Academics and professional services in partnership summary report and self-assessment toolkit

Leading the student experience

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1. Foreword

The development of effective partnerships in the 'third space' – the intersection of the academic and professional service spheres – is critical to developing an engaging student experience for *all* students, and improving students' belonging, increasing their retention and maximising their success in higher education.

The academic sphere is the most important site for engagement, as all students must participate here to remain and succeed in higher education. Engagement must include active and collaborative learning, challenging academic activities and enriching educational experiences (Coates 2007, p. 122), but it must also include developing the understanding, capacities and identities to be a successful learner. Professional services offer a wealth of opportunities designed to assist students to be successful in HE and beyond. Many students, however, are unaware of either academic development or pastoral support services offered by the professional services within their higher education institution, or they would not dream of using them. It is because of this reticence by some students that we need to work collaboratively to deliver student support in a mainstream and universal way to enable all students to benefit, and thus to maximise their success in HE and beyond.

Leading the student experience: Academics and professional services in partnership is an ambitious project, which aims to research and inform the ways in which academic and professional staff work together to enhance the student experience. It provides a useful literature review to inform thinking about internal partnerships, and it has undertaken research with institutions from across the UK about effective partnerships. The toolkit presented in this document is informed by the synthesis of the information from existing research, effective practice in institutions and reflections from colleagues engaged in the process of partnership to bring about change. I highly recommend reading the research underpinning this toolkit, as well as using the toolkit itself.

The authors have refrained from a prescriptive approach to partnership working across academic and professional services. Rather they have developed a detailed and comprehensive series of self-review questions to challenge colleagues in institutions to analyse the extent to which you or they are 'ready for partnership' and to explore five strategic and seven project-level themes that contribute to enhancing the student experience.

Anyone who is interested in enhancing the student experience will recognise both the importance of working in partnership across academic and professional service areas in the 'third space', and the challenges of doing so. This is a research informed, practical approach to assist you to take your work further in this area.

Professor Liz Thomas
Director, Widening Participation Research Centre, Edge Hill University

2. Introducing the toolkit

2.1 Background

In 2012 the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) funded a project to determine the key elements of successful working partnerships across academic and professional services for enhancing students' experiences within the higher education (HE) sector. One of the aims of this project was to develop and disseminate a 'toolkit' to facilitate good practice. The project team was led by Sarah Parkes (Newman University) and comprised Dr Julie Blackwell Young (Newman University) and Kenny Archibald (University of Hull). The team drew on the knowledge and experience of project consultant Dr Elizabeth Cleaver (University of Hull) and steering group members Dr Celia Whitchurch (Institute of Education, University of London) and Dr Paul Williams (Cardiff Metropolitan University).

We are extremely grateful to members of the academic and professional communities in our exemplar universities who provided the data on which the toolkit draws and helped to evaluate it in its early stages.

2.1.1   The context for the toolkit[1]

Higher Education (HE) within the United Kingdom is facing a number of challenges. Within England, the Government's White Paper argues that increased student tuition fees place 'students at the heart of the system' with a subsequent expectation that institutions will 'deliver a better student experience' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills,2011, p 4). These themes are echoed in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, although contextualised by different approaches to the funding of higher education and the fees required from students. Adding to this complex picture, within the English HE sector, there are many variations in student fees, bursaries and fee waivers. With the income of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) increasingly resting on the payment of student fees in instalments, retaining students in their studies becomes ever more important. Indeed, and as noted by Broadfoot in the foreword to the *What Works?* summary report (Thomas 2012a, p. 1), there is now an even stronger business case for improving student retention as institutions '…stand to lose a considerable sum of money for each student that drops out'. Acknowledging the significantly larger financial investment students are now asked to make towards their undergraduate education, she adds that it is also the 'moral and educational' duty of institutions 'to do everything they can to help students make a success of their higher education [experience]'. Set against this backdrop of change and uncertainty in the political and economic environment, the ways that staff work within HEIs to support the student experience continue to develop and evolve.

2.1.2   The student experience

The 'student experience' is often a difficult concept to pin down. It can comprise a range of different student experiences, each dependent upon the context in which it is viewed or defined (Jones 2010). For example, the expectations of a positive 'student experience' can vary between on- and off-campus students or between traditional-aged and 'mature' students. Our definition and understanding of the concept of a 'student experience' derives directly from the 'Student Engagement to Improve Student Retention and Success' model[2] and is defined as the successful generation of a sense of belonging within students that goes on to affect their experience of higher education.

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[1] Further discussion of the context and other relevant issues can be found in the main project report
[2] Originally developed by Thomas and May (2011) and expanded upon by Thomas (2012, p. 6): viz.

With this in mind, factors which contribute to the generation of a 'student experience' may include student involvement in, and engagement with, a range of HEI academic, social and support areas that influence their sense of belonging, and a range of other environments with which students are likely to come into contact by virtue of studying at a particular institution. Such areas and environments can include but are not limited to:

- student support areas such as study skills, welfare or disability;
- Information Technology and/or eLearning departments;
- libraries and other learning resources: both physical and virtual;
- accommodation and catering services;
- academic service departments such as registry, quality or exams and assessment;
- students' unions including support services, social events and networks.

Words such as 'department', 'faculty' and 'service' are used here to provide examples of relevant organisational levels and locations (academic and professional) which will have an impact on the student experience rather than to restrict reflections to particular areas in organisations. Thus, when these terms are employed throughout the toolkit they should be seen as relating to other equivalent organisational levels and locations which could include, for example, internal academic schools and colleges.

