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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Trading time, not authority: A partnership facilitator model for sustainable student–staff partnerships

Monique Van Acquoy, Gee Chong Ling
University of New South Wales

Effective student–staff partnerships rely on a reciprocal relationship that is built on trust, shared understanding, and meaningful dialogue (Cook-Sather, 2013; Thomas & Sorbara, 2023). However, implementing student–staff partnerships often places significant additional demands on academics, who must balance these partnership activities alongside their teaching and administrative responsibilities. One solution to this problem is the introduction of a partnership facilitator to lead the student–staff partnership. However, the facilitator does not simply take on the tasks traditionally undertaken by the course authority. Rather, they strengthen the partnership by redistributing responsibilities so that course authorities can dedicate their limited time to educational decision-making while retaining overall responsibility.

In this study, the partnership facilitator (casual academic or professional staff) worked with student partners throughout a teaching term to facilitate dialogue, synthesise feedback, and support academics in implementing timely, student-information improvements. This exchange was mediated through regular reporting and meaningful actions taken by the course authority, acknowledging student input and empowering the partnership to deliver co-designed solutions where needed. Through post-partnership surveys, this study explored two key questions: (1) Does the presence of a partnership facilitator influence the students' perceived safety of the feedback environment? and (2) what are the benefits of the facilitator model for staff?

Post-partnership surveys of 43 student partners and academic staff from the participating courses in 2025-26 demonstrated benefits for students, academics, and facilitators. Positive partnership experiences were reported by 93% of students, while 80% of academics reported a positive impact on their development as educators. Facilitators also observed that the initiative created safer spaces for student feedback and reduced barriers to participation by lowering the perceived risk associated with engaging directly. This, in turn, supported more open discussion of issues affecting student learning.

Additionally, the facilitator model of student–staff partnerships helped support academics to respond more effectively to student voices. Drawing on expertise in learning management systems and digital pedagogy, facilitators rapidly translated student feedback into meaningful improvements to digital learning environments, including improving the accessibility and organisation of learning resources, developing interactive quizzes and other learning materials, and introducing anonymous discussion forums. These timely enhancements demonstrate how human-centred partnership practices can strengthen technology-enhanced learning through responsive, student-informed course design.

Beyond improving the student learning experience and supporting course authorities, the facilitator model of student-staff partnerships provides facilitators with valuable professional development opportunities, including developing expertise in educational design, partnership facilitation, communication, and leadership, while building the capacity to translate student feedback into meaningful enhancements to teaching and learning (Marquis et al., 2019). The model also supports sustainable student-staff partnerships by leveraging existing educational professional and casual academic staff capacity, reducing the time required from course authorities while maintaining opportunities for student feedback.

Overall, the partnership facilitator model offers a practical and sustainable approach to student–staff partnerships by reducing demands on course authorities, improving student engagement, and supporting the timely and effective translation of student feedback into improvements to learning and teaching. In addition to improving the student learning experience, this model

supports facilitators to develop and refine key professional skills in an academic setting. Overall, the approach visualises the role of an academic developer within partnership relationships and contributes to ongoing discussions of collaboration, power sharing, and capacity building in higher education (Healey & Healey, 2026).

Keywords: Student-staff partnerships, student voice, partnership facilitator

Session Outline

Slides 1-3 (Background): Explain the Students as Partners Program.
Slides 4-6 (Problem): Introduce the problem of academic workload and the need to make it sustainable.
Slides 7-11 (Model/Solution): Introduce the Partnership Facilitator Model and how it works to redistribute authority.
Slides 12-16 (Results): Outline the benefits of the model on students and examples of positive changes made to the course and learning management system.
Slides 17-20 (Conclusion): Explain how this model creates a sustainable Students as Partners program and the benefits to staff.

References

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