

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Reflecting on a student-staff partnership: Co-designing and implementing a sustainable induction programme to embed a culture of equality, diversity, and inclusion amongst 3rd-level students

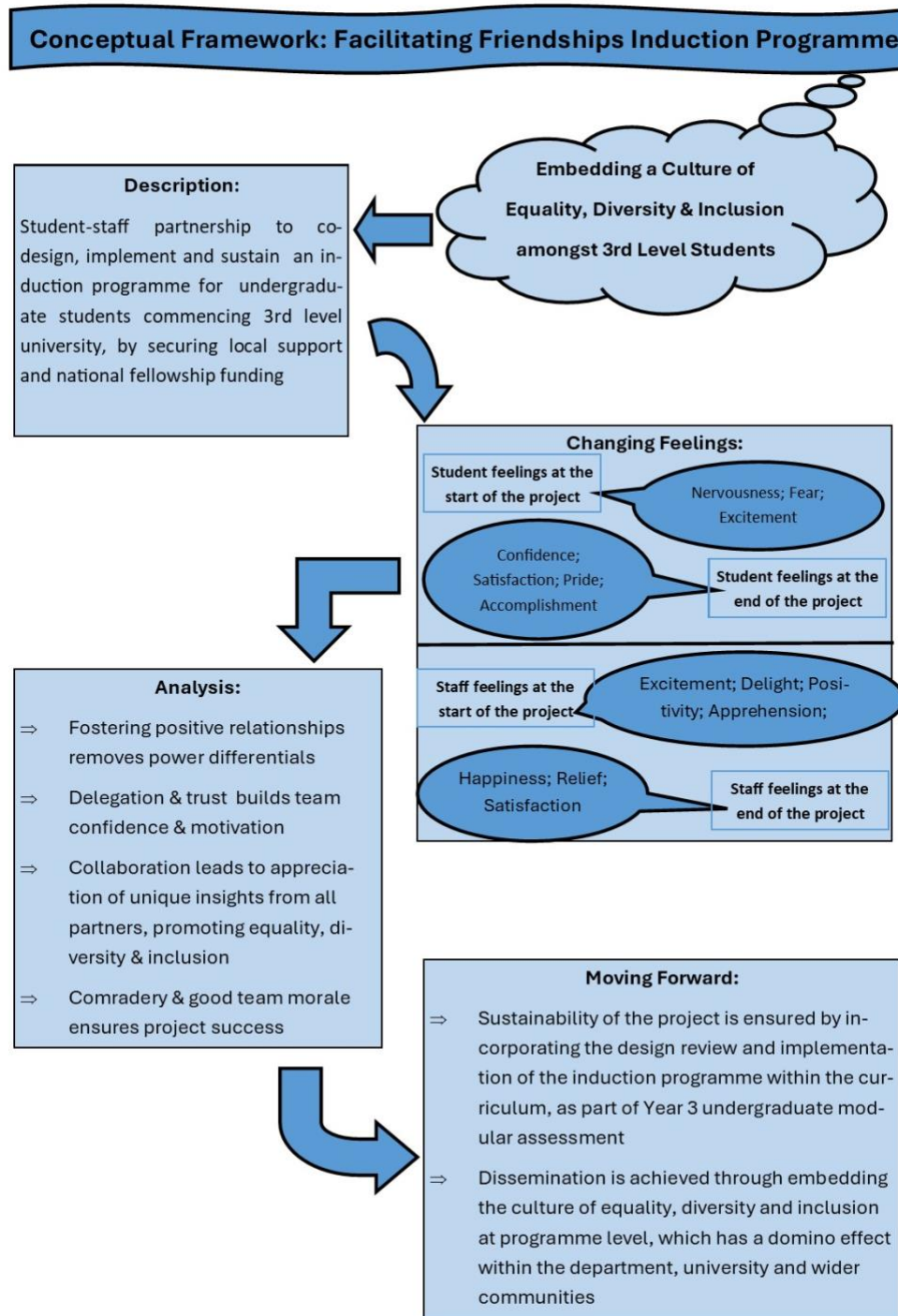
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In the ever-changing landscape of 3rd-level education (all education after second-level, encompassing all higher education institutes) student-staff partnerships represent an important opportunity for promoting collaboration, innovation and student empowerment. These partnerships can encourage dialogue and mutual feelings of respect and can give an insight into others' world, enabling both students and staff to become more open and to consider new ways of thinking (Curran, 2017). These partnerships can also often involve challenges, which can evolve into newly gained insights, hence the importance of reflecting on the partnership process. Reflection can offer analysis of lived experience that highlights the practicalities of the tasks achieved, the lessons learned, and the effect of this experience for those reflecting (Healey et al., 2020).

