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Samantha E. Martens[a] , Annemarie Spruijt[b], Ineke H. A. P. Wolfhagen[a],
Jill R. D. Whittingham[a] and Diana H. J. M. Dolmans[a]

[a]Educational Development and Research, Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands; [b]Department of Clinical Sciences of Companion Animals, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Students do not always feel that their ideas for improving educational quality are taken seriously. Student–staff partnerships may help take this feeling away. In such partnerships, students equally collaborate with staff and participate in shared decision-making and implementation processes for improving education. However, empirical research has hitherto paid scant attention to the question of how students experience such student–staff collaborations, whether they are willing to participate in these partnerships and, if so, under which circumstances. We therefore conducted an explanatory mixed-methods study, for which we administered a student–staff partnership questionnaire to 87 students and held four focus groups. In the students' view, students can provide a unique perspective on educational improvement. Yet, they did not consider their collaborations with staff as full partnerships, because their role remained restricted to giving advice and they were not involved in the implementation process. Although students felt respected by staff, they expressed a wish to be informed of what happened with their suggestions, and to be seen as equal partners while appreciating the difference in students and staff members' roles. Additionally, students pointed to a need for clear and well-communicated role descriptions. We conclude that to render student–staff partnerships effective, students should be empowered more.

Introduction

Quality assurance systems have increasingly embraced student input as an essential quality marker (Cook-Sather 2009; Bovill 2013; Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014; Moore-Cherry et al. 2016). It is widely agreed that students can make a valuable contribution to the improvement of education. Stevens, Wiltens, and Koetsenruijter (2010), for instance, have argued that students offer a unique perspective on educational improvement because they have first-hand experiences of education. Others have asserted that students can help raise the quality of education when they collaborate with staff (Könings, Seidel, and van Merriënboer 2014). Hence, it is clear that the value of student input is recognised by many. Nevertheless, this input has hitherto stayed largely confined to students filling in evaluation questionnaires and advising in focus groups (Giles et al. 2004), revealing a need for their deeper involvement in both the evaluation

and implementation stages of educational improvement processes (e.g. Roberts and Nash 2009; Delpish et al. 2010; Blair and Noel 2014). At the same time, however, we see that the few students who are more deeply involved in course improvements do not always feel appreciated, respected and valued (Bicket et al. 2010). In other words, student involvement is currently hampered by a prevalent feeling among students that their suggestions for improving educational practice are not always taken seriously.

Evidence from the literature demonstrates that it is possible for students and staff to collaborate on the improvement of education in all stages of the process, spanning both the course evaluation and implementation stages (e.g. Delpish et al. 2010; Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014; Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014; Bovill et al. 2016; Moore-Cherry et al. 2016). An example of such a promising collaboration is a student–staff partnership (Griffin and Cook 2009), which has been defined as '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, implementing, investigating or analysis' (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014, 6–7). This reciprocity is reflected in the act of students sharing their experiences and staff members contributing their expert knowledge. As such, these partnerships move beyond listening to students' voices, assigning a more active role to students, with both parties participating equally in both the decision-making and implementation stages of the improvement process (Williamson 2013).

Although the ultimate aim of student–staff partnerships is clearly to improve educational courses/curricula (e.g. Cook-Sather 2010), research has demonstrated that they can also bring additional benefits in terms of improved meta-cognitive skills for students and transformed beliefs about teaching and teaching practices for staff (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014; Dickerson, Jarvis, and Stockwell 2016). Whether all of the aforementioned benefits can be reaped, however, depends on several criteria that should be met first. From the few empirical studies that have been conducted so far, we have learnt that successful student–staff partnerships are based on: (1) *reciprocal respect*, (2) a feeling by students to be able to *influence* decision-making, (3) *autonomy*, (4) *commitment*, and (5) *ownership/responsibility* (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014; Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014). These criteria are further explained in Table 1. A study by Bicket et al. (2010) has demonstrated that students are indeed willing to have more influence and be more respected.

Active student involvement in the form of student–staff partnerships is an exception rather than the rule (e.g. Bovill 2013). Moreover, most of what we know about student–staff partnerships comes from non-empirical studies. We therefore set out to collect empirical data about students' experiences of these partnerships and their associated preferences. More specifically, we sought to investigate the extent to which they felt the criteria for successful student–staff partnerships were met, whether they were willing to be engaged in such partnerships, and, if so, what their preferred conditions were. An answer to these questions can help us facilitate student–staff partnerships better and render them more successful. Specific research questions were:

1. To what extent do students experience their collaborations with staff as full partnerships and does the reality differ from their preferred situation?

