

A partnership approach to pandemic policy: building student confidence in the wake of Covid-19

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The challenge

The 'co-creation' with students of curricula and learning experiences is well researched within learning development (Bryson, 2016; Mercer-Mapstone, 2020), but less is written about how to engage students in co-developing the policies underpinning their learning and its outcomes. The Covid-19 pandemic has given universities a chance to reflect on new ways to embrace student partnership. At the University of Exeter, student representatives contributed to the university's pandemic response, for example, co-developing new digital learning and teaching principles and support for those self-isolating. Yet, as the pandemic took hold, students sensed a loss of control over their academic outcomes as living, working, and learning took on new forms (Aucejo et al., 2021; Means and Neisler, 2021). This translated into genuine concern about grade outcomes and, consequently, futures beyond graduation.

Ramsden (2008) advocates for a partnership model where students actively contribute to decisions that shape their experiences, but university-student partnerships are shaped by institutional cultures (Carey, 2018) and a higher education context which positions students as consumers, which White (2016) argues could undermine the authority of expert educators to design effective learning experiences. The university had to ensure confidence in the robustness of degree quality and also protect students' achievements from the impact of the pandemic. Here, we discuss how student union sabbatical officers, activist groups, and university education leaders worked together to develop a policy to build students' trust in their degree results and encourage their continued efforts to learn in exceptional circumstances.

The response

In February/March 2020, discussions began between university leaders and sabbatical officers campaigning for a policy to account for the consequences of the pandemic on learning outcomes. The resulting 'no-detriment policy' harnessed the data expertise of the university's many academic specialists and professional services teams, and led many other institutions to adopt a systematic approach to protecting students from pandemic impacts. The policy involved a 'benchmark' based on a student's grades accumulated to date across 2019-2020, below which the credit-weighted average of their results would not fall.

During 2020-21, a benchmark was not possible because all completed assessments were impacted by the pandemic. Vocal student campaign groups, student union sabbatical officers and university leaders developed an evidence-based 'no-disadvantage guarantee' to address differences in individual student circumstances. This necessitated many impassioned discussions over a short timeframe, during which all stakeholders navigated the diversity of experience, expectations, and contested power relations that characterise a higher education community.

The policy was an outcome in itself, but its creation also enhanced the depth of, and confidence in, student partnership and co-creation now in place at the university. Below, drawing on the lessons learned, we offer three recommendations that enable students to

act as agents for change in designing effective policies that support their learning and attainment – beyond the classroom.

Recommendations

Keep talking

As Tim Smit has suggested, ‘we talk about all the bad stuff, but how it doesn’t have to be bad’ (Smit, 2020, cited Smith, 2020). Partnership is an iterative process and the no-disadvantage guarantee evolved gradually, through many, many meetings and challenging conversations. Cara Chittenden, President of The Falmouth and Exeter Students’ Union, explains:

After initial communications were released regarding the policies making up the no-disadvantage guarantee, many students were still concerned that these policies did not address their own circumstances and feared that individually-impacted students could slip through the net. We communicated this to the policy makers at the university, and helped develop a more robust exceptional circumstances application process for these students. This flexibility and reactivity to student feedback was great.

Diversifying and enhancing communications

Shaw et al. note that institutions can struggle to roll out engagement opportunities across wider student bodies (2012). This issue was heightened by the complex and time-sensitive nature of the challenge. Some students found communications about the policy development confusing and inaccessible, and did not understand how exam boards made decisions about degree outcomes. As well as sending email updates, student and university leaders took part, together, in social media messaging and student ‘town hall’ Q&A sessions, making consultation and conversation accessible to all students, not just student leaders or those in elected and privileged positions. Other recommendations include:

- Sharing more detail about how degrees are awarded – including how exam boards function, degree outcomes are calculated, and what types of data will be used to identify how the pandemic impacted students' learning.
- Consider the timing of messages – the team learned not to share important messages on Fridays to avoid increasing student anxiety over the weekend.

Inclusion, patience, and trust

At times, it was challenging to convey to students that non-immediate action does not mean 'no'; some requests or decisions require further consultation and/or identification of algorithmic, or other, mechanisms for implementing policy. This required all stakeholders to:

- Role-model constructive dialogue during discussions. Student union sabbatical officers often faced the most vocal criticism from students. By openly giving space to different views and considerations, university leaders enabled student leaders to advocate better for students in crisis situations.
- Adopt an inclusive approach to consultation, by inviting student activist and campaign groups into conversations rather than working only with union-affiliated representatives.

These practices enabled the university to develop policies that became sector leading in protecting student outcomes. We hope learning from this experience can enable the post-pandemic university to embrace 'pedagogies of partnership' (Pauli, Raymond-Barker and Worrel, 2016; Brailas, Koskinas and Alexias, 2017) in ways that extend beyond curriculum content, to the processes, policies, and ways of working that shape and support inclusive education outcomes. Universities need to operate partnerships in ways that recognise the power relations embedded in such dialogue (Carey, 2018). Using the above practices may mitigate White's (2016) caution that 'students as partners' approaches undermine trust and collaboration between university educators and students and, in so doing, incorporate into the learning development landscape the co-design of underpinning policies that build student trust and confidence in their experiences.

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