Example of Response to Reviewers

Professor John Richardson
Editor, *Studies in Higher Education*
Email: John.T.E.Richardson@open.ac.uk

Manuscript ID CSHE–2018–0025
Title: It is a complicated thing: Leaders' conceptions of students as partners in the neoliberal university

Dear John.

Many thanks for your email of 2 March informing us of your decision with regards to our recent submission to *Studies in Higher Education*. We are encouraged by the favourable response to the paper and are pleased to make some revisions to our manuscript before publication.

On the following pages, we have copied all of the reviewer comments that outline revision requirements. We have then explained the changes that we have made to our manuscript using indented text beginning with ':'. We have used additional indentation and '::' to refer to direct quotes from the revised version of our manuscript.

To further aid your efforts, we have highlighted the changes to the manuscript by using blue coloured text.

Following the revisions, we believe the manuscript has improved. We are grateful to the reviewers for their thoughtful comments and feedback. Please pass on our gratitude to them.

Reviewer: 1

It is important to understand how senior leaders responsible for institutional innovation in teaching and learning conceptualize and imagine the implementation of SaP since they have a great deal of power and influence over whether and how partnership practices develop. You do a good job of situating your analysis in the context of the neoliberal university, and the findings you present are clear and, while based on a relatively small number of interviews, nevertheless are likely quite representative of leaders across institutions. I recognize and respect that you are not claiming that they are representative, but I am offering the perspective that they likely are, in fact.

> : Thank you. We appreciate that you sense that our findings would be more representative than we suggest. Particularly interesting claim in juxtaposition to Reviewer 3 who interpreted the numbers of interviews differently yet nonetheless acknowledged the value of the study given the limited research into senior leaders in regards to SaP in current literature.

I especially appreciate the strong argument you make in the Discussion and Conclusion for the potential of SaP practices to open a space for university leaders to rethink. I suggest that you make an even more explicit link between that potential and the way SaP practices create "liminal" spaces for participants to rethink, re-imagine, and try out other ways of being. Since we have seen how this works within partnership, it would be interesting to argue that partnership as a concept could also offer this "in-between" space to those even just considering it rather than participating in it. Perhaps you could do this more explicitly on page 19, where you assert that "SaP re-establishes a space wherein competition is suspended and cooperation defines success" and "if the language and values of SaP created space for these leaders to reflect on how they imagine students in relation to the staff and themselves…" Just a few sentences making the parallel more explicit would help make the connection for readers.

> : Great suggestion for us to be more explicit, thank you. We have revised a paragraph on page 20, which now reads:

>> :: In other words, while SaP might conflict with, it also has the potential to remedy neoliberal university models and performative self-regulation by offering a counter-narrative to these dominant trends that imagine a different model of learning between students and staff. Indeed, a recent study of students and staff working in partnership projects across eleven Australian universities found SaP was discussed as a counter-narrative that created a liminal space that allowed participants to engage in ways that challenged dominant notions of students as customers and education as a commodity (Matthews, Dwyer, Hines, & Turner, 2018). If we imagine SaP as a liminal space that enables participants to rethink, re-imagine, and try out other ways of being, an opportunity arises for partnership as a concept to create a liminal space for those simply considering the possibilities of SaP—such as institutional leaders—to engage in new ways of thinking.

>> Thus, we suggest that SaP re-establishes a space wherein competition is suspended and cooperation defines success. The outcomes of SaP are new forms of knowledge creation rather than new metrics of self-calculation. SaP enhances learning *and* teaching by realigning each with an ethos that is not predicated on a hierarchy, nor on competition. A challenge for SaP advocates becomes finding ways to engage the views of institutional leaders in dialogue and supporting them in turning their critical eyes on their own rhetoric through an expansion of the view of SaP as a liminal space that includes those even *considering* partnership practices.

I offer a few comments and suggestions below to clarify a few points that are currently a bit confusing.

> : Much appreciated.

In the section "Where partnership happens," you mention ease (partnership achieved more easily outside the classroom context) and primacy (classroom and curriculum partnerships as secondary to the primacy of governance related activities). These are different drivers, and I think it would help readers if you analyzed this "where" question a bit more extensively, perhaps raising more pointed questions, such as: Might partnership seem "safer" if it is further removed from immediate practices of teaching and learning, situated instead in more distanced, deliberative spaces? This comes up again in the next section, where it manifests as an

interesting tension between rhetoric on being inclusive of students' voices and perspectives and hesitation to align such inclusion with changes to pedagogical practice (although you do not offer evidence of the latter). Perhaps return to this issue in the Discussion, where you address it to some extent.