This reflective piece delves into the narratives and experiences of students and staff that partnered together to co-design and implement a sustainable induction programme for undergraduate students entering 3rd-level education. This partnership came to fruition through observation by both staff and students of a disconnect between peers at the undergraduate level. To address this, faculty from the South East Technological University (SETU) Ireland successfully secured a fellowship from the Technological Higher Education Association (2024) to transform the student experience through funding from the National Technological University TransfOrmation for Recovery and Resilience project (N-TUTORR).

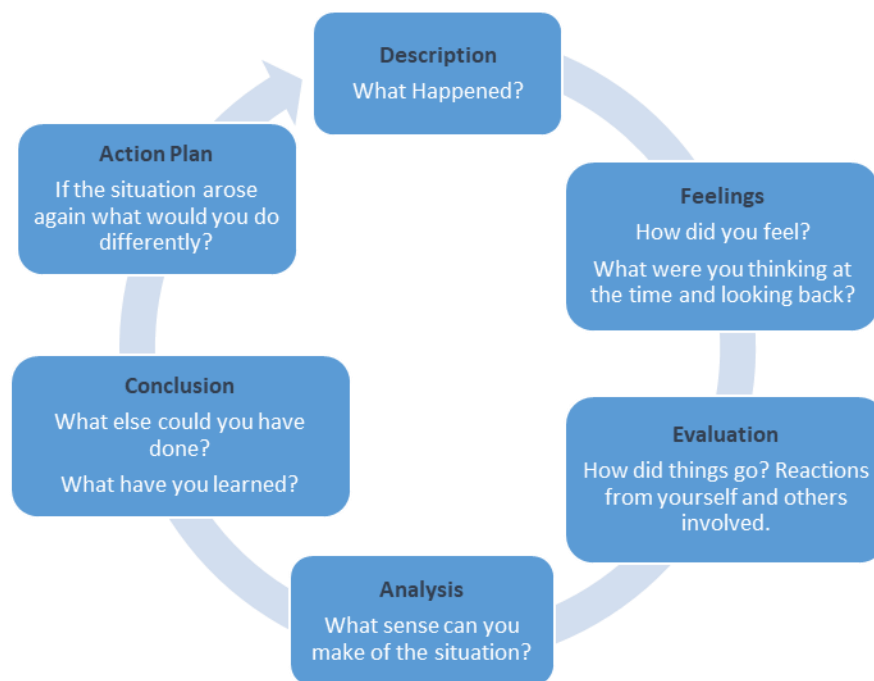
The partnership project was titled "SETU Includes U: 'Facilitating Friendships' Induction for Year 1 Students." Briefly, students and staff worked together to design and deliver a sustainable induction day programme for new undergraduates entering the Department of Nursing and Health Care, School of Health Sciences, SETU. The aim of the student-staff partnership was to enhance the 1st-year undergraduate experience and embed a culture of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) amongst 3rd-level students (See Figure 1 for conceptual framework that guided the programme).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for Facilitating Friendships induction programme

CAPTURING REFLECTIONS

To capture the lived experiences of the students and staff involved in the partnership process, an adapted version of Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle has been used as a framework (See Figure 2). This is a 6-stage cyclic framework that explores the following areas: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan. Gibbs' reflective model is widely used in nursing and healthcare education and in clinical practice to provide a more structured and focused approach to reflection (Ingham-Bloomfield, 2020). The University of Edinburgh Reflection Toolkit (2024) suggests that Gibbs' model allows for a series of systematic reflections which in turn can be associated with a deeper and more meaningful experience of the reflection process. The reflective accounts captured with this framework from both students and staff provide a multifaceted view of the complexities of the partnership process, from initial apprehensions to eventual triumphs, and offers valuable insights into lived experiences regarding student-staff partnerships in higher education, with implications for future practice.

