

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Change agents: The impact of a student partnership on the educational practice of a diverse higher education engineering faculty

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the implementation of a new student partnership across a large and diverse STEM faculty and the impact this four-year partnership had on enhancing students' experience. This innovative partnership recruited and employed students, termed student experience champions (SEC), to inform and develop inclusive educational initiatives in response to their educational experiences. This partnership enabled the faculty to develop a dynamic and agile working relationship with their students, creating an environment where students informed the strategic direction of the student experience and leading faculty and departmental educational projects that resulted in institutional changes. The breadth of the SEC projects enabled the benefits of student partnerships to be appreciated across the faculty, leading to a culture change where SEC are now viewed as partners in programme enhancement.

KEYWORDS

student as partners, agents for change, STEM education, educational strategy, student experience

As with most UK higher education institutions (HEIs), the number of students studying STEM subjects at Aston University has been increasing over the past 5 years, along with the diversity of students' educational experience and personal backgrounds (Universities UK, 2018). Involving students in curricula design can address cohort diversity issues by engaging students in a way that empowers them to actively shape their educational experience. This ensures learning and teaching (L&T) practices are accessible and inclusive to all students (Felten et al., 2019; National Union of Students [NUS] & Universities UK, 2019; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020; Stephen et al., 2020).

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As closer and more equal working relationships with students can be beneficial to academic and student experiences, more HEIs are now exploring different approaches to student and staff partnerships (Freeman et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Students as Partners (SaP) is an approach recently embraced by many HEIs, and it involves students and faculties working in collaboration to improve educational experiences (Bovill, 2019; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). SaP can take many forms; students can be evaluators of their experience, participants in decision-making processes, co-creators of curricula, and, importantly, change agents (Dunne et al., 2011; Tschirhart & Pratt-Adams, 2019). Positive SaP outcomes are increased student and staff motivation for the learning process and enhanced inclusivity in teaching practices (Bovill et al., 2011; Curran, 2017; Elsharnouby, 2015; Snelling et al., 2019).

At Aston University, the capture of students' voices utilises the traditional UK "student rep" positions (Carey, 2013), whereby students undertake voluntary positions to represent the voice of their student cohort. The student rep's role is to feedback on their and their peers' study experiences to academic staff at programme L&T meetings. However, in line with sector experience, this programme-level student representation mainly addressed specific operational and often local programme issues (Seale, 2010; Carey, 2013; Freeman et al., 2014). The student reps did not focus on addressing the wider brief of how to enhance student L&T experience at a faculty level or how to improve the user-friendliness of the educational material from a student perspective. Student volunteer schemes can also be biased towards a certain student demographic and are then not representative of the student cohort (Freeman et al., 2014). For example, students that frequently commute to university are often focused on activities outside of their university learning, such as family and part-time employment (Holdsworth, 2009). These commuter students are less likely to participate in extracurricular initiatives, such as volunteering to become a student representative (Holton & Finn, 2018; Thomas & Jones, 2017).

Recent research indicates that many student partnerships are unpaid, small scale, and extracurricular, with students often invited by staff to join the project (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020) and a focus on addressing a specific programme or discipline requirement (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Some of these SaP approaches potentially risk prioritising certain students and may not be representative of the student cohort. Recent reports highlight the need to determine the impact of more institution-wide partnerships on improving the equality of student learning (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021).

Therefore, in 2017 the College of Engineering & Physical Sciences (CEPS) faculty at Aston University established a new SaP framework informed by the philosophy detailed in Freeman et al. (2014). Staff and students work in partnership, as described in Freeman et al, to encourage joint ownership of educational developments, with this partnership recognising good practice, acknowledging both student and staff expertise and promoting respect and trust between staff and students. The overall aim of this new SaP initiative was to develop a faculty-level partnership that would successfully inform educational development and enhance the student learning experience. To that end, student partners would take on a pivotal role in becoming "change agents"—those who implement change in addressing a problem (Dunne et al., 2011). An additional goal was to provide an experience that enhanced the professional development of the students involved in this partnership.