> : Yes, thank you. While we discussed these drivers, we did not pick up on them in our discussion, and we are pleased to do so. First, we wanted to more clearly offer evidence of this hesitation to align SaP with changes in teaching approaches but referring to how we asserted this claim. On page 10, we added a sentence:

>> :: The hesitation to align SaP with changes to pedagogical practice was evident by what was *not* mentioned in the interviews—clear and explicit support for SaP transforming how teaching and assessment happens within courses.

> : On page 17 of the discussion we raised this important question about why leaders might associate SaP with representation instead of classroom praxis (which provides a useful transition to the next topic of our discussion around neoliberal forces shaping leaders work in HE). The new text includes:

>> :: *Where SaP happens* also raises important questions, as the leaders in our study could perceive that partnership removed from the complexities of classrooms and implemented in more distanced and deliberate spaces could be 'safer'. In other words, SaP in governance and quality assurance efforts via student representation involves less risk and would be easier to implement in a quantifiable way (e.g. counting up the numbers of students on committees) that align with neoliberal forces shaping the daily work for institutional leaders.

In the first paragraph under "Benefits of partnership," it is unclear who is doing the framing in the second sentence and the first part of the third sentence.

> : Revised on page 13 with new text reading:

>> :: When interviewees discussed SaP in process and values-based terms, partnership was imagined as valuable to all activities within the university (pedagogic and organisational), necessarily relational, and established situationally between the collaborators. Within this conception of partnership, students were framed as individual agents able to contribute expertise to positive change at the institution; however, this was rarely the framing discussed of SaP in our interviews.

In the first paragraph of your Discussion, you repeat some of the definitions of partnership you offered earlier in the paper. It would be more powerful were you to build on rather than repeat those.

> : We have reduced the repetitive text in this paragraph on page 15 and used the additional word count to address reviewer suggestions through additional text in the discussion and conclusion.

Check sentence structure and references within sentences. For instance:

"While another viewed SaP…" (p. 8) refers to the same person you just quoted in the previous sentence (T3).

: Corrected on page 9 with all results re-read focused on similar issues that resulted in further corrections on page 12.

This sentence needs to be recast: "From their positions as formal leaders responsible for enabling others to enact innovative teaching and learning reforms in an increasingly neoliberal political climate, the consistent thread of neoliberal rationalism evident in the interviews was not surprising." The current construction has the thread of neoliberalism as the subject, whereas you appear to intend the leaders to be the subject. Maybe: "The consistent thread of neoliberal rationalism evident in the interviews was not surprising given these formal leaders' responsibility to enable others to enact innovative teaching and learning reforms in an increasingly neoliberal political climate."

: We have deleted this sentence as result of revisions as it became repetitive, and we needed to conserve words to stay within the journal word limit.

Check noun-verb agreement throughout, e.g,:
…although research of students and staff (including institutional leaders) not directly engaged in SaP were under-represented in the literature (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). (Should be "was under-represented"). The positive outcomes associated with SaP along with the message—students matter here--that SaP signals to the broader university community has also… (Should be "have also").

: Re-read with eye for subject-verb agreement with corrections on pages 3 and 5.

Overall, this is a strong and important paper. With the revisions suggested above, it will make an important contribution to the literature on students as partners.

: Thank you, and we agree that the manuscript is stronger as a result of the suggested revisions.

Reviewer: 2
This is a well written, topical, and nicely positioned paper that would contribute well to the literature on SAP and would inform current debates.

: Thank you.

The fact that the study itself, and the paper, is part of a student-staff collaboration is great and very appropriate. I do think this needs to be discussed more in the paper though. For example, the interviews with senior leaders were carried out by the student researchers. This is valuable, but I feel more attention to this is warranted as there are particular issues arising from the student–senior staff relations in the interview situation that are likely to have shaped the data. Some of the challenges to SAP discussed in the literature focus on power relations – a dynamic one would suspect was especially apparent in this study.

: We went back and forth about whether we should highlight the process of partnership that led to this publication. Your comments have given us permission to include more about our process, which we welcome. On pages 7-8 we have included

more information on our rationale for the Student Partner conducting the interviews and relate this to power briefly. The new text reads:

> :: Data for this study were collected through audio-recorded interviews. Two paid Student Partners conducted individual interviews using a semi-structured approach. The Student Partners were mindful of the power dynamic between themselves and the senior leaders they were interviewing, while believing that such a model of students interviewing staff was appropriate and important in the context of a study on SaP in an institution seeking to implement SaP. The Student Partners co-created the interview guide, conducted practise interviews with peers, and worked with an Academic Partner (co-author Matthews) throughout the interviewing process with preparation meetings and regular de-briefing sessions. Interview questions probed understanding of SaP by asking for leaders to explain how they understood SaP, to discuss values or principles underlying SaP, to share examples of practices, and to discuss the implementation of SaP in the university, including any perceived challenges and benefits. To acknowledge the Student Partner interviewers, the opening question asked the senior leaders to recall their experiences as a university student and share a story where they felt valued as a student working with staff members.

