



STUDENTS AS PARTNERS

WHY STUDENTS AS PARTNERS?

One way to think about the Students as Partners (SAP) movement is as a subset of the global focus in universities on student engagement. The basic premise is that by designing curricula that draws from the best research about what engages students, and that demonstrates the relevance of that learning to future opportunities, students are more likely to see the benefits of investing deeply in their educational success. At Western, there is likely to be a wealth of curriculum innovation already influenced by such an approach to engagement. And for very good reason; a lot of the time, a focus on engagement produces results!

Our approach to SAP in the 21C project expands on this notion of engagement. Influenced by North American literary scholar Williams' (2008) idea 'teach the university', the 21C project recognises that our students need a way of apprehending the university as an idea and as an institution. They need a way of understanding the university's role in their educational formation. In fact, 'teach the university' also reminds us that learning about the university – what it is, its history, structures and forms of governance, what academics do and why, how curriculum is decided upon, sequenced and assembled – is a key part of learning how to inhabit the university as an act of 'care'. If we neglect to teach our students about the university, we give them the message that they are ancillary to rather than participants in, and shapers of, a scholarly community of inquiry. In this context, SAP is about working with students to find ways of caring for the project of the university. By doing so, students are caring for their own futures too. In 21C, we are embarking on this task via a curriculum initiative where partnership pedagogies are at the heart.

There is a rich SAP literature both in Australia and elsewhere, but particularly, the UK and North America. And there are different ideas about what should drive a commitment to



SAP. For some, it is about students and staff engaging in genuine dialogue about learning and teaching; it might be a belief that SAP enacts a commitment to social justice; or it acknowledges that students are experts of their own lives and motivations. Not all these drivers will be compelling. If you are keen on SAP, aim to find a reason that keeps you curious about what a curriculum partnership with students can achieve, and how it might enliven your approach to teaching, learning and educational design. After all, both you and your students should be transformed by the experience. Here's one of the original 21C SAPs Fay Ballouk on the experience:

“My whole perspective about student life and the university experience was overturned when I joined the Learning Transformations team and embarked on the journey of being a student partner. It has enriched my understanding of university, what it offers students, and how we can contribute to shaping curriculum.”

SAP MODEL TO THINK WITH

Dunne and Zandstra (2011, p.11) developed a powerful model to demonstrate how academics and universities might structure their SAP activities. The model makes a distinction between four logics:

Students are evaluators of their experience (the student voice)

Students offer feedback, views and opinions and are listened to on an institutional basis in order to build an evidence base for enhancement and change. Decisions for action tend to be taken at the unit/institutional level.

Students are participants in decision-making processes

Students engage in institutional decision-making in order to influence change and enhancement. Decisions tend to be taken collaboratively with staff and students.

Students are partners, co-creators, experts

Students are collaborative partners in curriculum provision and professional development in order to enhance staff and student learning. Decisions for action tend to be taken at the unit/institutional level.

Students are agents for change

Students are collaborative partners in pedagogic (learning and teaching) knowledge acquisition and professional development, with the purpose of bringing about change. Decisions for action tend to be promoted by students, and engaged with at the unit/institutional level.

At one of the recent 21C Future of Work forums, SAP researcher Lucy Mercer-Mapstone claimed:

“It is important we engage with students as partners because they are a huge source of knowledge, expertise and experience.”

SAP CURRICULUM EXAMPLES

Example 1: The University of Winchester

Student Fellowship scheme recruits 60 students annually to undertake educational development research in partnership with academics on a critical mass of undergraduate programs. Student Fellows are paid bursaries, mentored, trained in research methods, and drawn into a community of practice through working groups, conducting joint research and attending and disseminating findings at conferences.

Example 2: Four student interns (one from each of **The University of Strathclyde’s** faculties) were funded for 12 weeks to work in partnership with staff to improve assessment and feedback practices across the university. At the end of the initial 12 week period, the student interns made a series of recommendations to the University that were based on interviews, survey, and focus groups with students and staff from across the institution and a review of relevant L&T literature. The findings from their work contributed to a review of the University’s Assessment and Feedback Policy and Procedures and the working group who developed a new policy comprised student membership for the University’s Students’ Association and the group of student interns.

Example 3: At **Sheffield Hallam University** students have been recruited to be Course Enhancement Officers (CEOs) through an initiative that gives students a role as active agents ‘early on’ in the course approval

process. Course leaders and teams who are interested in working with CEOs meet with them at the start of the (re)approval process. Both parties negotiate what the consultancy will involve. CEOs do not usually support course leaders/teams for subjects they are studying. Typically, CEOs will conduct a ‘solutions-based’ workshop with students on the course, then prepare a report on the findings for course team/leaders, which may also be used as evidence in the (re)approval submission documents.

These three examples are extracted from Healey et.al (2014).

PROMPTS TO GET STARTED

1. Understand what is driving your ambition to collaborate with students as partners.

Is it access to the student voice; a desire for student participation in decision-making; a recognition that students have expertise as co-creators of content; or a belief that students are agents for change? What do you want to learn from the process?

2. Be clear about the curriculum initiative you’d like to partner with students on.

Is your invitation genuine? What do you see as the initial outcomes - for curricula, for you, and for the students? What capacity is there for students to shape the curriculum outcomes with you?

3. How will you invite students into a partnership with you?

Will they see it as a risk? What structure or mechanism will enable and establish the partnership?

4. What resources are needed to make the partnership work?

Are there colleagues you can collaborate with? Is there potential to pay students? Will students need training to carry out the work?

5. What will the students learn (or produce) from the partnership that will be relevant beyond their time at university?

Make sure your students can see this clearly.

6. How will students’ efforts be recognised?

SAP can take place in different ways, for example, as part of helping you plan/evaluate

a unit, during class, as part of an assessment task, outside of a unit structure. These variations (as well as the amount of work) will suggest different forms of reward and recognition: payment, credit as part of assessment, certification, or SAP embedded as a natural part of the learning process. Framing the initiative as a partnership with students is about signalling to them your educational intentions and communicating the outcome.

7. Is there any potential for evaluation or research as part of the partnership?

Might there be opportunities for students to act as co-researchers and collaborators on a scholarly output?

8. How will you share and disseminate your partnership efforts and outcomes with students in your teaching team or colleagues in your School? SAP is already an international movement with a strong evidence-base. Part of our job in 21C is to bring that evidence base to bear on the curriculum work at Western.

SAP RESOURCES

The University of Queensland (UQ) curates a [SAP website](#) with case studies, resources, research and hosts an Australian community of practice. This is a good place to start with any SAP inquiry you might have.

REFERENCES

- Dunne, E. & Zandstra, R. (2011). [Students as change agents - new ways of engaging with learning and teaching in higher education](#). University of Exeter, ESCALATE, HEA.
- Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). [Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education](#). HEA
- Williams, J.J. (2008). Teach the University. *Pedagogy*, 8(1), 25-42.

CONTACT

Visit the resources on our SAP website or contact [Dr Tai Peseta](#) or [Dr Jenny Pizzica](#) in the Learning Transformations team.