This article describes the implementation of this new and innovative SaP framework across a large and culturally diverse faculty delivering STEM education to over 3,500 students and contributes to the literature on institution-level student partnership. It provides details on the range of L&T projects designed and delivered over this 4-year partnership, summarising the outcomes these student-led projects had on student experience. It also discusses how successful this new framework has been in addressing student representation and raising awareness with academic staff about the benefits of co-creation. Finally, it also describes the impact of this initiative on the professional development of the students involved in this partnership.

METHODOLOGY

This methodology section describes both the process of establishing the new faculty SaP framework and the analysis and reporting of the outcomes of this SaP initiative.

Student experience champion recruitment, training, and support

To enable faculty recognition and awareness of this new SaP framework, the recruited students were called student experience champions (SEC). Recruitment of new students to the SEC scheme occurs annually and aligns with the start of the academic year. The vacant positions, usually 12 per year, are advertised to continuing undergraduate students by faculty email and the university's in-house careers portal. A thorough recruitment process is followed, with the submission of an application form and CV, followed by an interview. The interview requires students to demonstrate their skills in summarising student feedback, analysing points for improvement, and suggesting initiatives to strengthen student experience. To ensure SEC have a range of viewpoints on student experience, recruitment considers adequate representation from a breadth of backgrounds (i.e., gender, ethnicity, international/home, commuting/on-campus students) as well as year of study and discipline.

SEC are employed as contractual casual workers, with the faculty's student engagement officer (SEO) acting as a line manager. Payment for this scheme is costed as part of the faculty's annual L&T budget.

SEC are required to submit action logs detailing activities conducted, independent work, and meeting and event attendance. They regularly update these action logs with the evidence they have collected on the impact of these initiatives. Therefore, these actions logs are used jointly to act as formal payment timesheets and as a research data recording mechanism to show the outcomes of the initiative.

The faculty's SEO trains new SEC to run focus groups, present information, lead team-building activities and in any specific skills that emerging projects demand. The training is also informed by documentation prepared by previous SEC to ensure continuation of long-term projects. SEC and the faculty's SEO meet monthly to discuss project progress and share experiences and expertise. SEC have a termly individual meeting with the faculty's SEO to reflect on personal development.

To build a relationship between the SEC and faculty academic staff, SEC meet with nominated academics, termed "departmental student experience leads," who teach within the SEC academic discipline. These meetings help SEC gauge an understanding of discrete L&T departmental practice.

To ensure an inclusive and wide-reaching partnership with students, the faculty still engages with UK standard voluntary student rep positions, with this new SaP framework being embedded as an additional partnership. Therefore, one of the roles of the SEC is to support the student rep to deal with any operational programme issues.

Identification of SEC partnership projects

To ensure awareness of how student experience is measured within UK HEIs, SEC analyse a range of faculty and departmental student experience metrics, such as student voice questionnaires, module and programme performance, and student continuation and employment data.

The faculty has an appointed member of the senior management team, an associate dean in education, who oversees the faculty's educational strategy. Once SEC have reviewed the student experience data and met with their respective departmental student experience lead and student rep, the SEC then meets with the associate dean. This meeting is for the SEC to discuss their reflections on the faculty's student experience. SEC then work with the associate dean and faculty SEO to determine what new faculty-wide and departmental L&T projects the SEC will implement and lead. SEC also propose and drive their own projects if they believe a hot topic or emerging issue has been omitted from the retrospective data gathering.

Although projects are primarily defined at the start of the academic year, new projects are also started throughout the year to respond proactively to student experience concerns.

Reporting SEC project progress and outcomes

To ensure the student partnership outputs are clearly documented, the SEC complete action logs that include informal evidence (i.e., local surveys, interviews) and formal evidence (i.e., Higher Education internal/external student surveys on teaching quality and student satisfaction). SEC determine how this data is collected, with qualitative feedback often generated from student focus groups and quantitative feedback from student questionnaires. SEC are in an excellent position to collect this informal evidence; they liaise with student reps, organise student focus groups, work with student academic societies, and also talk with their friends and peers. All of these methods enable SEC to capture the wider and more diverse student voice.

