The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty Revolutionizing Higher Education

Edited by Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Sophia Abbot

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CHAPTER 4

Power, Partnership, and Representation

A Dialogue Exploring Student Academic Representation Systems as a Form of Partnership

Abbi Flint
Educational developer and researcher
United Kingdom

Hannah Goddard
Student engagement consultant
The Student Engagement Partnership
United Kingdom

In this chapter, we draw on research which explored the role, value, and impact of student representation ("rep") systems (Flint, Goddard, and Russell 2017). This qualitative study involved interviews with senior staff in six higher education (HE) providers (universities/colleges), staff responsible for rep systems in their associated students' unions, and four national experts. We felt it important to include both provider and students' union (SU) perspectives as representation is an area where staff and students, HE providers and SUs, work collaboratively toward a common goal of high-quality academic experiences for students. Through this research, key themes emerged around relationships (including partnerships) and power in relation to rep systems, and it is the intersection between these that we explore in this chapter.

Some of the terms we use may be unfamiliar to those working and studying outside the United Kingdom (UK) or may have multiple

meanings, so we have contributed terms to the online glossary for the book. Since rep systems are so central to our chapter, we define the term here: Student academic representation systems are a model of student involvement in the governance of universities; they are structured systems in which individual (elected or selected) student representatives (reps) speak and act on behalf of their (collective) peers concerning the educational and scholarly experiences of students (Flint, Goddard, and Russell 2017). We encourage you to consult the online glossary for an extended definition of rep systems, as well as explanation of other terms used throughout the chapter.

We've written this piece as a dialogue as it enabled us to explore the complexity of this area of practice in a discursive and thought-provoking way. We draw on Bohm's (1996) framing of dialogue as a means of developing and deepening shared understandings by building on one another's ideas and insights. Given that dialogue is often recognized as a key feature of partnership, this approach also models partnership in practice. The questions we use as prompts are informed by our research themes and are listed below:

- How do we understand power in representation systems?
- What can we learn by looking at representation systems through the lens of partnership?
- How might partnership in rep systems differ to other staff-student partnerships?
- What impact does effective partnership have on concepts of student power in rep systems?
- How might rep systems negotiate between individual and collective student partnership, and what are the challenges here?

The Dialogue

How do we understand power in representation systems?

Hannah: There's something to unpick in how we frame power in rep systems, and that's the balance between *power* and *empowerment*. Rep systems often exist within predetermined provider structures, with student voice and feedback expected within those spaces. For example,

rep systems are usually aligned to the committee structures of the provider. This creates tension in our understanding of power; do these systems only have power with permission? On the other hand, UK rep systems are usually positioned as having a degree of independence from the provider (see Grills 2015), and while this is vital, it's worth reflecting on whether the current structures are set up to facilitate and enable that independence in the most successful way. Independence enables effective representation, accountability, and credibility, all of which were mentioned in our research as being highly important.

Abbi: I think that the issue of independence is really interesting. I'm reminded of Chapman, Blatchford, and Hughes' (2013) description of SUs and providers being *inter*dependent, and the challenges in maintaining a balance between holding the provider accountable and working together on issues of joint concern.

Hannah: I'd also mention that, in our research, representation was almost universally felt to achieve positive change, but how this manifested depended on how the values of representation were framed, and how much power is afforded to the system. I'm reminded of two contrasting quotes from participants:

> We need to be very careful: [student representatives] are not our reps. And that is difficult to explain to people, they're not our reps, they're student reps. [. . .] But, as soon as we let them speak, they may not say what we want but that's ok because that's what their role is. (Provider participant quoted in Flint, Goddard, and Russell 2017, 27)

> The students who attend those meetings, they don't hold any of the power. [. . .] If we are invited to a university meeting, on quality processes, it's inaccessible to most university staff let alone students. [. . .] We can't really say that there's equal power. It's not a joint birthday party if somebody else has organised it all and invited all their mates, but you get to go. (Students' Union participant quoted in Flint, Goddard, and Russell 2017, 28)

The workings of power and who holds it are very different in these two examples. I think a lot of this comes down to the ways different rep systems are positioned, and how they understand the value of student voice.

Abbi: To me, these quotes speak to a clash between the desire for partnership and the realities of the existing mechanisms through which partnership is expected to operate. In the first quote, a provider participant describes the importance of foregrounding the independence and autonomy of student reps. In the second, an SU participant describes how this is constrained by the largely provider-owned and -controlled spaces where representation operates. The image of the not-really-joint birthday party contrasts sharply with another provider participant's metaphor of reps as "architects of their experiences," which formed the title of our report. The term "architects" suggests a significant level of control, design, and ownership.

Hannah: I'd echo a point made by one of our participants: that a bit of power has to be relinquished by the provider for positive, effective change to be led by students. I believe that when this happens, we see the truest examples of partnership working and where reps are given space to be those architects.

Abbi: Yes, it's important to recognize that it may be hard for student reps to claim this power themselves when they operate within provider-owned or -led structures and processes. One of our SU participants approached this by being a "wedding crasher": inviting themselves to meetings to get a seat at the table.