2.1.3 The 'third space'

Recent research has charted the rise and importance of 'Third Space Activity': viz. activities taking place through a blurring of the boundaries between the professional and academic spheres (Whitchurch 2008, 2009, 2010). The notion of 'third space' is further illustrated through the 'Student Engagement to Improve Student Retention and Success' model (Figure 1: Thomas 2012) derived from the substantial HEA funded *What Works?* programme (2008-2011)[3]. The model highlights the importance of the intersection between academic and professional spheres of activity for supporting and developing student engagement and belonging (see also Watson 2012). This suggests that older models which divorce the support sphere from the academic sphere as outlined by MacFarlane (2011) cannot optimise the creation of a cohesive student experience which retains and engages students. The importance of partnership working between cross-sections of staff is viewed as key to achieving a successful higher education experience for students (Thomas 2012b). This toolkit therefore takes as its starting point the 'Student Engagement to Improve Student Retention and Success' model (Figure 1: Thomas 2012). This indicates how institutions can support the generation of a sense of belonging through collaborations between staff in both professional, support and academic areas, as well as students themselves.

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[3] This project involved 22 HEIs in seven projects across the UK with the aim of generating robust, evidence-based analysis and evaluation through a mixed-methods approach that demonstrated improvements in student retention.

Figure 1: Student Engagement to Improve Student Retention and Success (Thomas 2012)
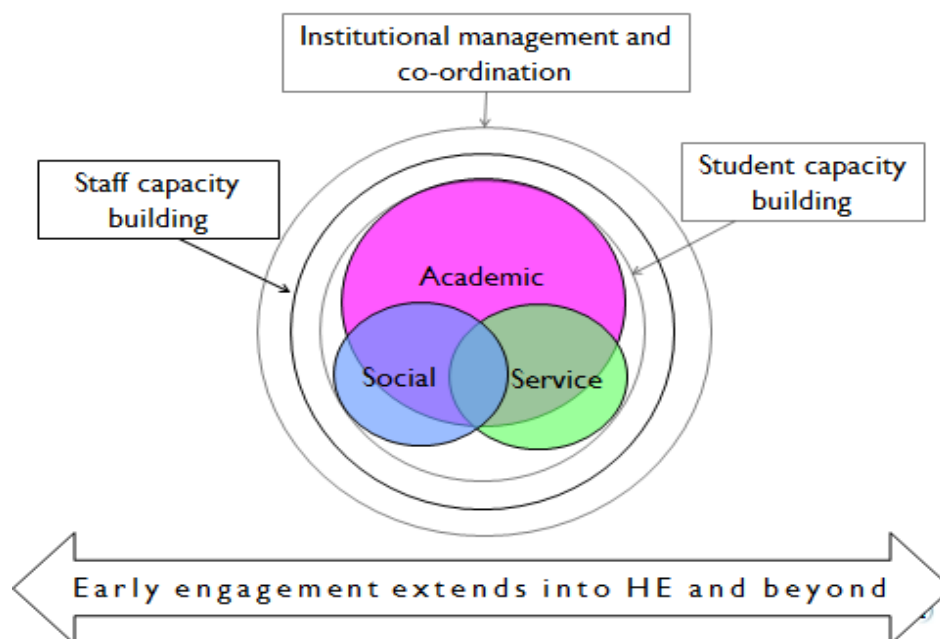
2.1.4 Understanding partnership working in context

Based on discussions with study participants, our further development of the original model (see Figure 2) is an attempt to make sense of how partnerships work to support student engagement and belonging and thus enhance the experience of HE. In line with Thomas and May (2011), we recognise there are many factors that are outside institutional control which can affect student experiences. To ensure the outcomes of this project are as practical and useful as possible, this new extended model continues to focus the attention of institutions on to those factors that are within their power to control that can influence students' sense of belonging and thus, their experience of HE. This is not to deny the impact or influence of other factors, but to acknowledge that they exist and to focus our energies, with this broader understanding in mind, on areas of our work in HEIs that we can actively influence and change.

The model presented in Figure 2 reflects our starting point: that a successful experience of higher education depends on a partnership between a student and the institution which, in turn, can foster and promote a sense of belonging for the student. Central to developing this sense of partnership is collaborative working between staff from both academic and professional spheres of activity with members of the student body. However, as the *What Works?* project identifies (Thomas 2012a, p. 20), we cannot assume all parties come to the table with the capacity and self-efficacy necessary to collaborate successfully. The two inner green concentric circles that we have taken from Thomas' (2012) diagram indicate the need for institutions to promote the development of both the students' capacity to develop and the staff's ability to foster a positive student experience. The third outer green circle reflects the need for senior management to take responsibility for nurturing a culture of belonging and for creating the necessary infrastructure (Thomas 2012b, p. 17).

The three spheres contained within these concentric circles represent sites of activity within institutional control. The *Academic* sphere explicitly refers to curricula design and content, curriculum delivery, assessment and feedback, and academic development. The work in this sphere is focused at the programme level where subject teaching units contribute to the

organisation, management, content and delivery of academic programmes which are central to students' experiences. The *Professional Services* sphere plays an important role in developing students' capacities and identities as successful learners and graduates through provision of: information, advice and guidance; access to resources; skills enhancement; and personal and professional development. Such areas are identified by Bulpitt (2012) in his work, *Super-convergence of organisation, structure and business processes*, and include, but are not limited to, Careers, Study Skills, Chaplaincy, Admissions, Library and Disability services. The *Social* sphere is the site of friendships and peer support that are critical to many students' decisions to stay in HE and encompass the provision of formal and informal activities that are not explicitly educationally orientated (Thomas and May 2011, pp. 12-16; MacFarlane 2011; Quinlan 2011).

The optimum site for effective partnership working to enhance students' experiences through promoting a sense of belonging exists at the intersection between the three spheres of institutional activity. Thus, partnership work in this area would include collaborations between staff from teaching and professional areas with students. An example of this would be a partnership between teaching staff and professional staff from an e-learning department who work together to utilise their virtual learning environment for meaningful interaction between peers that is embedded within the module or programme curriculum.