> : We also came back to the role of the interviews in the conclusion section on page 21, with the new text reading:

> > :: In this exploratory study, we have investigated formal leaders' conceptions of SaP. Our approach involved Student Partners conducting interviews with senior leaders and engaging in the analysis and co-authoring of our study. While appropriate for a study on SaP, we acknowledge that the power dynamics of the interviews influenced the ways senior leaders talked about SaP, which would likely differ from how they discuss SaP with peers in informal settings.

Some additional points that would benefit from revision in the paper:

P5 Quote from government doesn't read well within the sentence. Paraphrasing rather than using a direct quote would be more appropriate.

> : Sentence has been revised on page 6 to read:

> > :: It is not surprising, then, that recent Australian government reform efforts, similar to policies unfolding in other Anglophile countries, have employed a singular economic-driven discourse as evidenced in a recent policy document referring to higher education as an 'export industry' in need of reform to ensure 'taxpayers receive value for money' through proposed funding changes that share the costs between taxpayers and students. (Australian Government, 2017:1).

P5 Sentence "The effects of this increasing, perhaps primary, concern with gain..." needs re-wording.

> : Revised on page 6 as follows:

:: Understanding how this increasing, perhaps primary, concern with gaining competitive advantage in the 'Global Knowledge Economy' influences all those who work and learn in the neoliberal university matters. Our intention is to explore such influences on leaders of SaP agendas that are emerging across many universities.

P6. Participant information. Whilst the authors have taken lengths to maintain anonymity of the participants, by the nature of the limited sample available it may be possible for readers to ascertain who they were (assuming the institution is where the authors are based). I'm not sure there is anything that can be done specifically about this, but I wonder if a) the participants were aware when they consented that it may be possible for them to be identified by their role and b) if it would be sensible to reduce the amount of information provided about them on p6. For example, remove the (e.g., roles) at the bottom of page 6, don't say how many invitations were sent out, and don't specify the number of participants who had been at the university for a long time. All of these things may make it easier to identify who they were – especially if you are familiar with the university in question. I suggest the authors are clear about why they are excluding certain information about participants. Of course, if the participants were made aware that their identities may be recognised, then this may not be necessary.

> : Yes, thank you. We struggled in terms of de-identifying participants while still offering the readers enough information to get a sense of the leaders as a group. However, your suggestions have affirmed that we offer too much information, and we have reduced our description of the institution and the leaders on page 7. The new text reads:

>> :: The study was undertaken in an Australian research-intensive university that excels in research while aspiring to excellence in learning and teaching. Individual leaders in formal positions of leadership with responsibility for teaching, learning, and curriculum were invited to participate in this study. Six leaders volunteered to participate. Further demographic information about the institution and leaders has been deliberately excluded to maintain confidentiality (numbers assigned where quotes are presented in the form of T1 for transcript 1).

What sorts of topics/questions were discussed in the interviews? What format did they take? This detail is missing in the methodology (along with attention to the role and position of the student interviewers)

> : Important suggestion. Thank you. On page 6, the text is revised and now reads:

>> :: Interview questions probed understanding of SaP by asking for leaders to explain how they understood SaP, to discuss values or principles underlying SaP, to share examples of practices, and to discuss the implementation of SaP in the university including any perceived challenges and benefits.

> : If the editor suggests that including the interview guide as an appendix would be useful and word limit permits, we are happy to do so. However, our sense is that the revised text is sufficient.

> : Suggestion about student interviewers has been addressed above.

P7. I'd like to see more detail of the analysis and the steps involved (with examples). What is meant by iterative cycles of inductive and deductive analysis? What did this look like in practice? How did the iterative cycle of dialogue between staff and students work?