SEC also provide formal oral updates on a termly basis to the faculty's student experience working group, which consists of each department's student experience lead, the SEO, and the associate dean.

At the end of each project, SEC complete formal end-of-project reports summarising how the project influenced student experience and/or informed the wider student cohort as well as an updated action plan to track any further deliverables.

SEC also conduct an end-of-year reflective exercise to describe what transferable skills they have acquired and reflect on how their personal upskilling can influence future employability. These reflections also help inform amendments of processes and procedures on how SEC and their workload are managed prior to induction of new SEC.

At the end of the academic year, the outgoing SEC formulate a business case and submit it to the CEPS faculty's management team to approve any operational and strategic changes and ensure continuing endorsement and financial support.

Data analysis on the impact of SaP on student experience

To determine the longitudinal impact of this new SaP framework on student experience, the SEC action logs and final reports from 2017–2021 have been used to describe the actions of the projects and to provide the qualitative and quantitative evidence. This data has also been combined, where applicable, with the annual Office for Students (OfS) National Student Survey (NSS) which determines UK students' educational experience.

Data analysis on impact of SaP on SEC skills

The analysis of the end-of-year reflective reports (2017–2021) have been used to determine the development of skills highlighted by the SEC. These reflective reports have been analysed to generate a word cloud using Mentimeter (<https://www.mentimeter.com/>).

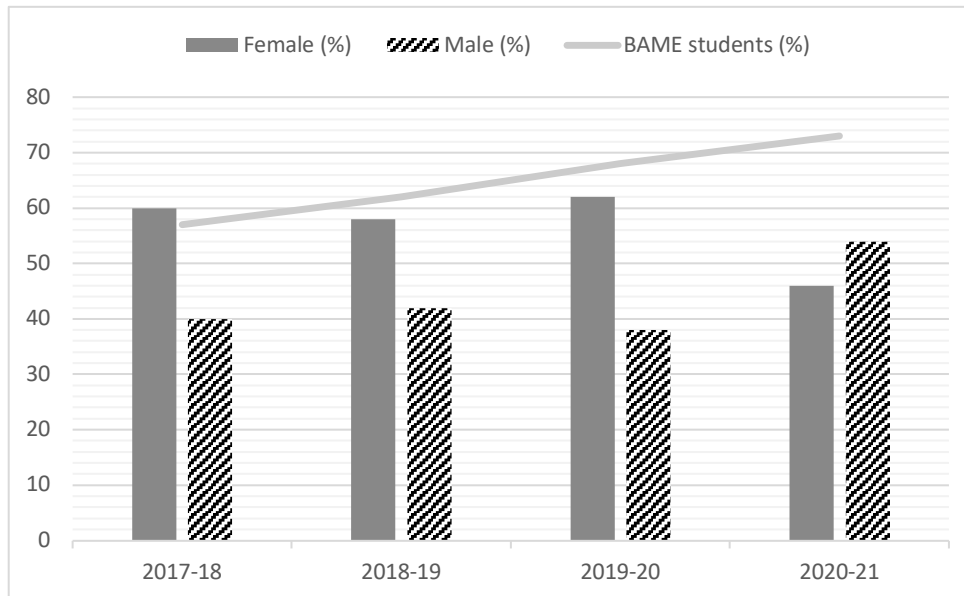
RESULTS

SEC recruitment

Since implementation, applications to SEC positions have increased yearly. In the partnership's inaugural academic year (2017–2018), the 10 positions received 22 applications from 1,325 eligible students (1.7% of the cohort). In 2020–21 academic year, 2.5% of students applied for the 12 SEC positions, which equates to around 48 of the 1,900 eligible students.

A key part of the recruitment process is ensuring SEC are representative of the CEPS faculty's student body, which is 70% male, 83% BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic), and 80% UK nationality, with most students aged between 18–21. In the first year of recruitment (2017–18), 57% of SEC were BAME, which has increased to 73% in 2020–21 (Figure 1). In 2017–18, most of our SEC were in their final year of undergraduate study. For 2020–21, each year of undergraduate study is now represented, and all faculty departments have SEC representation.