Table 1. Definitions of the five criteria for successful student–staff partnerships.

Criterion	Definition
Reciprocal respect	Taking each other seriously, valuing each other, and exchanging thoughts in an equal manner (e.g. Cook-Sather et al. 2014; Brandl, Mandel, and Winegarden 2016)
Influence	Feeling that you can actually contribute to educational improvement (e.g. Menon 1999)
Autonomy	Determining by yourself how you will do your job (e.g. Spreitzer 1995)
Commitment	Being willing to put extra effort into improving education and being worried about its quality (e.g. Bendermacher et al. 2016)
Ownership/responsibility	Feeling that it is your job to improve the educational system (e.g. Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks 2003; Bendermacher et al. 2016)

2. Why and under which circumstances do students feel they can make a useful contribution in a student–staff partnership?

Methods

Setting

We conducted the present explanatory mixed-methods study at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML), Maastricht University, the Netherlands, where problem-based learning (PBL) is the dominant learning strategy. As a student-centred approach, PBL engages students actively in their own learning (van Berkel et al. 2010), by letting them discuss professionally relevant problems in small groups. Guided by a tutor, students actively participate in the group discussion and identify learning contents that need further study. After a period of self-study, students meet again to discuss what they have learnt.

Participants

Participants were students taking the undergraduate FHML programme in biomedical sciences, health sciences or medicine, including the international track. More specifically, these students were all actively involved in educational improvement as a member of: (1) a course design team in which staff meet to design or re-design a course and students (usually two per team) participate by giving staff feedback about issues that need improvement; (2) an evaluation panel in which students collect evaluative data about a course and discuss these data with staff; or (3) a curriculum or educational committee in which staff and students discuss issues related to the overall curriculum or specific courses in need of improvement. Within the FHML, a total of 135 undergraduate students from all years and programmes are actively involved in one of these activities. We invited all of these students to participate in the quantitative part of this study, to which 87 students responded positively (response rate of 64%). The student sample consisted of 69 women aged between 18 and 24 ($M = 20.96$, SD $= 1.42$), 17 men aged between 19 and 28 ($M = 21.76$, SD $= 2.49$) and one who selected the neutral option. Twenty-five students (22 women; three men) participated in four additional focus groups.

Instruments

To answer our first research question, we invited students to fill in a questionnaire that we had specifically developed for this purpose. The student–staff partnership questionnaire (SSPQ) was based on insights from the existing literature about student–staff partnerships and associated criteria for success, and consisted of 26 items related to course improvement that were divided into the following five scales: reciprocal respect (nine items), influence (three items), autonomy (three items), commitment (five items), and partnership (six items). We used Spreitzer's (1995) Psychological Empowerment Scale to measure 'influence' and 'autonomy', Meyer, Allen, and Smith's (1993) Affective Commitment Scale to gauge 'commitment' and developed our own scales to assess 'reciprocal respect' and 'partnership'. The items were related to course improvement. Students were asked to rate each item twice on a 5-point Likert scale (1 $=$ strongly disagree, 5 $=$ strongly agree): first to indicate their level of agreement as it applied to the present and then to indicate their preferred situation. Before administering the questionnaires, we tested them on four undergraduate students to make sure the items were clear and to record the time needed to complete the questionnaire.

We performed principal axis factoring (PAF) with orthogonal rotation, as the dataset was suitable for PAF based on the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity: KMO $= .78$; Bartlett's test of sphericity χ^2 (465) $= 1594.46$, $p < .001$. Moreover, the questionnaire showed acceptable validity evidence and reliability, with Cronbach's alphas ranging between .70 and .90

per factor. We considered a score below 3 as insufficient, a score above 4 as good and a score in between 3 and 4 as needing improvement.

To answer our second research question, we subsequently held four focus groups. In doing so, we first explained to students what we meant by student–staff partnerships, before asking them several questions to gain insight into their experiences of the last academic year, such as: Would you like to be involved as partners in the improvement of education?; How and when can you have an influence?; Do you feel appreciated?.