Figure 2: Optimising potential partnership work to enhance student engagement to improve student retention and success (adapted from Thomas 2012)
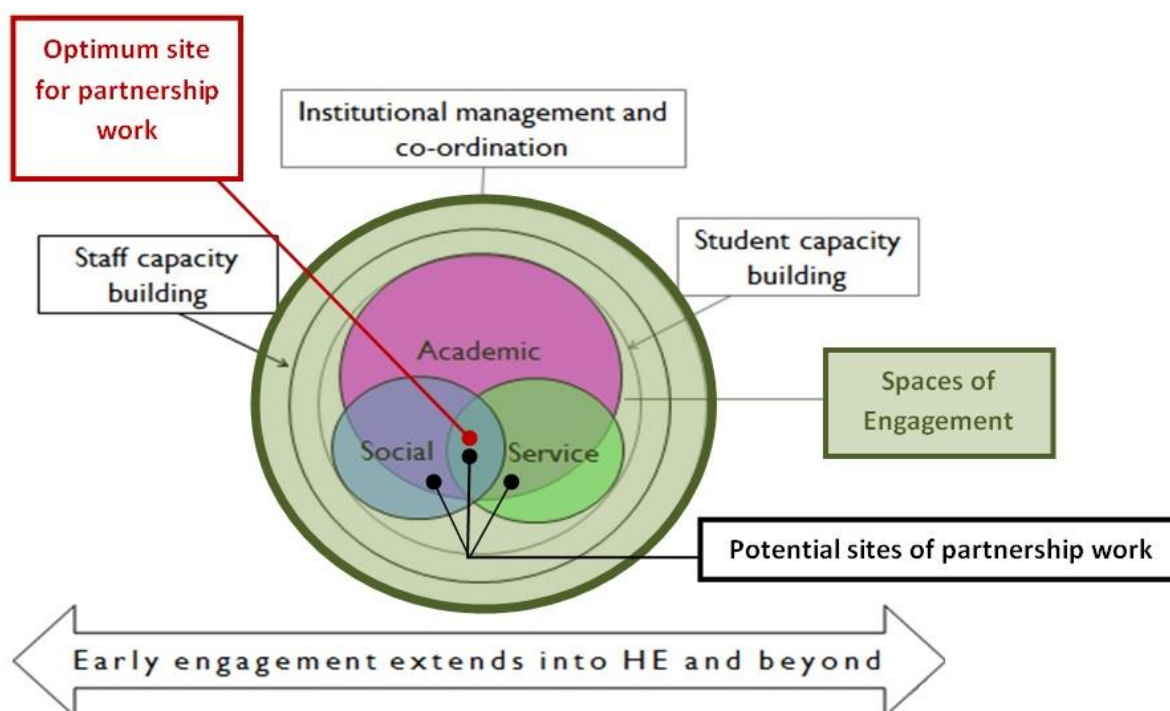
The original model sees the social sphere as consisting of those informal spaces where students meet with peers as well as social and extra-curricular activities that may take place (either on or off campus) (Thomas and May 2011, p. 15). However, participants involved in this research project felt this did not account for the variety of environments students may inhabit while studying at an HEI. Therefore we have added an overarching context to these three spheres of activity: 'Spaces of Engagement', which incorporates the lived experiences and the physical and virtual spaces in which these take place (such as student accommodation, virtual learning environments, social learning spaces and physical classrooms or lecture halls).

3. Data Collection

Data was gathered in three phases and informed the development of the self-assessment toolkit. These phases included a questionnaire survey, focus group interviews with four institutional exemplars and a post- data collection validation workshop. For more detail on the methods used see section three of the main report .

3.1 The exemplar institutions and projects

Four short exemplars which explore partnership working in practice were developed. Diverse in their missions, the exemplar institutions illustrate a range of current partnership approaches of working across academic teams and professional support services to enhance the student experience. More detailed discussion and individual consideration of the exemplars is given in the main project report. We include a brief summary of each here to stimulate partnership teams, project groups and a range of stakeholders to think about, reflect upon and discuss existing practices in order to consider similar and/or new directions of travel within their own institutions.

Of the four universities chosen, two are located in the north: Newcastle University and Manchester Metropolitan University; one in Scotland: the University of Edinburgh, and the fourth in Birmingham: Newman University. The partnerships between academic and professional services that form the basis for the success of the projects described below cover enhancement activities that focus on academic, pastoral and professional support arrangements for students through two different approaches to tutoring known as PESS (Edinburgh) and SAST (Newman); provision of a digital campus through development of a lecture capture and event recording service named ReCap (Newcastle); and the development of an undergraduate modular structure aiming to seamlessly deliver administrative and technological services support for students alongside a consistent approach to academic support (EQAL: Manchester Metropolitan).