Figure 2. Gibbs' reflection cycle framework



DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDENT-STAFF PARTNERSHIP

The reflective account begins with an overall description of what happened to trigger this initiative and how this evolved. Issues with EDI were initially highlighted at a programme board review, with some undergraduate students reporting feeling isolated and disconnected from their peers. For example, Ruth, a staff partner, noted the importance of addressing cultural divides,

explaining that “faculty also observed divisions between white Irish students and students from diverse backgrounds.”

To address this issue, a proposal was developed by the staff partnership team to embed the theme of EDI at university level by partnering with students to design and implement a sustainable induction programme for new undergraduates. National funding for this initiative was secured by the staff partnership team and this enabled the purchase of reusable materials and the recruitment of paid student partners as ambassadors to promote EDI through the design and implementation of the induction day programme.

Expressions of interest were requested from the Year 3 undergraduate student cohort for the role of student partner on the project and to act as student ambassadors for EDI; however, initially there were no responses. This prompted the faculty team to approach specific students directly and invite them to participate, all of whom agreed. The co-design partnership of the induction programme developed from here.

Jamie, a staff partner, highlighted that the event’s aim “was to create a fun and safe space for the new students to meet each other while providing an opportunity to get to know their new peers who they will be working and studying alongside going forward.” Reflecting on the programme, Chris, a student partner, explained that the practical objectives of the partnership were to “organise activities for new undergraduates such as team building exercises, a calming meditation session, and a lively scavenger hunt across the campus”.

Every aspect of the day was carefully planned and facilitated by the student-staff partnership team. Student partners were encouraged to contribute their insights and ideas, which created a sense of ownership and accountability for the event’s success, as one student partner reflected: “Throughout the planning we all came together and worked as one team. The staff encouraged us throughout the planning and treated us as equals in every part of the event rather than us just helping” (Karolina, student partner).

Table 1 below outlines the schedule for the induction day, which lasted approximately 6 hours. Throughout the day, specific tasks and activities were led by different student partners and staff partners. Local businesses provided sponsorship for some great prizes during the day, and this generated excitement, engagement, and motivation among the new entrants.

A key aspect of the induction was organising students into their small class groups of four to five from the very beginning. These groups were designed to encourage strong peer connections, as these students would be spending significant time together in the first academic year. To encourage bonding, the day began with icebreaker activities that focused on getting to know one another, identifying common interests and team building.

Students also had the opportunity to interact with peers from Years 2 to 4 of their respective programmes. These informal conversations provided valuable insights into their academic journey. Additionally, there was a strong focus on mental health, resilience, and self-care, something the student-staff partnership team considered particularly important for future healthcare professionals.

In the afternoon, students participated in a cross-campus scavenger hunt. This served both as a fun, informal way to strengthen their small group connections and as an introduction to important campus facilities and support services. Before concluding, the student-staff partnership team addressed essential information to prepare students for their first day of

lectures. This included guidance on accessing timetables, a talk from the Gardaí (police) on nightlife safety, and tips on maintaining social connections going forward. Finally, an online evaluation of the induction day was conducted using a QR code. Gathering feedback in this way was essential for refining and improving the induction day for future cohorts.

Sustainability of the initiative year on year was achieved by embedding the induction programme into the Year 3 curriculum, where students earn academic credit for their contributions. This ensures the programme continues long term whilst maintaining its focus on EDI.