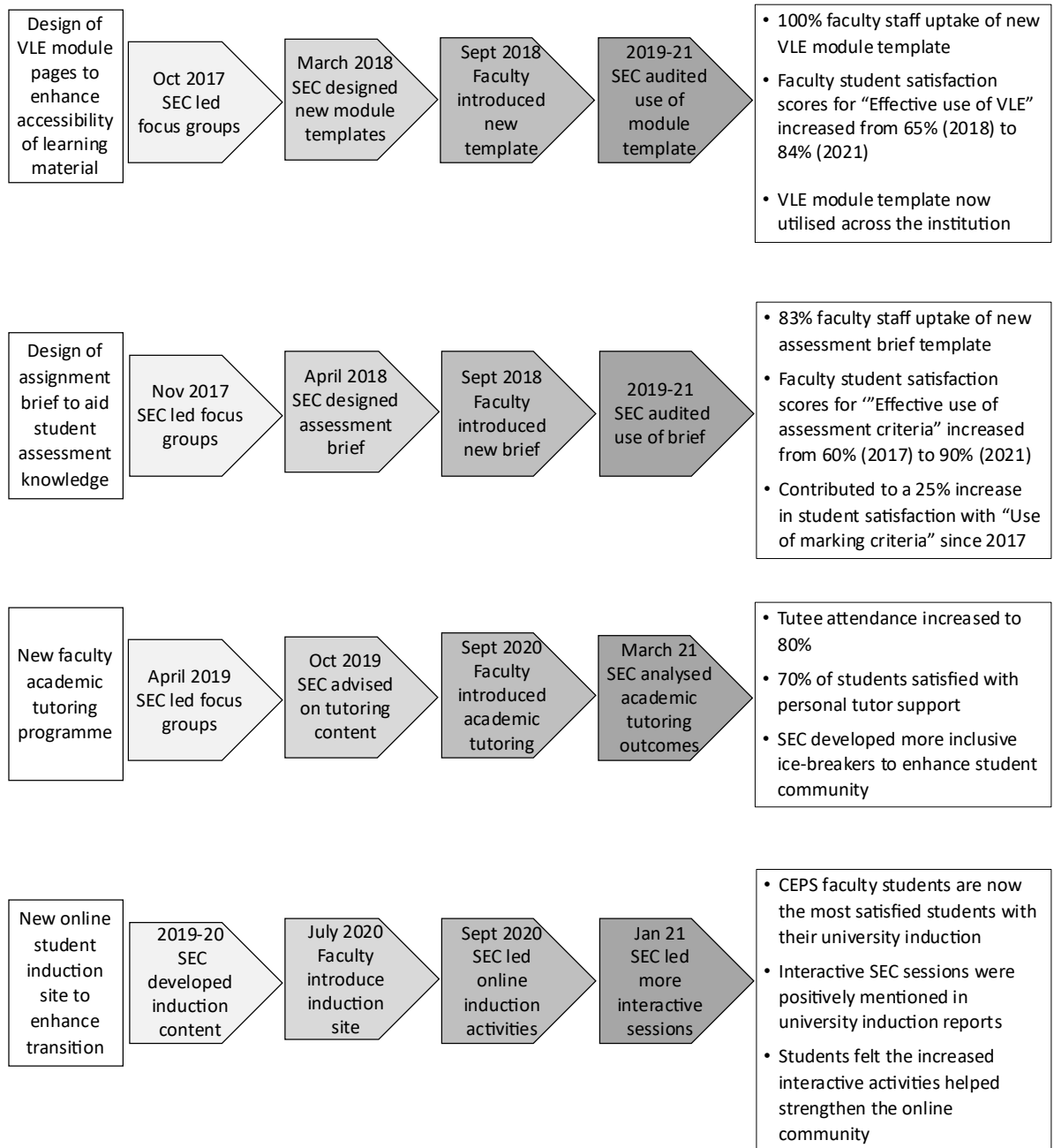
Although the increased popularity of the scheme has enhanced some areas of SEC diversity, gender diversity was 40:60% male to female ratio for the past 3 years. However, in the 2021/22 academic year this has increased to 54:46% male to female (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Changes in SEC representation from 2017 to 2021

Impact of SEC projects on student experience

Over the past 4 academic years, this SEC scheme has led and developed a wide range of L&T projects that have resulted in change to faculty teaching and students' experience. Figure 2 documents the actions and impact on student experience of some of the largest faculty SEC L&T initiatives.