3.1.1 ReCap project, Newcastle University

Comprising three faculties, Newcastle University describes itself as a world-class, research-intensive, civic university; playing a leading role in the economic, social and cultural development of the North East of England while providing a high quality student experience. The institution-wide ReCap project initially arose out of collaboration between staff from Information Systems and Services (ISS), the Quality in Learning and Teaching (QUILT) and Medical Education Development units. It allows audio and visual material, including the presenter's voice, presentation slides and visualised documents, to be recorded and published online in an automated, easy-to-use process. ReCap is an explicit example of how the strategic goal of the university to deliver a digital campus is achieved through supportive *leadership* alongside academic and professional staff working in partnership:

> …the investment and the creation of the environment was a push from ISS [Information Systems and Services] … the Medical school [and] … with … academic support [from] … the PVC from teaching and learning … who saw the potential

(ISS Assistant Director, Newcastle University)

3.1.2 EQAL programme, Manchester Metropolitan University

Manchester Metropolitan University describes itself as the largest campus-based undergraduate university in the UK with eight faculties across six campus sites in the North West of England. It defines itself as a university for world-class professionals with an emphasis on vocational education and employability. EQAL**,** or the Enhancing the Quality of Assessment and Learning programme, was an overarching change project at Manchester Metropolitan University which involved academic divisions,

student support and professional services with the aim of enhancing the overall quality of the student learning experience including a consistent approach to assessment planning and organisation. The project included a range of academic, administrative and infrastructural changes all aimed at improving the student experience while making the academic support processes more efficient. EQAL can be viewed as a manifestation of the institutional desire to approach the student experience in a holistic way. It illustrates the often *complex (and sometimes messy) nature of change* even when formal structures and programmes exist; how partnership activities need to build in flexibility to accommodate unforeseen events and how it is possible to achieve radical positive institutional change in a very short timescale:

> …it was massively challenging because there were so many strands running at the same time that had an impact on so many people around the institution …
>
> (Director Student Services and Deputy Registrar, Manchester Metropolitan University)

3.1.3 PESS project, University of Edinburgh

The University of Edinburgh describes itself as an international university comprising three colleges with 22 schools which makes a significant contribution to the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of Scotland that delivers an outstanding student experience. Edinburgh's Project for Enhancing Student Support (PESS) brought together staff from the academic community and professional service areas of academic and information services. Through building a framework of guiding principles in academic and pastoral support for both staff and students, PESS has developed a Personal Tutor System and Student Peer Support system that enhances and extends existing student support services. IT tools, briefing, training and resources were developed to support the new roles designed to promote a *holistic and personalised student experience*:

> … [PESS] looks at the support we're providing the students and the academic programmes they're studying and also holistically at an experience level so it is covering all ends of the spectrum.
>
> (Professor and Assistant Principal, University of Edinburgh)

3.1.4 SAST project, Newman University

Based in the west of Birmingham, Newman University is a small institution which has recently achieved full university status. It has two academic schools and describes itself as providing a high quality, accessible academic and professional formative education that is informed by the Catholic ethos of respect for others, social justice and equity. The Senior Academic Support Tutors known as the SAST team at Newman University operate as a bridge between students, academic processes, colleagues and professional support services. SAST is distinctive because it recruits academic members of staff to offer a service which combines elements of professional and academic advisory and support roles to enhance the experiences of students. The roles and remit of the SAST team have grown as the project has matured and become embedded in the institution, exemplifying the potential positive effects of *organic change,* where space for innovation and creativity that responds and utilises the strengths and expertise of the staff involved is fostered:

> …one of the drivers for change … has been having to make our systems flexible enough to [respond to the] problems that students might have ... and recognise that [often these can be] outside of their control and [the institution] ought to be helping them.
>
> (Senior Lecturer and SAST, Newman University)

3.2 Institutional discourses of student experience

3.2.1 Support at the strategic level

Our analysis of the focus group data stresses the importance of understanding that partnerships which focus on achieving and enhancing the 'student experience' must be *supported at the strategic level* if they are to be wholly successful and if their outcomes are to effect institutional change.

Within the exemplar sample, Newcastle University and Manchester Metropolitan University make explicit reference to 'a high quality' student experience for 'world-class professionals' within their vision and mission statements. While this is not included in similar statements for the University of Edinburgh or Newman University, reference to the student experience is implicit through statements such as 'the highest quality learning and teaching environment' and 'student centred'. All of these descriptions, whether implicit or explicit, are further explored within each institution's strategic plan; each of which details institutional interpretations of the student experience.

The student experience for all four universities is driven by a strategic strand and embedded within the academic sphere of engagement through a cross-fertilisation of objectives across their learning and teaching, faculty and/or school strategies. For example, Newcastle University has a Learning, Teaching and *Student Experience* Strategy (Newcastle University 2011; our emphasis).

3.2.2 Strong leadership

A sense of strong leadership and support for partnership working, either at the most senior level or devolved to a relevant level below was apparent across all of the exemplar institutions. During the data collection period, in three of the institutions there were existing positions or vacancies within the senior management team with job titles that explicitly or implicitly made reference to the student experience: Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Student Experience (Manchester Metropolitan), Dean of Students (Edinburgh University) and Pro Vice-Chancellor Formative Education (Newman University). Thus, the accountability for monitoring and developing the student experience is clear to those within the institution, reinforcing its level of importance. There was acknowledgement however, that successful leadership can include contributions from more operationally-focused staff where development is directed from the 'grass roots' level, rather than enforced 'top-down':

> If we hadn't had the expertise of the staff [within the partnerships] that we've got, it wouldn't have worked and developed into the system we now have
>
> (Director of Student Support, Newman University

In this particular case, the support provided by and the devolved nature of the leadership was deemed to have enabled staff to develop a successful partnership.

3.2.3 Shared contextual understanding

Across all exemplar institutions, there was a sense of an institution-wide awareness of the need to understand the *internal and external drivers* for enhancement of the student experience. Those who were interviewed stated that this was key to the creation of a fit-for-purpose holistic approach to supporting students. Moreover, institutional recognition of the benefits of partnership working was evident, for example in project-based 'public' web information, such as the 'Enhancing Quality in Assessment for Learning' (EQAL) pages at Manchester Metropolitan that have now been integrated into the CETL pages[4].

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[4] See: http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/curriculum/index.php/ and http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/policy/ltmmu/)

Indeed, the 'Enhancing Student Support' (PESS) project in Edinburgh[5] was explicitly presented as evidence of the '… on-going financial commitment' of the University of Edinburgh to its students.

