

UCD Fellowship in Teaching & Academic Development

Engagement through Partnership: Students as Partners in Teaching & