

## CASE STUDY

## Reflections on co-researching AI literacy: A Students-as-Partners approach with international students

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## ABSTRACT

Students as Partners (SaP) approaches have gained more and more traction in higher education in recent years (Dai & Matthews, 2022). Rooted in values such as reciprocity and shared responsibility, SaP can offer opportunities for internationalizing the curriculum and departing from traditional teacher-student hierarchies (Green & Baxter, 2022). This case study focuses on a SaP project involving international students and their English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teacher, which investigated artificial intelligence (AI) literacy during a UK pre-session course in summer 2023. The project identified that learning about the limitations of AI, in addition to developing skills for effective prompt writing, was beneficial to students (Partridge et al, 2023). This case study reflects on the challenges and benefits of SaP for both students and the teacher using the Advance HE (2016) Framework for Student Engagement Through Partnership. Based on these reflections, the case study offers recommendations for future SaP projects including effective scheduling, defining roles, engaging in continual reflection, and formally recognising student input.

## KEYWORDS

AI literacy, students as partners, co-creation, reflection, international students, student engagement

Employing a students-as-partners (SaP) approach has become more ubiquitous in higher education (HE) in recent years (Matthews, 2017; Dai & Matthews, 2022). SaP is defined by involving students as “genuine contributors” to any aspect of the university experience (Green & Baxter, 2022, p. 309) and is characterized by a process-focused, dialogic approach to enhancing student learning and assessment (Healey et al., 2016). Importantly, students and staff are regarded as equals, while the skills, experience, and knowledge they bring may differ (Matthews, 2016). In SaP, students are at the center of decision-making processes (Healey et al., 2016); this active involvement made SaP appropriate to the project described in this case study.

The current authors—four international post-graduate students and their English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teacher—investigated artificial intelligence (AI) literacy during a UK pre-session course in 2023. AI use differs greatly from AI literacy; the latter involves critical awareness of the tool's abilities, limitations, and biases (Chan & Hu, 2023). Shortly before the course, the Russell Group (2023), which represents 24 long-established UK universities, published principles emphasizing the need to support students' AI literacy, yet how to do this remained unclear. The project aimed to identify students' needs regarding AI literacy, specifically ChatGPT 3.5 as it was widely used and freely available.

Following ethical clearance, a survey was distributed to the class of 14 international postgraduate students; this investigated how and why they had used AI previously. This found that all students had previously used AI and that this was frequently due to low self-confidence (Partridge et al., 2023). Lesson materials were designed with a colleague to raise students' awareness of ChatGPT's limitations and develop their ability to write effective prompts and evaluate its output. Completed class handouts and student feedback on these materials were analyzed by the teacher. Four students then volunteered to co-lead the project by conducting peer interviews to gain further insight into their peers' use of AI. The researchers believed that the student-researchers would receive more honest answers from their peers due to the sensitive nature of AI in HE; some students may not have wanted to be transparent about their use of AI with a teacher present. The four student volunteers then co-wrote an academic blog post discussing the research results and recommending ways to support students' AI literacy. Mainly, they found that students valued classroom input on AI literacy and wanted this from their university teachers; further details are beyond the scope of this article yet can be found in Partridge et al. (2023).