This was further demonstrated through the awareness of our focus group participants of institutional discourse around the new fees and funding regime, the potential financial and league-table penalties of student non-completion and National Student Survey scores:

> Tuition fees have gone up, students expect to improve their employability [… through their] experience in university now so it's a key driver for us.
>
> (Head of Careers, Manchester Metropolitan University)

There was also discussion around translating and contextualising 'effective practice' within the sector; ensuring parity across academic departments and of 'closing the loop' to ensure that gaps in provision were analysed and improved:

> … [it's] part of everyone's agenda … you realise that the student numbers have grown but we're all operating in the same way […] students were identifying the same issues [as unsatisfactory] and [so we] felt that we really should be responding to this.
>
> (Professor and Assistant Principal: Teaching and Learning, University of Edinburgh)

The web-based and participant quotations, above, highlight the importance of partnership development and third space activities for improving and/or enhancing the student experience; they are used here to demonstrate how the exemplar institutions have *openly disclosed* their current context and drivers for existing student enhancement projects and future developments in this area.

3.3   Issues and challenges

The partnerships between academic and professional services briefly discussed here cover a range of activities to support the student experience. The main issues and challenges for the staff involved concerned *institutional reward and/or recognition for staff* who take part in such activities, particularly when associated with the *feelings of uncertainty* associated with change:

> Without proper reward in place … you won't get … the buy in from other members of staff and without that we're dead in the water.
>
> (Professor and Dean of Students, University of Edinburgh)

It is this that has led the toolkit to place at its centre questions relating to the roles and responsibilities of those engaged in partnership activity and institutional mechanisms for reward and recognition.

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[5] See: https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/PESS/Home

4. The toolkit

4.1 The purpose of the toolkit

Drawing on evidence emerging from earlier work in this area and our own investigations, this toolkit has been designed as a reflective tool to support HEIs in the enhancement of their students' experiences within their own contexts. Recognising that the 'student experience' may look and feel very different in each institution (and to each student), the toolkit does not set out to be prescriptive; instead it aims to support institutions in undertaking a self-reflective exercise to consider how staff and students can work together across internal boundaries to promote effective partnerships and projects. For further discussion about the importance of partnership working, third space and the effect on the student experience, please refer to the main report.

4.2 How has the toolkit been constructed?

The research project undertaken investigated practice at UK institutions and indicated that partnerships and projects between academic and professional staff, aimed at enhancing the student experience, were working well in many cases. Recognising the complexities of the sector, the project does not aim to generate a set of generalised findings but to use data from this investigation to provide guidance to support institutions to develop positive ways of taking such partnerships forward within their own context.

The research set out to investigate what makes current successful partnership models work, considering both perceived challenges to building effective partnerships and teamwork and factors that appear to lead to success in this area. Participating institutions were asked to discuss with us their experiences of developing partnership ways of working and how these experiences could be used to support future initiatives in this area.

Drawing on a questionnaire survey and focus group interviews, the project has been able to build a series of evidence-based reflective questions to help institutions to recognise synergies across professional and academic boundaries and to develop effective support for students. Please refer to the main report for a more in-depth discussion of the project methodology. Five over-arching themes emerged from our analysis of the focus group and survey data:

i. the need to understand and analyse both *internal and external drivers* for the enhancement of the student experience, and how these can work towards or against the development of a fit-for-purpose holistic approach;

ii. the need to recognise the *messy nature of sector and organisational change*, the often *organic nature of change* and potential associated *feelings of uncertainty* for staff involved;

iii. the importance of *institutional reward and/or recognition for staff and students* involved in activities that promote teamwork and collaboration to enhance the student experience;

iv. the importance of *honesty, openness and disclosure* which, together, underpin the success of partnership development;

v. the importance of understanding that partnerships which focus on achieving enhancement of the 'student experience' must be *supported at the strategic level* if they are to be wholly successful and if their outcomes are to affect institutional change.

None of these themes on their own are new or, indeed, specific to the focus of this project. However, looking through the lens of 'enhancing the student experience' they have provided us with a framework with which to build a set of self-reflective questions (SRQs) to support institutions to achieve improvements in practice.

Following feedback from research participants, the SRQs (typically presented in groups of three) have been organised thematically. The SRQs are posed at two levels:

- at the *strategic level*: questions designed to assist focused discussions in relation to wider issues of planning and implementation;
- at the *project/partnership level*: questions are structured around key themes, with the aim of encouraging reflection on how best to promote and undertake partnership approaches to the enhancement of students' engagement with, and experience of, HE.

It is important to stress at this point that each set of questions is not exclusive to particular institutional groups; strategic SRQs are not simply aimed at strategic managers but can also be used to help partnership teams to think through strategic issues. Likewise, project/partnership SRQs may be used by strategic groups to think through some of the operational issues that may affect partnership working.

4.3   Introduction to the toolkit

This toolkit aims to allow you to develop new partnership-working arrangements to support and develop the 'student experience' at your institution. It guides you through a series of themed self-reflective questions (SRQs) to undertake a structured assessment of:
- your *starting point* and *current climate for change*: where you currently are, the background to the project and institutional readiness for change;
- your *destination point:* where you wish to go and what success would look like for a range of stakeholders;
- the *resources needed*: key personnel, project and partnership dependencies and the support necessary for success.

The SRQs are designed to help you uncover and interpret specific contexts and requirements within your institutions and how best to make progress. They require honest and open reflection; your answers may vary from single word responses to detailed accounts. Moreover, further institution-specific questions may arise from the SRQs that reflect the context of either the partnership under development and/or that of the institution, and these should be added as appropriate. As stated above, the intertwining principles of honesty, openness and disclosure resonate throughout the data that informs the SRQs. Our analysis reveals that all three are fundamental to the success of partnership development.