Table 1: Facilitating Friendships induction programme

TIME	FACILITATING FRIENDSHIPS INDUCTION PROGRAMME	STAFF/ STUDENT PARTNER NAME
N/A	Music/ Audio Visual Equipment	Lead: Jordan
09.15	- Plan for the day, exits, toilets -Power Point - Hello from Programme Lead & Cohort Lead - Groups- Power Point- sort into groups (as per small class groups) - Each student given their group sticker & name-keep/display for the day - Staff & Year 2/3/4 Students to facilitate ice-breakers Icebreakers and team building in small groups: get to know each other, I am unique, art game, untie the knot game... - Introduce Teams/Logo exercise	Intro/ PowerPoint- Lead: Karolina Icebreakers Lead: Jamie Team: All members
11.00 Coffee Break	During coffee break: Students in their group of 5, to develop 'Team Name/Logo'. Supply markers and blank sheet. Name/logo they develop should be based on something they have in common. 11.30: Prize for the team with the most innovative/best name/logo.	Lead: Chris
11.45am	Talk from Students- Year 2, 3 & 4- how they navigated first year. Q&A- Mingle with smaller group	Lead: Aoife
12.00pm	Mental Health/ Managing Stress as a Healthcare/Nursing Student Guided reflection with music – lying on mats	Lead: Claire
1pm	Lunch	N/A
1.45	Scavenger Hunt across campus- teams based on class groups- use of tic toc/ Instagram posts/ reels	Lead: Jordan

TIME	FACILITATING FRIENDSHIPS INDUCTION PROGRAMME	STAFF/ STUDENT PARTNER NAME
2.30pm- 3.30pm	• Cohort/Programme Lead- Intro & timetable • Student Life and Learning- Student Supports and Services • Safety Talk from Gardaí (Police); Nights out- 'Spiking,' Sexual Assault- supports. • Supporting each other- keeping connections going forward. • Fill page on thoughts from your first day, - these will be collaborated & presented in final year. • Evaluation of the day (QR code displayed- online)	Lead: Ruth

Note: The original programme included the following description at the top: "Plan for first day of college: focus of the day is to nurture and build friendships amongst all students across our programmes."

EVOLVING FEELINGS

In this section, the partnership team describe their feelings and how these feelings positively evolved throughout the project. Initially, the team members felt a mix of nervousness, fear, apprehension, and excitement about joining the partnership project. For example, Chris, a student partner reflected: "I was constantly debating whether I wanted to be part of the project or not. . . . I kept asking myself why I was chosen to be part of this project." Jamie, a staff partner, expressed similar feelings: "My feelings prior to starting the partnership were a combination of both apprehension and excitement."

According to Felten (2017), partnerships are relationships, and, therefore, like all relationships, they are underpinned by feelings and emotions. Healey and Healey (2019) detail that partnership teams should recognise the importance of the emotions of team members from the beginning of their projects and consider embedding appropriate support practices. Examples of support mechanisms would be mentoring, peer support, or reflective writing (Healey & Healey, 2019). These mechanisms were employed by all team members from the inception of this project and are evidenced by regular meetings, ongoing supportive correspondence by email or WhatsApp, and the reflective logs completed by each team member. Aoife, a student partner, reflected on the value of communication, stating; "Communication was essential throughout the process to ensure that all team members knew what the plan was and what was happening on the day. This helped me to feel less nervous about the day"

As the student partners engaged with the support of the partnership team, their confidence grew despite occasional doubts and pressure from balancing academic and personal commitments. The partnership project fostered mutual understanding and appreciation between students and staff. Karolina, a student partner, described the inclusive and friendly dynamic that developed, explaining: "The staff treated us as equals which created a fun friendship between

us". Similarly, Jordan, a student partner, reflected on the reciprocal learning between staff and students, noting:

The staff gained a greater appreciation and understanding for what the students go through on a day-to-day basis. Life is hard regardless of age, gender, race, or religion. However, friendship is key to any individual's success in academia and on a greater note in life.

As staff partners developed more personal connections with the student partners by engaging in open dialogue, actively listening to their perspectives, and acknowledging their contributions, they began to feel more confident in the partnership approach. This confidence was rooted in mutual respect and shared responsibility. This collaborative dynamic not only empowered and motivated students by valuing their voices in decision-making processes, but it also reinforced a sense of collective ownership over the initiative. As the partnership evolved, staff partners felt increasingly confident in the strength of the team, recognising the students' dedication and leadership potential. Jamie, a staff partner, reflected on this shift in perspective, explaining:

Once I got to know the students it was clear to me that they were a diverse, young, and vibrant group, which were committed to the partnership and wanted to make an impact going forward on their fellow students. As the partnership naturally evolved my feelings of initial apprehension dissipated as it was evident that we had a dedicated team that was committed to the task at hand.