Figure 2: Summary of the longest running SEC projects, detailing yearly actions and final outcomes



As shown in Figure 2, the SEC projects are varied, ranging from designing new assessment support to helping implement a new faculty academic tutoring programme. Yet, the majority of SEC projects have enhanced student experience across the faculty and, in some cases, have now informed the university-wide student experience (e.g., new online induction material being utilised across the institution and the use of a SEC-designed virtual learning environment [VLE] module template).

As SEC are utilising faculty educational material for their learning, they use this student-user perspective to design more inclusive L&T material which reflects the student body. For example, SEC have developed resources to aid students in the navigation of the university's online learning platforms, which included videos on how to book virtual meetings with academic staff and how to access the university's virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI).

Project duration also varies, with some projects running for consecutive years as new SEC bring their experiences of utilising the current educational format. The continual enhancement of the faculty's VLE is a clear example of this. This project was initially implemented to introduce a new SEC-designed VLE module template to ensure a more consistent and accessible faculty approach to presenting module-related learning material. Over the last 4 years, in response to student user feedback on areas of VLE enhancement, this project has now developed around highlighting areas of good practice and indicating areas of further enhancement. This has enabled faculty resources and assistance to be directed to areas that still need improvement. It has also ensured that the developed educational material was reflective of the student cohort's needs because it was directly informed by our students' own lived experiences.

Occasionally, some SEC projects do not result in any educational changes, as SEC determine the current practice is appropriate to provide sufficient educational support. In 2020, SEC explored enhancing personalised exam feedback in response to student feedback. After conducting student focus groups and contacting students from other UK institutions to discuss their exam feedback experience, SEC decided that student demand to enhance personalized exam feedback was unattainable, with current faculty practice reflecting and at times exceeding sector-wide practice.

Raising awareness of student partnership

The SaP partnerships aimed to encourage joint ownership between staff and students to inform educational development and to have an environment that acknowledged both staff and student expertise, recognising good practice whilst promoting respect. The wide range of projects implemented by our SEC have successfully informed educational development; however, establishing a joint ownership recognising and respecting both partners' expertise has been more challenging.

An example of this is the long-standing project based on enhancing student experience of the faculty's VLE. As already described, this project was initially implemented to introduce a new SEC-designed module template, but in response to SEC requests, this project has now developed around ensuring a consistent and high-quality learning experience for all their modules

In 2019, the new SEC decided that highlighting areas of good practice and indicating areas of enhancement within individual module teaching content could help achieve a

consistent approach (Table 1). Each programme module was audited by two SEC, one studying within the same department as the module and one from a different department. This was to enable a wider reference outside of the academic discipline to determine the quality of learning material. Reports were generated for each department and shared with the departmental student experience leads by the middle of each academic term to enable departments to be responsive to findings

Table 1: Summary of the impact of the faculty VLE audit on criteria and compliance

CRITERIA	AUDITED INFORMATION	TEACHING MATERIAL AVAILABILITY 2019–20	TEACHING MATERIAL AVAILABILITY 2020–21	PERCENTAGE CHANGE
Lecture recording	Use of lecture recording	82%	96%	+14%
Assessment information	Use of assignment brief	83%	83%	No Change
Marking information	Mark scheme rubric present	60%	73%	+13%
Feedback to students	Information on cohort exam performance	44%	68%	+24%
	Information on feedback opportunities			
	Worked answers/tutorial solutions			
Student voice	Details of module changes based upon student feedback	17%	21%	+4%