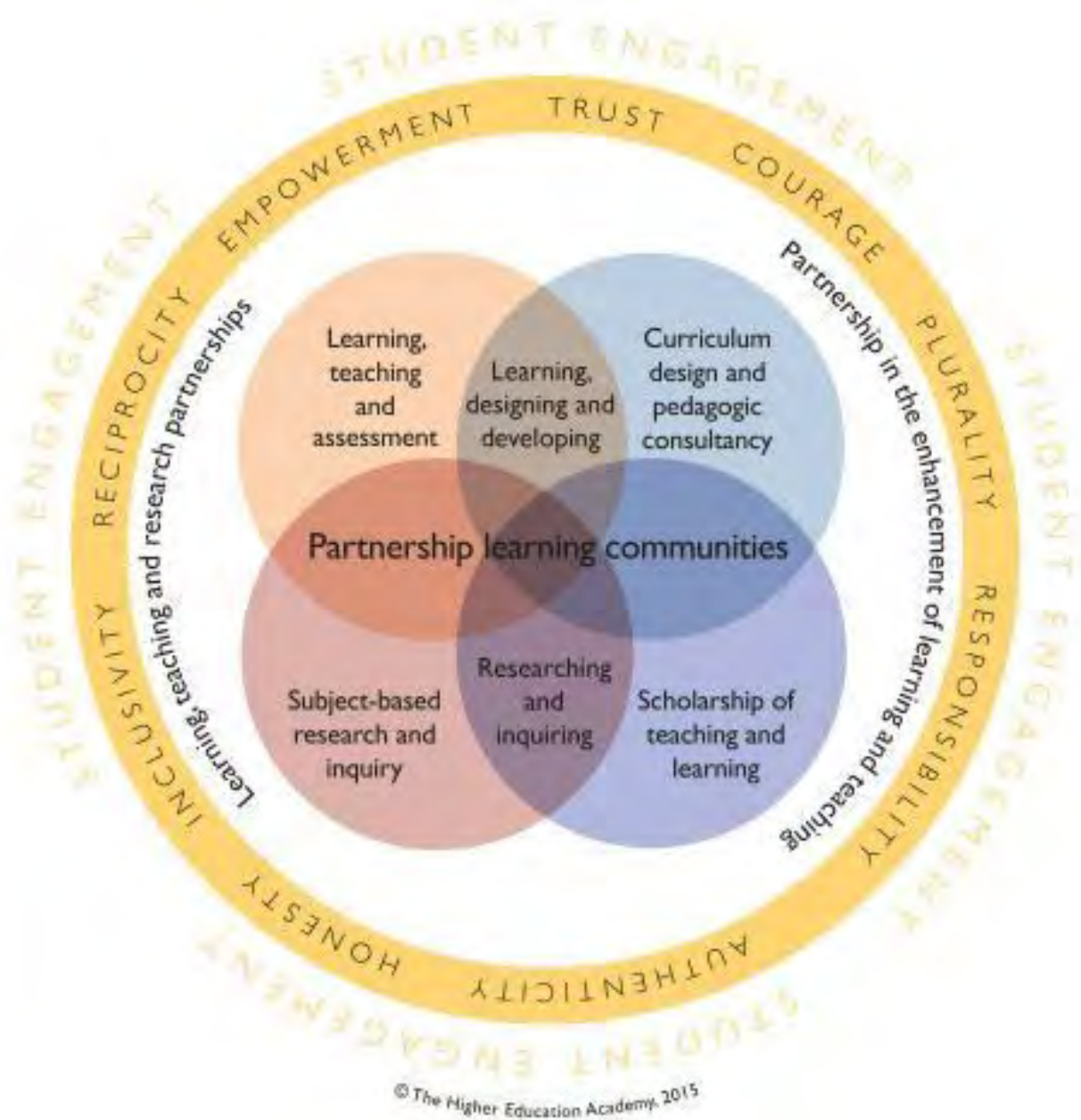
The student-collaborators included two Chinese nationals, one Taiwanese national, and one Thai national. Their perspective was valuable due to the teaching context as the pre-session course is exclusively for international students; it was expected that the project could inform future iterations of the course in supporting students' AI literacy. Furthermore, involving international students in SaP projects can help to re-balance traditional hierarchies in higher education (Stanway et al., 2019) and contribute to internationalizing the curriculum (Green & Baxter, 2022). Considering these potential benefits, this case study offers student and teacher reflections on the process of co-researching and co-creating the blog post, guided by the Advance HE (2016) Framework for Student Engagement Through Partnership. Finally, recommendations are given for others engaging international students in SaP projects.

### Models of reflection

The Framework for Student Engagement Through Partnership (Figure 1) was used to situate this project within the wider spectrum of SaP approaches. The authors place the project within the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) because the students were involved in the project as co-researchers rather than research subjects (Advance HE, 2016). The authors also considered the nine core values of SaP: Trust; Courage; Plurality; Responsibility; Authenticity; Honesty; Inclusivity; Reciprocity; Empowerment (Figure 1). They reflected on how far these values had been demonstrated during the project, as suggested by Healey et al. (2016). This helped the researchers consider the strengths of the project and potential future improvements, and

therefore how a partnership learning community—situated at the centre of the framework—may be fostered at the institution.

**Figure 1. Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education: An overview model**



Source: Higher Education Academy (2015). Based on Healey (2014). Reproduced with permission of the authors.

## STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS: MAIN CHALLENGES

### **Dealing with differences**

Initially, students faced challenges due to cultural and linguistic differences, including difficulties in achieving textual coherence and comprehending each others' ideas due to diverse writing styles and proficiency levels. As three students share a first language (Mandarin), direct translation sometimes led to unintentionally offensive remarks perceived by the Thai speaking student. This language barrier contributed to concerns about making mistakes and increased students' hesitancy in speaking out. Some students also lacked confidence in their knowledge of AI and feared judgment. These concerns regarding "losing face" have been identified as a common obstacle for students engaging in SaP projects in East Asian countries (Kaur et al., 2019). Consequently, initial conversations among student-authors reached a deadlock without a designated facilitator.