4.4   Before you use the toolkit: Finding your focus

Before you initiate a project to enhance the student experience you will need to decide on the focus. Figure 2 provides an illustration of the range of factors, environments and players that you will need to consider when finding your focus. You may wish to use a range of tools to do this including institutional management information and learning analytics data. In addition, you may wish to map this to the student journey alongside key points of transition and engagement to ensure your project or initiative reflects the range of needs salient to students at your institution. To help you with this we have provided a series of 'readiness for partnership working' questions and scales that you can use to make sense of your institutional position in relation to each focus you identify and its associated partnerships to enhance the student experience. This section aims to encourage a fuller elaboration of your institution's proposed or existing partnership project, highlighting certainties, gaps and areas of potential to illuminate issues specific to the immediate working context.

Readiness for partnership working assessment: Questions and scales

a. Focus of initiative or project (we suggest no more than 50 words):

This could be a large project with underpinning sub-projects or small scale, responsive and/or localised project(s).

b. Short description and aims (we suggest no more than 300 words):

Is a partnership approach appropriate to the aims of your initiative or project? Why is this the case?

c. 'Readiness for partnership working' assessment:

The following questions and scales are designed to uncover your starting point for partnership working. Ideally to be ready for partnership working your project would be rating high on all four scales below. However, such an ideal situation can be rare in practice. If any of the scales indicate a lower starting point you may wish to consider action in this area before the project/partnership begins to ensure that any fundamental disagreements or lack of shared vision, etc, are addressed before resources are committed to the project.

What is the level of agreement among potential partners that partnership working would be beneficial in this project area?

Low agreement ⟵⟶ High agreement

Evidence: *Are all partners on board and ready to work together? Are there any particular sticking points or bottlenecks you can identify? Do you have a history of partnership working in this area?*

Is there a clear shared vision for outcomes in this area?

Low shared vision ⟵⟶ High shared vision

Evidence: *Is there a shared vision and if so what is it? Are there different understandings across the institution?*

Capacity (resources)

Low capacity ⟵⟶ High capacity

Evidence: *What existing resources are there? What might you need? Are staff committed to (or do they have the capacity to fully commit to) the partnership project? Does the project have an executive sponsor?*

Evidence: *Who is already involved? Who could be involved and why?*

d. Actions and recommendations:

What do you need to do before the partnership is initiated? How can this best be supported?

4.5   The self-reflective questions (SRQs)

Our toolkit comprises five strategic-level themes with associated SRQs (themes 1-5) and seven partnership/project level themes with associated SRQs (themes A-G). Each thematic area includes a brief embedded commentary (*What might this look like in practice?*) to support you in your use of the toolkit. The commentaries comprise a series of brief examples, drawn from our research, which may help to stimulate and guide your thinking in relation to each thematic area. However, it should be noted that these examples are not exhaustive and you will be able to identify others.

4.5.1   Five strategic-level themes to enhance the student experience

The SRQs that follow are designed to assist focused discussions in relation to planning for partnership working to enhance the student experience. Each thematic section typically contains three SRQs that relate to your institutional starting point and readiness for change, your intended destination point and any resources that you might need to achieve your intended outcomes and outputs. It is envisaged that these questions will be completed by a member of the institutional senior management team or those with strategic leadership responsibilities.

The five strategic themes are:
1.   defining the student experience;

2.   institutional mechanisms for and of student engagement;

3.   evaluating the effectiveness of activities to enhance the student experience;

4.   fostering creativity and innovation in partnership working;

5.   valuing, supporting and rewarding partnership working.

SRQ theme 1: Defining the student experience

1.1: How is the 'student experience' defined in your institution?

1.2: How is your institutional definition of the 'student experience' embedded and/or articulated within institutional strategy, vision, mission and ethos and at the faculty and departmental level?

1.3: What steps could be taken to ensure that definitions are agreed, understood and embedded institution-wide at a range of levels?

What might this look like in practice?

- a clear definition and articulation of the scope and limits of the 'student experience' is embedded in strategy, policies and practice and externally-facing spaces such as institutional webpages;
- clear alignments are made between and across departmental strategies articulating contributions to the institutional aspirations for the student experience;
- performance indicators in relation to activity which operationalises strategic aims and objectives around the student experience are defined;
- the student experience is articulated within student-generated documentation such as students' union web-pages and a student charter or agreement.

1.4: What action and resources are needed to move forward in this area?

SRQ theme 2: Institutional mechanisms for student engagement

2.1: What formal and informal mechanisms exist for the bringing together of students with a cross-section of academic and professional support staff to report on and develop the student experience?

2.2 How are the outcomes and outputs from these various partnerships joined up at the institutional level?

2.3 What communication tools and strategies are employed to highlight, maintain and develop awareness across projects?

What might this look in practice?

- existing or new activities or projects are aligned to strategic implementation plans at faculty and institutional levels;
- projects, communication mechanisms and strategies are linked and work *across* the institution as well as *within* project or local areas to ensure enhancement of the student experience;
- clear and effective institutional mechanisms for collaboration between staff and student groups are in evidence such as working groups, task and finish groups, project groups, etc;
- new partnerships emerge in areas/enclaves without necessarily being immediately visible to senior managers but are brought to the attention of senior managers once established;
- there is demonstrable student involvement in all activities across the institution related to the student experience (e.g. committees, projects and working groups) to ensure that the student voice is heard. Students are actively involved in change and are encouraged to develop project ideas.

2.4: What action and resources are needed to move forward in this area?