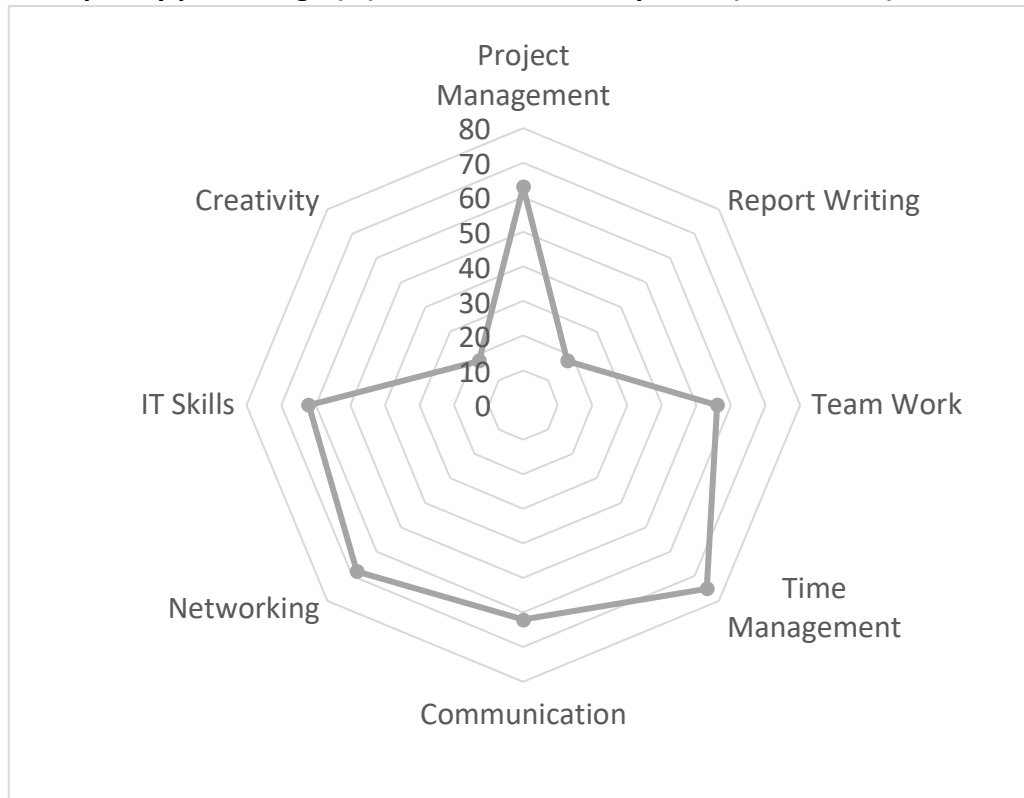
The response from academic staff to the SEC review of their educational material was mixed, with some disputing the findings whilst others embraced the critique. However, a clear strength of this SEC review was the ability to respond to staff disputing the findings, that what was being reported reflected how our students were viewing the educational material. For example, if the SEC could not locate the teaching material or was not aware it was addressing a particular assessment criterion, then was not sufficiently accessible and/or understandable for the student body and should be revised. Although challenging in its first year of implementation, the audit was conducted the following year. However, the departmental student experience leads also became involved in the methodology design, which helped strengthen staff acceptance of the SEC review. This led to most academics responding well to this analysis by SEC and recognising that these reports reflected the student viewpoint.

The work of this SEC audit has resulted in increased quantity and quality of educational resources (see Table 1) due to greater compliance at the module level. Discussions between academic staff and SEC on how to improve their departmental module pages has also increased awareness of the important work of SEC and resulted in more staff-SEC collaboration.

Professional development of SEC

SEC provide reflections on their experience within the role and how their work has impacted their personal development. Analysis of these reflective reports (2017–2021, N = 41) indicated the role was a positive experience, with SEC gaining a range of relevant transferable skills (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Frequency percentage (%) of SEC skills development (2017–2021)



The majority of SEC felt this role improved time management. Although learning to balance studies and the SEC role did prove to be challenging, SEC often highlighted how the benefits of newly obtained skills far outweighed the workload. Another key area was communication skills, with SEC welcoming the opportunity to engage with diverse people from various academic and working backgrounds. For example, the opportunity to sit on interview panels was an experience through which one of the SEC co-authors learnt how to communicate from a potential employer perspective, a skill which they have found invaluable when looking for placements and graduate jobs.