Procedure

The research procedure consisted of two steps. First, we asked undergraduate student representatives to distribute the questionnaires by email to all students who were actively involved in educational improvement. Completed questionnaires were collected in the period between June and September 2017. Second, we conducted focus groups with students that had been approached by the undergraduate student representatives by email. After we had conducted three focus groups, we noticed that students who were active in course design teams were underrepresented and therefore conducted a fourth focus group with course design team students only that we selected via purposive sampling. All focus groups were moderated by one of the authors (J.W.) and observed by the first researcher (S.M.) who took notes. Discussions were recorded, transcribed afterwards, and transcript summaries were made. We conducted a member check and all participants agreed on the transcript summaries. Focus group data were collected in the period between October and November 2017.

Before we administered the questionnaire and conducted the focus groups, students consented to participate in the study. We obtained ethical approval from the Ethical Review Board of the Netherlands Association for Medical Education (Ethical Review Board document number 896).

Analyses

We analysed the questionnaire data by calculating mean scores and standard deviations for each scale, reflecting students' current experiences of student–staff partnerships and their associated preferences. To measure the differences between the present and preferred situation we ran bootstrapped paired t-tests with an α of .05. The bootstrapping assumption was met: the sample represented the population. In addition, we calculated Cohen's d for each factor.

In the next step, we performed a template analysis of the focus-group transcripts, by following the 6-step procedure outlined in Brooks et al. (2015). This means that we: (1) read the transcripts; (2) started preliminary coding guided by sensitising concepts; (3) organised emerging themes into relevant categories and defined the relationships between them; (4) decided on the initial template; (5) applied the template and adapted it as necessary; and (6) decided on the final template and applied it to all transcripts. Two authors created the initial template based on their coding of the first transcript, which they discussed afterwards to reach consensus. The first author coded the remaining three transcripts, while all members of the research team critically reviewed the final template and underlying themes.

Reflexivity

The first author has a background in educational sciences and was a student representative herself during her study programme. Consequently, she may have been positively biased towards student–staff partnerships. The other authors also have a background in educational sciences and have a special interest in evaluation and quality assurance as well as curriculum improvement.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics reflecting students' experiences and preferences vis-à-vis the criteria for successful student–staff partnerships.

	Experience		Preference		Difference			
Factors	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	CI	Cohen's d
Partnership (N = 6)	3.27	0.85	4.08	0.55	0.81	0.86	[0.64, 0.99]*	1.16**
Autonomy (N = 3)	3.73	0.76	4.01	0.65	0.28	0.55	[0.16, 0.40]*	0.40
Influence (N = 3)	2.76	0.78	3.94	0.53	1.18	0.78	[1.01, 1.34]*	1.80**
Commitment (N = 5)	3.02	0.79	3.36	0.72	0.34	0.50	[0.23, 0.44]*	0.45
Reciprocal respect (N = 9)	3.94	0.68	4.41	0.48	0.47	0.64	[0.34, 0.60]*	0.80**

*$p < .05$; **Large.

Results

Questionnaire

We found that, in students' experiences, students' scores of criteria for successful student–staff partnerships ranged from 3.02 (SD = 0.79) for commitment and 3.94 (SD = 0.68) for reciprocal respect. The mean score for influence was lower, being 2.76 (SD = 0.78). Students' mean rating of the partnership scale, reflecting their current experience of the same, was 3.27 (SD = 0.85).

Scores pertaining to students' preferences ranged from 3.94 (SD = 0.53) for influence to 4.41 (SD = 0.48) for reciprocal respect, with the exception of the mean score for commitment (M = 3.36; SD = 0.72). The mean rating of the preferred situation of student–staff partnership was 4.08 (SD = 0.55).

As can be inferred from Table 2, students' experiences differed significantly from their preferences, with preference-related scores exceeding scores that reflected reality. This was particularly the case for the reciprocal respect, influence and partnership scales that had large effect sizes (>.80).

Focus groups

From our template analysis of the focus-group transcripts, five main themes emerged: (1) students offer a unique perspective, (2) students argue that staff members must be open to feedback, (3) students' involvement must include the implementation stage, (4) students and staff members' roles must be clearly defined and communicated, and (5) students must have prior experience of the course/organisation. While the first theme reflects students' view on why they felt they could make a useful contribution in a student–staff partnership, the other themes tell us what their preferred conditions are.