Throughout the event itself, student partners' feelings evolved from apprehension and fear to ones of satisfaction, pride, and a sense of accomplishment. This resulted in a successful and rewarding experience for all team members. Mutual respect between the partnership team was an essential element in nurturing this evolution. Karolina, a student partner, described the positive and encouraging environment, saying, "At the time of the Facilitating Friendship day I felt so happy and motivated by the staff to just be ourselves. It created such an enjoyable atmosphere between us all". Similarly, Aoife, a student partner, expressed her pride in the outcome, stating, "The day just was a remarkable success, and I felt proud that we had done well!".

Staff partners felt extremely proud on witnessing the students step into leadership roles within the project. There was a feeling that this was not only a testament to their growth in confidence, but also a reflection of the supportive and empowering environment cultivated by the partnership. The success of the induction validated for the team members the importance of embedding EDI at programmatic level. The positive feedback relating to the induction programme also reinforced the idea that EDI should not be treated as an abstract goal, but as an integral part of programmatic design, shaping both the experiences of students on a day-to-day basis and the broader culture of the university. Claire, a staff partner, reflected on this impact, noting:

Seeing the students take on leadership roles, such as presenting from the podium, was incredibly satisfying. The success of the induction day highlighted the value of embedding equality, diversity, and inclusion at programme level, reinforcing a sense of partnership and shared accomplishment.

EVALUATION AND ANALYSES

In this section, the evaluation and analysis of the student-staff partnership project reveals positive outcomes by the team members. Key themes found within the project's conceptual framework (Figure 1) such as analysis, EDI, culture, and sustainability are all identified. The student-staff partnership describes the project as benefitting from the diverse skill set of the team members along with ensuring effective planning and execution. Chris, a student partner, highlighted the value of varied expertise within the group, observing, "One of the many aspects that I noticed (that) worked well during the project was that we had a wide range of skills that could be used in different situations." Similarly, Ruth, a staff partner, emphasised the ongoing success of the initiative and the contribution of student perspectives, stating:

This project was, and continues to be, a resounding success. The partnership aspect added immense value, and the student partners' insights during planning and dissemination have been invaluable. Their unique perspectives demonstrate the importance of collaboration with those directly impacted by such initiatives.

The diverse perspectives from the students involved enriched the project. The emphasis on collaboratively working together built mutual respect, encouraged personal growth, and developed confidence and interpersonal skills. This collaboration and growth can be viewed as essential aspects to the successful implementation of the project. Reflecting on her personal development, Aoife, a student partner, shared that: "Organisational skills and time management skills were also further developed having completed this project." From a staff perspective, Jamie observed how the experience shaped both professional abilities and team dynamics, noting: "It provided me with a wonderful opportunity to further enhance skills around communication, confidence and team work all while encapsulating a sense of belonging and breaking down the power differentials between both faculty and students." Similarly, Chris, a student partner, described the collective effort required for success, explaining;

I discovered that the art of cooperation entails individuals joining together, combining their abilities, and working towards a common goal that would be challenging or impossible to accomplish separately. Each member of the team plays an important part in achieving the shared goal by offering their thoughts and abilities

Some students shared that participating in the project boosted their confidence and public speaking abilities, as Karolina explained:

I never had to participate in public speaking before, but after the encouragement from the staff and my newfound skills, the public speaking just came naturally to me. I also learnt the importance of sharing my experience with the new students and it was evident that it really benefited them.

The reflections highlighted the need for face-to-face interaction to foster genuine connections, suggesting more in-person activities to build support networks in the future. Emphasising the drawbacks of excessive screen reliance, Jordan, a student partner, remarked:

Individuals can struggle to communicate with each other unless it is through a screen. People have become so consumed by what is on a screen, they forget to appreciate what is all around them and the experiences and friends they are missing. They may fail to raise their eyes from their phones for a split second, to really connect with another individual, it must be face to face.