SRQ theme 3: Evaluating the effectiveness of activities to enhance the student experience
3.1: What mechanisms are used to evaluate the effectiveness of activities undertaken to enhance the student experience?
3.2: How do you use, measure and respond to positive and negative 'student experience' indicators? (eg NSS scores'.)
3.3: In what ways are students involved in such evaluations and responses?
What might this look like in practice? • staff at a range of institutional levels have a good understanding of the implications of poor student experiences on institutional sustainability and are prepared to act on this; • catalogued evidence of *failures* leads to positive catalysts for change and improvement; • there are clear consultation and feedback opportunities for those who cannot be directly involved; • there is a clear and good working relationship with the students' union (or guild of students) and members are fully engaged in helping the institution to improve the student experience; • student body recommendations are catalogued and tabled for action; • departments have working groups to make recommendations for change based on various data sets such as National Student Survey, module feedback mechanisms, staff student consultative committees reports, etc.
3.4: What action and resources are needed to move forward in this area?

SRQ theme 4: Fostering creativity and innovation in partnership working to enhance the student experience

4.1: How are opportunities for innovation and creativity in partnership working embedded within institutional strategies and operational structures?

4.2: How is engagement in sector-wide discussions regarding 'the student experience' encouraged and valued throughout the university and subsequently translated into the context of the institution?

4.3: How can lessons learned from less successful projects (i.e. those not meeting expectations) be built on constructively and creatively?

What might this look in practice?

- opportunities exist for *pilot* activities or *feasibility* studies to be undertaken;
- activities are institutionally funded (eg student experience innovation projects);
- activities that encourage cross-fertilisation of ideas are supported and funded;
- mechanisms exist for halting or changing projects/initiatives that are not meeting expected aims and outcomes;
- participation at a diverse range of sector-wide events is encouraged and supported;
- there are effective mechanisms for institution-wide consultation and/or discussion and dissemination regarding the embedding of external evidence or recommendations into the institutional context.

4.4: What action and resources are needed to move forward in this area?

SRQ theme 5: Valuing, supporting and rewarding partnership working to enhance the student experience

5.1: How does your institution actively support cross-institution partnerships to share practice?

5.2: To what extent does the institution articulate a balanced view of the value of involvement in research, learning and teaching, and wider academic citizenship, engagement and support activities?

5.3: How is appropriate recognition of involvement in activities to enhance the student experience built into existing reward and recognition structures for staff and students?

What might this look like in practice?

- there is clear articulated intent with regard to internal, regional, national and/or global partnerships in this area and guidance and support is available to those who wish to develop such partnerships;
- there is a clear articulation of the importance of activities which are acknowledged as contributing positively to the institutional 'student experience';
- membership on committees that work on areas associated with the student experience is representative of a cross-section of staff groups and students;
- there are clear and equitable promotion routes for academic staff members who show excellence in a range of areas of academic practice, including supporting 'the student experience';
- professional and support staff involvement is equally rewarded through contribution points and/or promotion;
- institutional awards and fellowships for staff are clearly aligned to key strategic aims and objectives associated with the 'student experience';
- student activity in this area is recognised in institutional student skills awards and is reported in the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR).
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5.4: What action and resources are needed to move forward in this area?

4.5.2   Seven partnership/project-level themes to enhance the student experience

Projects/partnership questions are structured around seven key themes which arise from our analysis of focus group data and our participant feedback workshop.

The seven partnership and/or project-level themes are:

A.   Using contextual evidence to connect aims and goals.

B.   Engaging stakeholders.

C.   Identifying contributors.

D.   Defining roles and responsibilities.

E.   Communication and dissemination.

F.   Evaluating/measuring effectiveness.

G.   Sustainability and change.

SRQ theme A: Using contextual evidence to connect aims and goals

A.1: How is internal and external evidence used to underpin and contextualise the operation of the partnership; is this research-based or from other areas of practice?

A.2: How do the aims and goals of the partnership relate to the elements of 'student experience' (see Figure 2: academic, social and/or services) that contribute to generating a sense of belonging in students?

A.3: How do partnership/project aims and goals articulate, relate to and support institutional definitions of 'the student experience'?

What might this look like in practice?
- baseline data drawn from the institution and evidence from the wider sector acts as a foundation for activities;
- evidence underpins the aims and objectives of the partnership/project;
- relevant previous experiences and evaluations (from within the institution and beyond) are built on in the new partnership/project;
- the aims and/or goals of the project/partnership are aligned and mapped to institutional definitions of 'the student experience';
- the project/partnership clearly indicates how outcomes and outputs will meet or support the achievement of strategic objectives in the area of the student experience.

A.4 What action and resources are needed to move forward in this area?

SRQ theme B: Engaging stakeholders

B.1: What opportunities are there/will there be for meaningful staff and student awareness and understanding of the partnership/project?

B.2: What opportunities are there/will there be for meaningful staff and student consultation on, and engagement in, the project/partnership?

B.3: How will feedback from staff and students on the partnership/project be effectively disseminated and actioned?

What might this look like in practice?

- conceptual, physical, digital, or notional 'space' is established for the new partnership to inhabit/exist within;
- there is senior management support, ownership and/or sponsorship for the project;
- there is student support and engagement with the project;
- formal lines of communication are vertical (hierarchical), horizontal or both, existing in a variety of formats;
- the process of changing practices is meaningfully explored, evaluated and integrated into work going forward in partnership with staff and students, and is clearly communicated to all stakeholders;
- clear and accessible means for staff and student input is articulated and collated in a variety of formal and informal spaces;
- feedback mechanisms are transparent.

B.4 What action and resources are needed to move forward in this area?

SRQ theme C: Identifying contributors

C.1: How will the partnership/project ascertain the 'right' people to be involved including colleagues external to the HEI or in positions without formal responsibility within the institution?

C.2: How sustainable are individual and group contributions to the project/partnership and how will they be funded?