Students offer a unique perspective

With respect to the perceived value of students' contribution in student–staff partnerships, students repeatedly mentioned that they could offer a unique perspective on educational improvement. Consequently, they are motivated to participate in such partnerships. While appreciating staff members' content and didactic knowledge, students felt they could provide a different perspective, by putting forward new ideas and suggestions and performing a practicality check (checking whether something is feasible for students), which they considered a valuable addition:

> Where, in my view, the student has a [very] important role to play is in, um, putting forward new ideas, new insights. Students [means staff] are sometimes just stuck, and therefore keep pursuing the same path. And you as a student can be the one who actually pushes that block into the right direction. (focus group 1)

> [a student quoting a staff member] Really nice that you as students who are sitting there as representatives, came to us and told us this, because otherwise we would never have known. (focus group 1)

Students argue that staff members must be open to feedback

One of the most important obstacles to successful student–staff partnerships students encountered concerned staff members' receptivity to feedback. Although most staff members were open to feedback and conversations, there were still several instances in which students were confronted with staff members who were hesitant and not very receptive to feedback. Staff members' openness to feedback is crucial in developing good student–staff partnerships:

> Like, in several courses they were really listening to us, and like, er, name it, name it, name it, we want to hear it, but sometimes they were just laughing our tips away. (focus group 2)

> Sometimes you give feedback, and they just smile it away, and they were like, yeah, okay, we understand, but then in the end didn't ask questions to clarify things, and, you know, like, okay … that, not that receptive to your information. (focus group 2)

> Yes, what really struck me was, it's, it's not just about them listening to you and taking you seriously, it is also really about them being open to changes. (focus group 1)

Students' involvement must include the implementing stage

Another reason why students did not experience their collaborations with staff as full partnerships was that they felt their influence was limited to giving advice. To reap the full benefits of partnerships, they felt they needed to be involved in all stages of the improvement process, from consultation to implementation. Although most staff members were open to students' improvement suggestions, they did not always clarify how they were going to incorporate them, nor did they explain to students when they chose not to act on them. Students understood that staff were busy, and that not all their suggestions could be taken up but would have appreciated being told the reasons for not doing so. Hence, improving courses together with students was not the norm yet, that is, it was not part of the existing culture. Moreover, students had the impression that improving and maintaining quality was not among the priorities of several staff members and students:

> We've been stuck in the cycle of just giving them feedback, and not doing anything. (focus group 2)

> Well, I think there is a difference between being heard, and that, than that changes are actually being implemented. So, like, yeah, we feel like they, they, they were heard, but nothing was changed afterwards, so, that's it. It's like, it was a good meeting, it was a productive meeting, but then I, I looked back a year later, and they still had the same courses, the teacher was the same and all, and so. (focus group 2)

Students and staff members' roles must be clearly defined and communicated

A third important condition for successful student–staff partnerships suggested by students was to have clear descriptions of students and staff's roles available and to effectively communicate these. Students felt they were not well-informed about their educational improvement roles and observed that students and staff members held different expectations of each other's roles. They also felt that staff members had too much freedom in deciding on the level of student involvement in improvement processes. As a solution, they suggested that they co-create role descriptions with staff members and that both students and staff members' roles be formalised. The need for clear role descriptions was felt less by students in management roles who, together with fellow students, were already regularly involved in decision-making processes. Moreover, their involvement was mandated by law or the institution, and hence their roles were already clearly defined. Although students in block-related roles advocated formalisation of roles, they did not want to lose the informal atmosphere. Moreover, they emphasised that their role was clearly distinct from staff members' in that the latter still need the final say:

> I think it's also really important that the student knows what is expected of him or her. (focus group 4)

> I think it would be really interesting if, um, students and staff would collaborate to write a job description so they could both, um, agree on the student's job. (focus group 4)

Students must have prior experience of the course/organisation

The final important condition that student–staff partnerships should meet according to students is that students must have knowledge or experience of blocks or the organisational structure. To be able to put forward valuable ideas, offer a different perspective and perform a practicality check, prior experience was indispensable:

> But they're like really little but important, um, um, logistic things or something. You cannot, er, know about when you haven't taken the course. (focus group 4)

> Yeah, I think it's really weird that you're a member of a … course group and you haven't taken the course yet. Because [then] you really don't know what you're talking about. (focus group 4)

Discussion

The present article has sought to investigate how students experience student–staff partnerships, whether they are willing to participate in these partnerships, and, if so, under which circumstances. We have found that students indeed valued the existence of such partnerships, for they felt they could offer a unique perspective on educational improvement. Nevertheless, we also discovered that their preferred conditions for participating in such partnerships were not sufficiently met for several reasons. First, students felt that their influence was limited to giving advice and regretted that they were not involved in the implementation process. Consequently, they did not feel treated as partners in the true sense of the word. This was especially the case when staff members were not open to feedback or did not act on their suggestions. We may conclude that Deming's (1986) evaluation cycle of plan-do-check-act (1986) is not completed together with students (Becket and Brookes 2006), which can be considered a missed opportunity.