Hannah: Absolutely. There are many complexities at work when we start unpicking what power means in and for student voice and representation. For me, this is where having a clear vision and set of values becomes essential. This enables you to access power, whether through self-empowerment or through that access being agreed at the outset, for example, through that seat at the table. The challenge is that effective rep systems often entail a bit of both—power within structures and power that the reps assert for themselves.

Abbi: I wonder if there is potential to move beyond oppositional understandings of power and shift to think about "power with" as Taylor and Robinson (2009) suggest. In previous work, Mark O'Hara and I reflected on links between community and power for student reps (Flint and O'Hara 2013). Part of feeling a sense of belonging is having influence within your community (McMillan and Chavis 1986). *Would reframing rep systems as a joint community of staff and students help to work toward ideas of shared power and influence?*

What can we learn by looking at rep systems through the lens of partnership?

Abbi: I was interested that some participants aspired to partnership framings of rep systems. To me, this indicated that they could see the practical and conceptual potential of looking at rep systems in this way. One of the most exciting things about partnership is its transformative potential (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014). If we use partnership as a lens to explore how different parties work together it might help us to challenge assumptions we have of one another, question the roles we play, and reflect on whether the approaches we use constrain or enable effective ways of working (and learning) together. In this way, partnership can open up new ways of working within rep systems.

Hannah: This reminds me of a comment from a provider participant in our research, who emphasized that for any institution to be successful, it must put students at the heart of what they do. For me, a working partnership model would reflect this ethos and be led by it. Concerning representation specifically, if a provider/SU has a partnership framing, then this should inform and shape every aspect of how representation operates within that context.

As we discussed earlier, there's a values-based relationship between partnership working and independent, authentic student voice; if the shared goal is ensuring that students have positive experiences, then rep systems can play a "critical friend" role as a part of the partnership

undertaking. A mature partnership doesn't mean only operating with consensus—partners can and should hold each other to account.

Abbi: I wonder if part of this complexity lies in the fact that rep systems are described in multiple ways: as simultaneously being a mechanism for student voice, consultation, *and* partnership. This is tricky, as consultation and partnership are different forms of student engagement. The approaches and relationships we build to enable consultation may not be effective in fostering partnerships. It might be worth asking ourselves—*what would a rep system look like if it was designed with staff-student partnership as an underpinning principle? How might current structures and processes be changed to build partnership relationships and ways of working?*

Hannah: Absolutely. A partnership framing necessitates thinking again about how power is operating within the provider context. Ideally, this would be collaborative with students and staff talking openly about what needs to change for students to feel empowered, and how they can shape this, addressing questions such as whether to use formal meetings or not, who sets the agenda for the meeting, who drives it, who delivers actions, and so on. A critical question in reflecting on how partnership could be embedded is: *what "space" can be made by the provider and the SU for the empowerment of student representatives?*

Abbi: Yes, and I think where partnership offers a different lens on this is that it goes beyond empowering one party; partnership encourages us to look at the active participation of both parties, how they share power, and their roles and responsibilities. This can be a developmental and empowering experience for staff as well as student partners.

Hannah: I'd like to expand a bit here on how the language used in the UK can sometimes be at odds with a partnership approach. Changes in the HE sector have largely been informed by a framing of education as a commodity, with higher education being described as a market and the student/staff or student/institutional relationships being transactional. For me, this is encapsulated in the fact that "higher education provider" is now a set phrase in the UK. But what does that mean, to be "a provider"? I don't think that students are "receivers" of education, and neither do many

staff working in HE, so there's this tension between a consumer mindset and a resistance to it that has to be considered. A partnership approach challenges this latent consumerism. The focus isn't on a transaction but is instead about different stakeholders collaborating in meaningful ways.

How might partnership in rep systems differ to other staff-student partnerships?

Abbi: The UK literature makes a distinction between two aspects of student engagement: how students invest their time and energy in their own learning and research; and student involvement in institutional governance and enhancement. As a form of student engagement, the nature and purposes of partnership in these areas will be different. Partnerships in rep systems may be more like collegial relationships to enhance learning and teaching institutionally, whereas in the classroom staff-student partnerships may focus more on individual learning. In our research, participants recognized that while rep systems led to benefits for individual representatives, they also led to benefits for the provider, the SU, and the wider student body. I think it's also interesting to reflect on where partnerships in representation happen, often outside of formal learner-teacher relationships. I'm thinking here of Cook-Sather and Alter's (2011) discussion of liminality in partnerships, and *whether student representatives could be considered to be in liminal or hybrid roles?*

Hannah: The framing of purpose within rep systems and other partnership or engagement projects is significantly different, as well as the partnerships themselves that we're talking about. For representation within a UK context, it's not just a partnership between the representatives and localized staff—this partnership often extends up to informal or formal partnership agreements or commitments between the provider and the SU at a strategic level. This means that, as with a lot of the elements of a successful rep system, we see operation across a range of levels and contexts with partnership existing between students and academics, students and students, students and professional staff, students and the SU, the SU and the provider, and so on.