As well as providing integral skills for the professional working environment, the work undertaken by SEC also appears to have benefitted their academic learning; for example, project management was a skill highlighted by 63% of SECs (Figure 3) with presentation skills also noted as a skill (Figure 4). The application of these skills helped enhance resilience and methodology development, as evidenced by the following quote taken from a SEC reflective report: “The team struggled with the initial project implementation, but we learned what approaches not to take and which methodology would work best for the extensive amount of modules we had to audit.”

Figure 4. Word cloud of skills mentioned within the SEC reflective exercise from 2017–2021

Networking was another area highlighted by SEC (Figure 3 and 4). The opportunities of working with a wide range of stakeholders helped inform SEC of their knowledge of the institution, with one SEC stating “Acting as a Student Experience Champion allowed me to gain an insight into just how much the university does to ensure students are heard and accommodated.”. SEC also benefited from supporting their peers, with a SEC saying the scheme “Allowed for me to have direct communication with student representatives and bridge the gap between staff and students.”

DISCUSSION

The new innovative SaP initiative to develop a faculty-based student partnership which informed educational development and delivery at an institutional level has been successful. Over the 4 years of delivery, SEC have identified and implemented a broad diversity of projects, which have been informed by and responded to current student needs. These student-led projects often focused on enhancing the accessibility of learning materials, increasing student support, and developing more transparent communications, all actions that support more inclusive educational delivery (Morgan & Houghton, 2011). A key driver was to improve student experience across the whole cohort by enabling students to engage at the faculty level to enhance their educational experience.

The educational material produced by SEC and SEC L&T projects have contributed to positive impacts on student experience (as indicated by qualitative and quantitative L&T performance data), aligning with other faculty and institutional student partnerships

(Elsharnouby, 2015; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Snelling, 2019). The desire of new SEC to continue the work of previous projects to further enhance their peers' educational experience also indicates the impact of SEC-produced material on improving student learning.

Having educational material being produced by students who experience these processes and systems has been widely recognised as extremely valuable. The employment of SEC for a whole academic year enables better project agility and responsiveness, with students who are living the experience working to solve the problem. Therefore, a strength of this SaP project is having students who are currently studying within the faculty informing the development of the educational material in response to their own and peers' learning experience, providing pedagogic changes relevant to current cohort needs. These observations align with work by Dunne and Zandstra (2011) who found that student-led research can have a direct impact on learning, where students research the L&T they are studying and take responsibility for bringing about pedagogic change. A similar partnership, developed by Freeman, Millard, Brand, and Chapman (2014), found that 57% of their student partners felt empowered to make a difference for their peers and the autonomy of developing projects informed by their learning led to greater confidence in their work.

Another strength of the SaP scheme is the wide diversity of projects combined with scheme longevity, ensuring projects show faculty-wide impacts and enabling this impact on student experience to be reflected in student satisfaction metrics such as the National Student Survey (NSS). This impact on L&T metrics has raised awareness of the benefits of SaP work among academic staff from all departments, which in turn has resulted in increased respect from the academic staff for student expertise in designing and leading educational projects. This SaP scheme has now resulted in an excellent outcome, where academic staff are now requesting SEC to work on departmental L&T projects, rather than setting apart teachers from students in the design of educational materials (Seale, 2010). SaP projects now feature as part of the department's annual review of students' experience, and SEC educational material is often utilised on a wider scale across the whole university.

Another key agenda when establishing this partnership was to involve students who were representative of the faculty's student body. Student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms such as student representation, student surveys, and other projects have traditionally been undertaken voluntarily, but this can lead to issues on student cohort representation (Holdsworth, 2009; Holton, 2018; Thomas, 2017). As it was deemed essential that this SaP scheme enabled faculty students, regardless of the personal backgrounds/commitments, to become involved in the development of learning and teaching, we devised a new framework for working with our student body. As a large percentage of students at Aston University have to undertake paid work alongside their studies to support themselves financially, it was felt that offering paid employment to become a student experience champion would help provide the opportunity for more students to engage in this partnership. Secondly, the employment of students would also show SEC were valued as part of the learning development community (Freeman et al., 2014). Although the payment of students for work at UK HEIs has traditionally been a contested subject (Freeman et al., 2014), the decision to employ students meant the faculty is now in the excellent position of having more applicants than SEC roles. This has meant the faculty can employ SEC who are representative of our student body, with sufficient SEC diversity to aid inclusive curricular design. This approach is Knight, G., Ordidge, H., Timothy, A. R., & Davis, M. (2022). Change agents: The impact of a student partnership on the educational practice of a diverse higher education engineering faculty. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijasp.v6i2.4947>