: We have included more details of the steps involved in our analysis along with insight into how the process worked in practice on page 8. The new text reads:

:: We drew on the process for thematic analysis in Braun and Clarke (2006). Our analysis was an iterative process of ongoing dialogue that involved weekly meetings over a period of three to four months followed by another four months of collaborating on the manuscript via an online collaborative writing and communication tool. The Student Partners (co-authors Dwyer and Russell) led the data analysis activities, which involved reading the transcripts, listening to the audio recordings, taking notes, proposing codes, documenting the analysis process, testing coding frameworks, drafting tables to describe codes and themes (with salient quotes), re-coding, and formulating themes. During weekly meetings, all co-authors would discuss the analysis, share relevant scholarly works, and decide together on the next steps with all offering ideas for potential theoretical frameworks (a process enriched by our differing disciplinary backgrounds of anthology and education within the broader field of social science). Through ongoing collegial conversations and collaborative writing, we decided together on the themes, analytic framework, points for discussion, and concluding argument.

Reviewer 3:
Before reading this I was not aware of other research on the perspective of university managers and leaders on student-staff partnership, so this article offers strong potential to make a valuable contribution to this important emerging field of practice. As the authors note, partnership as an approach and ideology/philosophy offers a transformational shift in recent trends in higher education. However, I am not convinced that the potential contribution has been fully realised by this article in its present form. Themes discussed are interesting but often need deepening, so I offer some suggestions to improve the article.

: Thank you for your engagement with our work and collegiality in offering guidance to enhance the manuscript further. Combined with the insights from the other two reviewers, we believe the manuscript is improved.

Please note the limitation much earlier that the research base is quite small and narrow, just six interviews in a single Australian institution. That does make the findings quite thin. This is exacerbated by there being little sense and much difference in what the participants' perspectives were. Try to bring that out more- much of the discussion later treats them as homogeneous.

: As you suggest, we explicitly articulate this limitation and urge caution. Like reviewer 1, we appreciate that you see the value nonetheless given the importance of understanding how senior leaders make sense of SaP as an area that is not currently available in the literature. We also appreciate your keen observation that the leaders appear to be treated as homogenous in the discussion. However, we were surprised

that you did not observe differences in the results section. We suggest this because we decided to include quotes so they could 'speak for themselves' in terms of differing views.

In the final step of writing process, we shared this work with two critical friends knowledgeable in the SaP literature. Like you, they could not identify any scholarly publications that explored leaders views on SaP. In addition, they wisely suggested we rely on the quotes, as they speak volumes because where we try to 'be kind' by suggesting perhaps the views were not all coming from a neoliberal influence, the quotes highlighted that they were. In other words, we struggled to find variation in that sense. Through juxtaposition between leaders' views and theorizing on SaP, and leaders' views and neoliberal rationalism, your observations are sensible – the perspectives of leaders did not reveal a great deal of qualitative variation.

We think you will be interested in Reviewer 1's suggestion that while a small number of leaders, they are likely representative. As we suggested to Reviewer 1, readers will interpret through their experiences and understandings, and we are interested to learn about those reactions. Ideally, our work will prompt more research into senior leaders' views and how they come to be formed/influenced (note page 21 suggests this as further research).

On page 17, we cite work about senior leadership generally in regards to taking on neoliberal ideologies, which speaks to our results that suggest little variation, as you have pointed out. The new text reads:

> :: A neoliberal filter influenced how SaP was perceived, conceived, and received by the leaders in our study, particularly the emphasis on pre-determined outcomes. Our analysis demonstrated that the implementation of SaP arising from a new institutional strategic plan needed to produce student satisfaction and employability outcomes. In her research into strategy planning of university leaders, Tuchman (2009, 2016) argues that institutional leaders internalise and then embody neoliberal ideologies without conscious awareness or even an intentionality to do so.

You could say rather more about other universities where there has been senior level support for partnership (some in the UK, like Lincoln, Winchester, and Birmingham City, and the national framework in Scotland).

> : Yes, we also struggled to find other research on the perspective of university managers and leaders on student–staff partnership. In fact, we reached out to established partnership scholars to seek such works because we feared we were missing them. As a few suggested, with the language of SaP being new, studies explicitly situated within SaP are just emerging, and our network knew of none that drew on primary research from institutional leaders. Like you suggest, we then thought about universities with institutional level strategies or universities known for SaP. On page 5 we cited scholars from Lincoln, Exeter, UCL, and the Welsh Assembly. As suggested, we could not find primary research even from these universities about leaders conceptions of SaP, which was out primary focus.

> Interestingly, one of us chatted with a colleague from Lincoln recently who mentioned the changes in support of SaP (students as producers) that have occurred

with changes in institutional leaders and a recent decision that moved SaP related efforts from the teaching and learning unit to the student union. This actually distanced the university from SaP and positioned it as a student facing activity (which caused this colleague concern).

For the purpose of this article, we sought to cite published works in academic outlets. If you have specific publications, please advise us and we can incorporate.