Despite initial apprehensions, the project's smooth running and positive evaluation from new entrants highlighted its success. Overall, the project fostered a cooperative student-staff partnership and achieved its goals of facilitating student connections and easing anxieties related to entering university life. Reflecting on this achievement, Chris, a student partner, observed:

The two days of induction went well and, in my opinion, we achieved the objectives of the project, which was to facilitate Year 1 students to make friendships easily, while also attempting to ease their anxiety and difficulties that come with transitioning to university. This was evident in their evaluations of the day."

From a staff perspective, Jamie shared his own sense of fulfilment in seeing the project's impact, remarking: "It was so satisfying to see the new incoming students getting to know each other. I would like to think that this helped diminish the often daunting feelings of starting university and a new chapter in their lives"

On review of all reflections about the initiative, it is evident that central to the project was a desire by all team members to address systemic barriers to inclusion of students from minority groups. The project aimed to create a welcoming environment for students from diverse backgrounds. The inclusion of peer leaders from minority groups enhanced relatability and representation. Emphasising the importance of student voices in shaping change, Ruth, a staff partner, explained: "Our goal was to enhance the student experience, which would not be possible without the student partner's involvement. As educators, partnering with students shows humility and a commitment to listening to their diverse voices." One student partner, highlighted the value of building connections beyond the classroom, saying:

I think that this project is amazing. It is amazing for the students/faculty to get to know each other outside of the lectures. It is also such a rewarding project to make sure that students are at ease when they are starting college. It creates an equal community and being a part of it will encourage students to continue studying. (Karolina, student partner)

The commitment from the project team to equity amongst students and staff alike was an essential aspect which was heavily fostered within the project. Open dialogue, collaborative leadership and a supportive environment by both staff and students created a sense of unity and empowerment. This inclusive culture will benefit both current and future students. Looking back on the collaborative process, Jordan, a student partner, recalled: "The project was run extremely

well, thanks to the mentorship of lecturers involved. They really helped to get this project off the ground and supported students with all their ideas. This helped to create a positive, and cooperative work environment.” In a similar vein, Jamie, a staff partner, reflected on the team spirit that drove the initiative forward, noting, “One area that stood out to me within the partnership was the high sense of moral and camaraderie between the team to get the project completed and make it a success for all involved not just the partnership”

The inclusive and diverse skillset within the team was heavily highlighted throughout the analysis of reflections. One student partner highlighted that the limited range of diversity within the student-partnership group could potentially have an impact on the overall outcome of the project:

Upon reflection of the induction programme, the only thing that might have been helpful is if we had a more diverse group of students involved in the project. The project was heavily led by students in the Applied Health Care course. With only a handful of students to help from other courses on the day of the induction. I think with the assistance from other respective disciplines we then could have tailored each day more specifically to the needs of those individual groups. (Jordan, student partner)

The funding received from N-TUTORR played a crucial role in making this event possible as a student-staff partnership. Without national or institutional financial support, involving students in such partnerships would be much more challenging (Curran, 2017). The allocated funding allowed for the purchase of equipment needed to facilitate the day’s activities. As this equipment will be reused multiple times, it serves as a sustainable resource, aligning with the project’s ongoing commitment to sustainability. Additionally, providing stipends to students reinforced the value of their individual contributions while also initially serving as an incentive for participation. Continued funding is essential to ensure that 3rd-level institutions can sustain and expand student-staff partnerships in the future.

The integration of the induction day at curriculum level ensures its sustainability. The positive impact on 1st-year students, including reduced anxiety and new friendships, demonstrates the lasting benefits of such initiatives. This project displays how embedding EDI principles creates long-term cultural change and supportive networks. Embedding the programme into the Year 3 curriculum ensures its sustainability, longevity, and continued alignment with EDI principles. Speaking to the importance of building change into programme structures, a staff partner, remarked:

From my perspective, the project was successful in both the short and long term. A culture shift can take time to embed, so the sustainability piece of embedding the student-staff partnership within the curriculum, where credit is awarded for achieving equality, diversity and inclusion with induction at programme level, is crucial to this dynamic process and the domino effect it has on both staff and students. (Claire, staff partner)

Echoing this sentiment, Ruth, a staff partner, emphasised the broader influence of the initiative, stating: “By addressing barriers to equality and fostering inclusivity, this initiative has

laid a durable foundation for sustainability. The positive outcomes and widespread appreciation for the partnership reinforces its long-term impact.”

