trying to do everything at once will lead to mayhem. A developmental approach will ensure that changes stick.
5. Keep partnership under review. One of the strengths of a whole-institution approach is that when new student representatives are elected they will have their own ideas about what needs to grow or change and this will help to ensure that partnership is always a work in progress.

NUS is committed to continued work with students unions to support the development of partnership approaches. Our higher education regional consultants and our student engagement and quality team are available to offer tailored support and guidance.

Contact: [higher-education@nus.org.uk](mailto:higher-education@nus.org.uk)