C.3: In what ways might the overall structure of the partnership/project incorporate and overcome the restrictions some contributions *might* bring?

What might this look like in practice?

- partnership involves staff from a variety of institutional positions including those in authority, those with personal interests/existing involvements and those with innovative strategies for engagement;
- the knowledge and skills helpful to the partnership, where known, are clearly articulated to staff and students and opportunities for involvement are offered;
- staff and students who demonstrate necessary skills and talents are identified and proactively engaged via informal or formal means;
- the impact of the project/partnership on existing responsibilities and roles is recognised from the outset, with contingency plans made accordingly;
- known future opportunities for colleague and student involvement are explicit from the outset.

C.4: What action and resources are needed to move forward in this area?

SRQ theme D: Roles and responsibilities

D.1: How will you define clear roles and responsibilities in the partnership/project between students, academic and professional staff?

D.2: How will this be communicated to both those involved and those outside the partnership/project?

D.3: In what ways might post-holders adapt and develop the roles and responsibilities within the overall aims of the partnership/project?

What might this look like in practice?

- clear parameters and regular reporting mechanisms ensure devolved activities can meet the aims and objectives/terms of reference of the partnership/project;
- where appropriate, roles are clearly articulated within the formal records of partnership activity, ie through committee terms and reference or project aims and objectives with levels of responsibility and reporting clearly defined and agreed within the team from the outset;
- there is authority, within the scope of the partnership/project for participants to influence, make decisions and enact change across the institution;
- projected time commitments and/or the workload balances of involved colleagues and students are, as much as possible, outlined from the outset and agreed with line managers;
- engagement in activities associated with the student experience is both expected and supported at a range of institutional levels.

D.4: What action and resources are needed to move forward in this area?

SRQ theme E: Communication and dissemination

E.1: What are your communication and/or dissemination strategies and plans for engaging all levels of the institution, including group members, so they know what you are doing, when and why?

E.2: How might the partnership/project adopt and adapt inclusive communication and dissemination strategies?

E.3: What mechanisms allow for project dialogue between participants and with external stakeholders: how might the partnership/project manage and include input from multiple 'voices'?

What might this look like in practice?

- clear communication plans detail mechanisms for institution-wide dissemination of news and updates to all staff and students;
- there is an institution-wide understanding of key stages, times and outputs from the project;
- a portfolio of opportunities and mechanisms for effective and regular communication is in place between involved colleagues and students;
- methods of contact include reporting, sharing practice(s) and team-building exercises;
- regular departmental, institutional and sectorial dissemination of activities associated with the partnership exists through a variety of mechanisms;
- a range of communication technologies - such as virtual learning environments, project Wikis, blogs and Twitter discussions - are employed to engage a range of interested parties in discussion about the partnership/project as it progresses.

E.4: What action and resources are needed to move forward in this area?

SRQ theme F: Evaluating/measuring effectiveness

F.1: How and when will the effectiveness of the partnership/project be measured and/or evaluated?

F.2: How will key milestones be used to measure effectiveness and maintain relevance?

F.3: Which groups are likely to be involved in evaluating the partnership/project?

What might this look like in practice?

- evaluation is built into the partnership/project from the outset;
- there is effective use of existing or the creation of new mechanisms to undertake evaluation;
- all members of the partnership/project group are clear and agree on who is actively involved in evaluation processes and when and how these are to be completed;
- underpinning empirical evidence and/or philosophical/conceptual foundations of activities are clearly embedded in evaluation techniques;
- both qualitative and quantitative measures from internal and external indicators are appropriately used to evaluate and triangulate effectiveness;
- evaluation mechanisms embrace the analysis of emerging or unexpected outcomes.

F.4: What action and resources are needed to move forward in this area?

SRQ theme G: Sustainability, change and impact

G.1: What capacity is there for changes to the partnership/project in terms of remit, resource levels and/or staffing: should these be indicated by evaluation activities or required due to other contextual changes?

G.2: What plans are there for any positive activities and outcomes to be embedded in on-going practice once the partnership/project has finished and disbanded?

G.3: How will you communicate 'lessons learned' and examples of good practice to other related partnership/projects in your institution?

What might this look like in practice?

- aims and objectives or terms of reference are periodically reviewed in the light of evaluation activities and departmental, institutional and sectorial environmental changes;
- partnership/project memberships, roles and responsibilities are regularly evaluated and, where necessary, changed in consultation with those involved;
- if the partnership/project is short term or finite, a clear 'exit' strategy with recommendations for embedding practice within 'business as usual' is clearly articulated to those who can and will take it forward;
- case study examples and findings and recommendations from the project/partnership are produced for a range of stakeholders so other future projects and partnerships can learn from and build on the work undertaken.

G.4 What action and resources are needed to move forward in this area?

4.6　Closing remarks

As stated in 2.1.1, we feel that the increasing importance of partnership working across staff groups and students within HEIs cannot be understated. If the sector is to respond to the demands made upon it while recognising the complexities of modern day studenthood, institutions need to reflect on how their teaching practices, operational procedures and services, when coupled with their physical and virtual environments, can promote a sense of belonging that enables students to make the most of their experience of higher education.

In reality, discussions of the 'student experience' are not one dimensional, but reflect the diversity of the student body and of experiences within it. Drawing on these understandings of the diversity of student experiences that exist, the toolkit recognises such experiences as forming within a range of context specific activities and environments that students are likely to come into contact with while engaged in their studies. The toolkit should not be perceived as a panacea, a cure to remedy all things 'wrong' with the 'student experience', but more as a facilitative resource that encourages institutions through a thematic self-reflection exercise. It focuses on those elements of the 'student experience' that are within an institution's power to control and/or influence and those that are likely to benefit from successful working partnerships across academic and professional services.

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