### **Contributing to group discussions**

A lack of confidence in some members during discussions may have stemmed from their socio-educational backgrounds and influences from Confucian philosophy, which remains prominent in China particularly (Dai & Matthews, 2022). The philosophy stresses respecting and maintaining hierarchical teacher-student relationships (Dai & Matthews, 2022). Kaur et al. (2019) emphasize that despite recent cultural shifts, Confucian values still significantly impact education and social interactions in many Asian countries. Several, though not all, student-collaborators believed that this affected their interactions with the teacher and each other during group discussions, particularly in the early stages of the project.

### **Aligning timetables**

Differing academic schedules lead to prolonged gaps between meetings and delays in addressing feedback. Students' fluctuating workloads also hindered project engagement, and students worried that additional reading would be 'exhausting'. Indeed, the demand on students' time is identified as a significant challenge in other SaP projects (Cabral et al., 2023). Marquis et al. (2016) found that this additional stress impedes the development of meaningful working relationships essential to SaP projects. Thus, aligning project timelines with students' schedules is crucial for an effective SaP experience.

## STUDENT REFLECTIONS: MAIN BENEFITS AND SOLUTIONS

### **Personal and academic growth**

After completing the AI co-writing project, the student researchers felt satisfied with their efforts and proud to share their work with their families. This is consistent with Kitchen's (2023) findings that SaP projects often foster a sense of accomplishment among student-partners. Similarly, Matthews (2017) emphasizes the transformative nature of diverse partnerships and the value they can hold for participants. The project enabled students to step outside their comfort zones, nurturing confidence and peer relationships. Additionally, students felt accomplished in balancing extracurricular projects with coursework and appreciated the opportunity to conduct interdisciplinary research, expanding their knowledge beyond their bachelor's degree. Notably, the only Thai national in the group felt they gained valuable intercultural communication skills by

working with others who did not speak her first language. These experiences demonstrate the personal and professional growth opportunities for student collaborators in SaP projects (Roy et al., 2023).

### **English as a lingua franca and code-switching**

Collaborative work in a second language offers frequent chances for natural practice and meaning negotiation, which can enhance proficiency (McGroarty, 1989). The project provided such opportunities for the students, whose use of English with each other can be defined as English as a lingua franca (ELF). ELF accommodates variations and prioritizes strategic competence over linguistic accuracy (Elder & Davies, 2006). During peer-led discussions, students were less anxious about incorrect word choices or grammar, instead focusing on communication; this led to learning opportunities and improved English proficiency (Miyagi et al., 2009).

In addition to ELF, the students used Mandarin to communicate. This is one student's third language, while three students share it as a first language. McGroarty (1989) emphasizes the value of using communicators' first language in group projects to promote cognitive growth and enhance second language proficiency. Linguistic proficiency and personal relationships overlapped as two students became friends through the project, facilitating communication as one student frequently translated another's ideas from English to Mandarin for their peers. This bilingual approach parallels code-switching (CS), where multiple languages are used within one communicative event (Grosjean, 2010). While some view CS negatively (Shafi et al., 2020), Bista (2010) argues that it can be a useful strategy for language learning. The student-collaborators used CS to aid communication when English expression or comprehension fell short. This multilingual approach can improve both English proficiency and intercultural communication skills, crucial in academia and the workplace (Washington et al., 2012).

### **Group roles**

Initially, meetings included the teacher, but, as the project progressed, students met independently, allowing them to develop their relationships and make decisions autonomously. De Wever & Strijbos (2021) recommend that teachers allocate roles to enhance group tasks, yet the students found roles organically as the project progressed. For instance, one served as the facilitator by mitigating communication barriers and encouraging participation. Another student grew in confidence and so began to offer their opinions and literature findings proactively. Two others presented counter ideas, which cultivated useful discussion and critical thinking skills by considering alternative viewpoints (Sudrajat et al., 2020). By developing these roles, students enacted SaP values of courage in exploring new approaches and plurality in acknowledging each other's contributions (Advance HE, 2016). Group roles also cultivate students' sense of responsibility (De Wever & Strijbos, 2021), which is another core value (Advance HE, 2016). Overall, student roles meant they took ownership of the project and collaborated more effectively (Hansen, 2006).