in contrast to current research that institutional level SaP projects, although often large-scale and involving multiple projects, can sometimes be modest in the number of students involved and not represent the student body (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021). It should be noted that the gender ratio of SEC does not fully reflect the student body, even with the recent increase to an equal split between male and female students. However, as this new SaP has been conducted in a STEM faculty with predominantly male students, having a nearly equal gender distribution of SEC is seen as a strength to develop inclusive educational material. A further limitation of this recruitment process is possible bias towards recruiting the highly engaged students, who can be more likely to apply for these positions (Carey, 2013).

As documented in other SaP publications, a key objective of SaP is to promote respect and trust between staff and students and acknowledge the value of participants' experiences (Felten et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2014). The employment of SEC for a full academic year establishes a strong and beneficial working relationship between SEC, academics, and their cohort peers. These year-long partnerships raised awareness of the work SEC were undertaking with the academic and student body, resulting in increased acknowledgement and respect for this type of partnership. This recognition and acceptance of SEC-led initiatives have led to a better environment, as described by Bovill (2019), of shared trust, respect, and responsibility between SEC and academic staff. SEC are now more confident to propose collaborative work, with greater knowledge and expertise being developed by both parties and enhancing the student experience (Dunne et al., 2011).

The benefits of students undertaking work-related experience whilst studying at university have been shown to enhance student employability (Dunne et al., 2011; Ollis & Gravett, 2020). Therefore, the development of key skills highlighted by SEC such as communication, networking, time management, and project work demonstrates the impact of this scheme on personal development. Furthermore, the employment of SEC enabled the faculty to provide the opportunity for a wide range of students to become SEC, regardless of their personal circumstances. This has helped reduce the issue where particular student cohorts are less likely to engage with extracurricular schemes, risking graduating with reduced graduate employment experience (Holton, 2018; Thomas, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This manuscript describes the implementation of a new SaP framework across a large and culturally diverse faculty delivering STEM education to over 3,500 students with over 50 undergraduate, postgraduate, and work-based learning programmes.

The selection and employment of student experience champions (SEC) on an annual basis have enabled the faculty to develop a dynamic and agile working relationship with students. It created a new working environment where faculty-based students were able to inform the strategic direction and lead the development of faculty and departmental L&T projects. These projects were in response to, and informed by, the learning experiences of the current student cohort and, therefore, reflective of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing faculty educational delivery. The involvement of SEC within the design of new educational material has contributed to faculty-wide increases in student satisfaction with their L&T experience, whilst also resulting in the production of more inclusive student educational

material. This clearly demonstrates the influence a successful faculty-wide SaP scheme can have on educational design and delivery.

The employment and payment of SEC helped to address concerns around the diversity and representation of student partners, although the bias of selection towards the more engaged student is still a concern. The annual recruitment of SEC has also meant that a range of students (up to 60 students to date) have benefited from the personal development this scheme provides.

The longitudinal nature and breadth of the SEC projects as well as their positive outcomes are well recognised and appreciated across the faculty. This has led to a change in faculty practice where the involvement of SEC within departmental projects is now being requested and embedded as part of the programmes' annual enhancement reviews of students' experience, with this scheme also being recognised as good practice by internal and external quality audits.

The data provided in this manuscript has been collated from published university metrics and action logs, final reports, and reflective logs written by the student experience champions (SEC). These SEC logs and final reports are prepared with an awareness that data will be analysed and disseminated. The data presented in this manuscript is using secondary data, showing the final analysis of collated data from various action logs, final reports, reflective logs, and published university metrics from 2017–2021. In further accordance with the data protection act, no individual participant's data can be identified.

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