The partnership we see within representation is often embedded and longitudinal; it outlasts the experiences of each cohort of representatives and even of individual staff. It's a value system, and therefore helps to inform partnership planning at a strategic and project level. Having that investment and accountability means that rep systems can deliver strong partnership, and that partnership delivers strong rep systems.

Abbi: I think it's also worth reflecting on where enhancement-focused staff-student partnerships emerge beyond rep systems, for example in the scholarship of teaching and learning and projects to enhance the student experience. Some of our participants included these kinds of activities in their definitions of academic representation, and others saw them as complementary to it. For some, there was a sense that these other initiatives afforded flexibility and different ways of working that their formal rep systems did not. *What can we learn from informal/extra-curricular partnerships to inform how rep systems work as part of a wider ecosystem of partnership?*

What impact does effective partnership have on concepts of student power in rep systems?

Abbi: This question speaks to why I first became involved in work around student engagement and partnership. As an educational developer, I was working around cultural change in learning and teaching using participatory approaches, and it seemed natural to me that, as students are part of the university community, they should be part of that change process. One of the purposes of rep systems is to influence and effect changes that enhance student learning experiences. If we are interested in engaging student reps and SUs in that process of change, then I think we should acknowledge and support students' agency in that process.

Hannah: The National Union of Students (2012) positioned democratic representation at the core of partnership, but our research and the conversations we have across the sector show this playing out in very different ways. Some students see partnership as positive for power,

others say without partnership they don't have power, and others see partnership as a loss of independent power.

Abbi: That's fascinating, as I think that partnership and agency go hand-in-hand: partnership is recognized as being fostered through sharing power and responsibility. As Arnstein (1969, 216) noted, "Participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless." A rep system rooted in partnership should support the agency of both staff and student partners.

Hannah: So, successful partnership working means reframing power, but this shouldn't be thought of as a loss. Necessitating a greater sharing of power requires openness, trust, and accountability, and that to me is something you gain by working in this way.

How might rep systems negotiate between individual and collective student partnership, and what are the challenges here?

Hannah: This distinction is very important for effective representation, and it is often where the system gets tangled. It's worth spending some time on this, as a common question asked by staff is: "how representative of students' views are the comments made by reps?" (see Little et al. 2009). While this question can be useful, there's also a risk of it undermining the effectiveness of representation.

Abbi: Why do you think that is?

Hannah: Because representatives and representative structures are often navigating between two distinct roles that aren't considered very often—that of acting as a "voice for" students or presenting the "voice of" students (Lizzio and Wilson 2009; Carey 2013). To summarize, "voice for" relates to the collective role of a representative, and "voice of" reflects the individual voice of that representative as a student. Rep systems by design are pluralistic, with multiple roles, values, and expectations being juggled by and between representatives and stakeholders, often without a clear articulation of what is required and when it will be required. *Is the representative in the meeting expected to speak on the basis of unfiltered*

consultation, or from their individual perspective of what it means to be a student on that course at that particular provider?

The ways we navigate this in the rep system might also offer lessons to partnership more broadly because this same tension exists. The challenge and strength of effective representation is balancing individual and collective voices. This is expected of providers across the UK as the revised Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Assurance Agency 2018) specifically mentions "actively engag[ing] students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience." I'd, therefore, emphasize that individual and collective partnership should operate at every level within and outside of representation.

Abbi: There is a strong vein in scholarship around partnership that speaks to relational models of engagement; in many cases, this is framed as individual relationships between students and staff. Many of our research participants emphasized the importance of individual relationships between key provider and SU staff, and those that worked in partnership had built strong professional relationships. While a focus on building trust and respect through these relationships is clearly important to successful partnerships, it's both challenging and fascinating to think about how this might work at scale and translate to collective relationships, such as those between student cohorts and teaching teams, or institutional leadership and SUs. There's potential here to open up the scholarship of student engagement and partnership to explore how we can learn from collective relationships in other fields. *Is this an area where SUs could contribute to the study of partnerships?*

Where Can We Go from Here?

We've tried throughout this dialogue to draw out some of the questions and intersections from our research themes. We're particularly interested in how understandings of partnership and of power shape the role, value, and impact of rep systems, and vice versa, as considerations of these often-tricky areas deliver stronger rep systems and therefore stronger student voice. In thinking about how you might develop student-staff partnerships in institutional governance and enhancement, we invite

you to revisit the questions in italics posed throughout this dialogue. In addition, we've provided some questions below which are informed by the recommendations from our research, and by the conversations we've had since its completion.

Reflection Questions for Readers

Questions on partnership

- How are students' experiences, expertise, and ideas currently represented in your context? How might you use the ideas in this chapter to move toward working through empowered partnership within representation systems or similar student engagement practices?
- What opportunities are available within your context for active and collaborative partnership working? How is this informed by, or posing challenges to, existing concepts of power?

Questions on power

- How can you assess/redress the power relationships operating within your partnerships? This could include reflecting on visible signs of power such as: Who chairs meetings? Who sets the agenda? How are decisions made? How much authority is given to student voice?
- What purposes are you expecting your partnerships to fulfill? To what extent do current operational aspects facilitate or inhibit the achievement of these purposes?
- If you were designing a representation system from scratch, with partnership as an underpinning principle, what would it look like?

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