### **Empowering mentorship**

Students were initially anxious, with one reporting: "I don't have the confidence [about] whether I can finish [the project] or not". The teacher's mentorship helped to alleviate such feelings; for example, a shared online schedule, Microsoft Teams group, and in-person meetings made tasks

manageable. This reflects research highlighting students' uncertainty in SaP projects and how pragmatic actions such as sharing clear objectives can alleviate this (Marquis et al., 2016). On a more personal level, the teacher respected each team member as a colleague and encouraged them to express opinions, fostering an environment where students felt heard, valued, and trusted with responsibility (Green & Baxter, 2022). This approach also promoted the value of empowerment by balancing power distribution (Advance HE, 2016), as it avoided the teacher dominating.

## TEACHER'S REFLECTIONS: MAIN CHALLENGES

### **Flattening the hierarchy**

From the teacher's perspective, the main difficulty was feeling unsure of how closely to guide the student-collaborators. The teacher wanted to prioritize the core values of empowerment and responsibility (Advance HE, 2016) by ensuring that the students took ownership of the project and participated in key decisions. However, the teacher had more previous experience of academic writing and research and is a university employee and a professional in academic English. In other words, the teacher had insider knowledge which positioned her as a gatekeeper to the community in which the authors aimed to participate (Russell et al., 2009). This "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1988) caused a power imbalance; the teacher wanted the students to take leading roles, but the differences in knowledge and experience meant she needed to guide the project closely and, in several ways, instruct the students.

This dilemma is reported in other SaP projects, as staff-collaborators want to break from traditional staff-student relationships yet find this challenging in practice, as demonstrated by the following reflection in Marquis et al.'s (2016) study: "I've been resisting the urge to direct things too strongly . . . , but I wonder if some students are feeling a little 'at sea' as result" (p. 9). In this project, the teacher-student relationship may have been affected by the students' socio-educational backgrounds, specifically the influence of a Confucian philosophy on their interactions with teachers. Particularly at first, it often seemed that the students held back from fully expressing their thoughts and often waited for direction before contributing ideas. This could be due to individual characters, but it is likely that the students' cultural and educational values influenced group communication in this SaP project.

### **Timetable constraints**

The difficulties in aligning schedules meant that for the teacher, it was sometimes tempting to continue writing alone when the students were not available. This was due to feeling pressure to advance the project but was not the appropriate response (and was not enacted) as it limited the authenticity of the students' involvement (Advance HE, 2016). This served as a reminder to value the process-oriented nature of SaP (Matthews, 2016) and, consequently, to remain adaptable and focused on the benefits to students, rather than the finished product.

## TEACHER REFLECTIONS: MAIN BENEFITS AND SOLUTIONS

### Reward

The main benefit for the teacher was a high sense of reward in helping the students publish their work for an authentic audience. Colleagues commented that the blog post had made them reconsider their stance on AI; the focus on the student perspective seemingly gave it greater power than if it had represented only the teacher’s viewpoint. The current case study hopefully holds similar value and is yet more rewarding as the students are publishing to a wider audience.

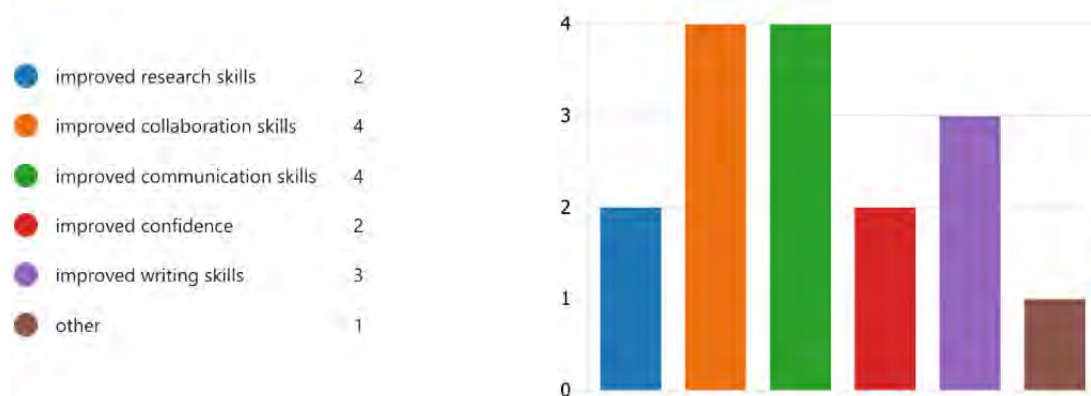
### Understanding student views

Through co-creating the blog with students, the teacher gained insight into the students’ views and motivations regarding both AI literacy and academic work more generally. In feedback on the project, the students indicated that the most significant challenges had been collaborating with peers and writing an academic text. These were due to a fear of being “incorrect” and a lack of confidence in their ideas. The main benefits were group work and communication skills (Figure 2). Overall, it seems that the students valued the socially oriented skills developed during the project above others. The SaP project therefore offered “a unique insight into what is important and relevant to students” (Cabral et al., 2023, p.118), enabling the teacher to run future SaP projects more effectively.