CONCLUSION

The reflective process supports the delineation of lessons learned from the partnership project and, based on this, recommendations for future practice are made from the perspectives of both staff and student partners. The partnership project unfolded through the mutual recognition of the need for students and staff to unite to address the transition challenges faced by 1st-year students entering 3rd level, with the ultimate goal of embedding a culture of EDI at programme, university, and community levels.

The main limitation encountered was initially securing student support for the project, as when this request was circulated to the wider Year 3 cohort, there was no expressions of interest. This was overcome by approaching specific students directly, and when invited to participate, they were delighted to become involved. Once the project started, faculty were cognisant to foster positive relationships and remove power differentials. Team confidence and motivation was cultivated through delegation, trust, and effective collaboration which ultimately led to appreciation of unique insights from all partners, promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion.

A key enabler for the success of the project was the national fellowship funding received from N-TUTORR, which validated the importance of addressing EDI within 3rd-level education. Without national or institutional financial support, it can be difficult to include students in these partnerships (Curran, 2017). Adopting this collaborative, collective approach to working together provides opportunities to re-frame the roles of both parties with the consequent responsibilities and potential for learning associated with that re-framing (Dickerson et al., 2016).

The students highlighted the importance of teamwork, effective communication, and their own personal growth from the partnership. They emphasised the importance of seizing opportunities and building relationships. They gave insight into the development of their professional communication, organizational, and time management skills through participating in the partnership. They acknowledged the relevance of these skills within their future careers and detail how these skills were honed through meticulous planning and adherence to schedules. Reflecting on this one student partner, explained: “The main learning from the partnership was professional communication between us as a team and with students on the day. This will be brought forward in my future career as it is essential within the healthcare industry” (Aoife, student partner).

Overall, the reflections highlight how the partnership underscored the significance of teamwork, communication, face to face interaction, and stepping out of comfort zones to achieve collective and personal growth. Interestingly, similar lessons learned were identified by staff partners, whilst also acknowledging the importance of dissemination and sustainability of the initiative to achieve an overall culture of EDI. Looking at the bigger picture, Ruth, a staff partner, remarked:

This project reinforced the importance of involving students as partners in shaping their educational experience. . . . Reflecting on the outcomes of this project, I see potential for

applying its principles to broader university-wide practices, creating a ripple effect that could enhance our overall culture

In a complementary perspective another staff partner, highlighted the interpersonal dynamics that make such initiatives thrive, stating: “Trust and delegation within a group of people motivates them to work confidently towards a common goal, foster positive relationships and remove power differentials, creating space for a culture of equality, diversity and inclusion to flourish” (Claire, staff partner).

The resounding success of the project highlights the importance of its sustainability, particularly as financial funding is a finite resource and was instrumental as a key driver to initiate the work to commence the project. The majority of the funding was used to pay stipends to the student partners to acknowledge the value of this work and enable them to give their spare time to the project as a part-time job. Sustainability of student buy-in has been achieved by embedding the ongoing design and implementation of the induction programme within Year 3 of the curriculum where students gain academic credit for their participation. Also, most of the materials purchased for activities are reusable. Finally, whilst securing national funding was a key driver behind the project, local support was also fundamental to its success, and this came in the form of sponsorship from local businesses and departmental wide practical help and moral support, particularly on the day of the induction programme.

As the team members move forward, they carry with them the lessons and experiences from this transformative initiative. These reflections underscore the potential of student-staff partnerships to create supportive equal, diverse and inclusive learning environments, benefiting all involved in higher education and beyond.

Recommendations for future practice:

- National support in terms of fellowship funding is positive to highlight the importance of such EDI initiatives and kickstart the evolution of practices around Year 1 induction approaches at 3rd level.
- Local support from both staff and students is essential to successfully embed a culture of EDI initially at programme level through an induction programme, which then has a domino effect within the department, university, and wider communities.
- Sustainability of the Year 1 induction initiatives are ensured by incorporating the design, review, and implementation of the induction programme within the curriculum, as part of Year 3 undergraduate modular assessment.
- In-person activities facilitate students to build support networks in the future.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

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