Student representation and voice is not the same as partnership, but they do overlap. You do bring that out in part, but this could be deepened. The contribution of Wenstone was interesting here, as it very much about an alternative to position students as either consumers or apprentices.

: If we are correct, you are referring to the Wenstone 2012 report from the National Union of Students that offers a visual model for student engagement that talks about consultant, partners, etc. On page 5 we cited Dunne and Zandstra (2011) who offer a similar model (Fielding in 2011 offered 'patterns of partnership' from k-12 student voice literatures that offers greater granulation in how students are positioned in educational systems) with four categories of students as evaluators, consultants, partners, and change agents. What emerged from our analysis was that student voice was often evoked but not in the way that it is theorized by student voice scholars – rather, leaders adopted the stance on voice as Dunne and Zandstra. Even Wenstone employed it as meaning 'listening to students' with a negative undertone. Because this is a contested space in the literatures, and we subscribe to the theorizing of student voice that signals partnership, we did not want to go off into that debate. What we have done is included a recent reference to a chapter in press that outlines the historical lineage of student voice in K-12 to SaP in HE on page 20.

I agree that how the student is positioned is so key to this. Partnership offers genuine agency whereas these managerial perspectives do not position the students as agentic. Emphasise that point even more because therein lies the danger of the appropriation of so-called SaP initiatives into something much more limited. This links to my next point.
You do bring in some mention of the recent critique of student engagement. This needs deeper discussion. Zepke has really been a player in this debate and needs mentioning because of his argument that it has all been too easy for 'mainstream' engagement to be subverted into serving neo-liberal ends. Macfarlane and Tomlinson infer the same for partnership! That's a misinterpretation and misunderstanding of partnership (we thought) as it misses the whole point about the values base and that authentic partnership is explicitly counter to neo-liberal thinking and practice.

: Important point about agency. We have revised with new text on page 18 that reads:

:: Furthermore, we argue that the sense of agency and ownership that SaP enables for students and staff through the principles of shared responsibility and reciprocity are lost in a neoliberal understanding of SaP (Cook-Sather and Felten, 2017).

: We have included reference to Zepke, particularly his notion of *mainstream student engagement* and explicitly linked this to SaP. On pages 18-19, the new text reads:

:: Critiquing the policy manifestation of student engagement strategies common in many Anglophile universities, scholars have disparaged the

simplified metrics of engagement driving decisions, the dehumanised and values-free practices being adopted in the name of engagement, and the performative nature of engagement practices that infringe on student's freedom to learn in ways that matter to them (Barnacle and Dall'Alba, 2017; Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017; Zepke, 2014, 2015). Zepke (2014, 2015) argues that views of *mainstream student engagement* are narrow, instrumentalist, and deterministic in ways aligned with neoliberal agendas fixated on generic quality indicators of 'student success'. Matthews (2016) has warned that SaP could suffer the same fate as student engagement if appropriated for neoliberal purposes if the relational process fundamental to SaP is diminished in favour of approaches that position SaP as a product.

Our analysis reveals that leaders did not discuss SaP in terms of a learning process where students and staff decide together the outcomes that matter to them, which is espoused as good practice in SaP practices (Matthews, 2017). Furthermore, transformative learning processes with uncertain outcomes, education for broader societal good, or disrupting traditional models of education were rarely mentioned or implied, and notions of inclusion of the diversity of students and staff within the university community were absent-- all central to what Matthews' refers to as 'genuine' SaP approaches (Matthews, 2017). Zepke's (2014, 2015) concerns about *mainstream student engagement* could be translated into concerns about notions of *mainstream SaP* as leaders in our study who clearly employed a neoliberal intentionality when talking about partnership.

That earlier issue of the leaders coming across as homogenously neo-liberal in their position undermines the positive conclusion that their version of 'partnership' might be good first step. The danger is that they could consider it to be sufficient to give students limited voice, which would/could stifle authentic partnership processes gathering momentum.

: Yes, perhaps in our deliberate attempt to draw some positive conclusions we need to also emphasis the risks more explicitly. On page 21 we added the following text:

:: However, there is a danger that institutional leaders could consider the neoliberal version of SaP as sufficient and not move past the 'first step', which would stifle genuine partnership processes that are gathering momentum.

The same references are used again and again – it would be good to broaden that base if possible. Note that the reference to Taylor and Bovill is not in the bibliography.

: The Taylor and Bovill (2017) reference has been added to the list.

We hope that we have been able to satisfactorily address the issues that have been raised above from the reviewers. To remain within the word limit, we have reduced some descriptive text in the introduction and discussion sections. We would like to thank you and the three reviewers for the time taken to consider our manuscript.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

Authors