**Figure 2. Main benefits of co-creating the blog post identified by student-collaborators**

What were the main benefits of participating in the co-writing process?

[More Details](#)



Source: Results from post-project feedback survey distributed to the four student-authors by the teacher.

### Addressing power imbalances

Though the teacher struggled to enact a non-hierarchical relationship with the students, there were several aspects of the project which answered this problem. Firstly, the students volunteered to participate. While many SaP projects involve a process of selection based on student credentials, this can prioritize those who are already “privileged and engaged” (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017, p. 17). Volunteering aligned more closely with the values of equality and shared responsibility central to SaP approaches (Green & Baxter, 2022) as it did not position the teacher as decision-maker. Furthermore, the students took on real responsibilities and made

choices independently of the teacher. In this way they were not, in Freire's (2002, cited in Reimer & McLean, 2015) terms, objects of research but research subjects themselves. For example, they led the peer interview process by developing questions and conducting the interviews. They recorded, transcribed, and analyzed the results, discussing implications in the blog post. This illustrates one way in which the students were guided through an unfamiliar process by the teacher yet remained in an active leading role. As Matthews (2016) emphasizes, it is important that all members of a SaP project contribute, but these may be in different ways depending on their varying experiences and knowledge.

## LIMITATIONS AND ISSUES

Viewing the project through a wider lens, there are arguably some important issues which should be addressed. Firstly, scholarship forms part of the teacher's contract of employment, meaning she received time and money (through her salary) to conduct this project. In comparison, the students were studying so were often time-pressured and received no money for their contributions. Furthermore, the project led to the teacher's participation in conferences and publication in an academic journal; these increase her future employability. The student-collaborators can acknowledge their participation on their CVs, but the benefit to them is arguably less tangible. This seems at odds with SaP values; can a SaP project authentically claim students are equal partners if the benefits are of notably unequal value to those of staff members?

While this SaP project goes some way to addressing issues of diversity by involving international students, it may also perpetuate other inequalities. Drawing on Bourdieu (1988), Matthews (2017) explains that due to unconscious bias, humans are drawn to those who share similarities with them. In SaP projects, this can mean that "like students" often partner with "like staff," which can perpetuate existing societal imbalances and power dynamics (Matthews, 2017, p. 2). Although the students in this project were not selected, they were very engaged and intrinsically motivated. Could less-engaged students have benefitted more from the project? With a clearer allocation of time and support initially, would other students have volunteered?

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this case study used the Advance HE (2016) Framework for Student Engagement through Partnership to evaluate the authors' experience of a SaP project. The Framework is centered around the concept of a 'Partnership learning community', which is characterized by positive staff-student relationships (Advance HE, 2016). Communities such as this are essential to developing a culture of SaP within the institution (Advance HE, 2016). With this goal in mind, the authors hope to empower other students and staff to engage in SaP by offering the following recommendations:

- Create a well-planned schedule and hold regular meetings to minimize disruption and maintain motivation. Importantly, include student-only meetings to foster peer relationships and build confidence in autonomous decision-making.



- Encourage the formation of roles within student teams and gradually increase responsibility and autonomy. This should help to mitigate teacher-student hierarchy and can empower students to take ownership of the project.
- Incorporate continual reflection to identify strengths and weaknesses as a group, as this can improve collaboration and outcomes in future projects (Cabral et al., 2023). The reflection required to write the current case study allowed collaborators to critically evaluate their contributions. This led to continual adjustments that were not only immediately useful but will also inform future collaborations for both students and teacher.
- Establishing a formal recognition system, like the Student Enhanced Engagement and Development (SEED) award at University College London, emphasizes the value of student contributions and avoids tokenistic participation (Cabral et al., 2023). This helps establish robust partnership learning communities by embedding SaP within institutional culture (Cabral et al., 2023) and embodying partnership values (Advance HE, 2016).

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