Students' discomfort may stem from student and staff members' roles not being clearly defined, nor communicated, resulting in a misalignment of mutual expectations. Despite prior research precisely underscoring this need (Giles et al. 2004; Moore-Cherry et al. 2016), identifying open communication as key to the improvement of quality (Kleijnen et al. 2014), students and staff rarely discussed the specificities of their roles in their collaboration. Strikingly, however, students did not want to lose the informal atmosphere, which echoes Rice's (2002) assertion that preserving the informal atmosphere is crucial to developing relationships that are based on mutual trust. In a similar vein, our findings confirm Cook-Sather et al.'s (2014) conclusion that students should 'contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways' (7), a statement with which our students fully agreed. Finally, our findings tie in nicely with Bicket et al.'s (2010) observation that students wish to be empowered and appreciated more.

One of the strengths of the present study is that it adds to the small body of *empirical* evidence concerning student–staff partnerships through its use of a mixed-methods design. As such, it offers a deeper insight into the question of how students experience student–staff partnerships and what their preferred conditions are that can bolster the partnership's success.

Three limitations need addressing. First, because the study took place in a PBL setting, the findings may not be generalisable to other, non-PBL contexts in which students have a less active role in their own learning. In PBL settings, students already experience a high degree of involvement, which is due, in part, to small distances between students and staff members. Second, the study only explored students' perceptions of student–staff partnerships, while the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as staff members, may be equally worth investigating. Third, only students who were actively involved in educational improvement were included, even though regular students could be invited to take part in student–staff partnerships as well. It is our contention that regular students at least deserve to be informed of improvements. Involving regular students was however out of the scope of the current study (Bicket et al. 2010).

In light of these limitations, we suggest that, before any student–staff partnerships are facilitated, more studies on these partnerships be conducted, preferably in other student-centred settings. We also invite future studies to investigate staff members' perceptions to gain a full picture of the opportunity to facilitate student–staff partnerships. Their perspectives should not be overlooked. Finally, we welcome further research into the question of how we can extend the range of students involved in student–staff partnerships beyond those already involved in committees.

We propose that the questionnaire we used in this study be used in replications of our study in other settings. Our findings moreover underscore the need for clearly defined and well-communicated descriptions of students and staff's roles in student–staff partnerships. Not all students and staff can be involved in the same manner, so responsibilities of diverse students and staff members should be clearly spelt out. Finally, facilitation of student–staff partnerships could be enhanced if students and staff members received appropriate support in, for example, giving feedback or being involved in shared decision-making. We consider this a top priority.

In summary, our study sets out students' perceived conditions for successful student–staff partnerships, highlighting the importance of clearly defined improvement roles and student involvement in all stages of the process, including implementation. To render student–staff partnerships successful, students must be empowered first.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Samantha E. Martens http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5374-1086

Data availability

If requested, the authors shall share their data for re-analyses. Moreover, they shall store the quantitative data in anonymised form on Dataverse for a period of 10 years following publication and store the raw data on a protected drive to which only SM and JW shall have access.

Notes on contributors

Samantha E. Martens is a PhD student at Maastricht University who has a background in educational sciences. Her research focuses on student-staff collaborations that aim to improve education.

Annemarie Spruijt is an assistant professor at Utrecht University who has a background in veterinary medicine. She takes a special interest in improving the quality of medical and veterinary education and in small-group learning.

Ineke H. A. P. Wolfhagen is an associate professor at Maastricht University who has a background in educational sciences. She takes a special interest in quality assurance, management, and problem-based learning.

Jill R. D. Whittingham is an assistant professor at Maastricht University who has a background in educational psychology. She takes a special interest in quality assurance and problem-based learning.

Diana H. J. M. Dolmans is a professor at Maastricht University who has a background in educational sciences. She takes a special interest in quality assurance, problem-based learning, and innovative learning arrangements.

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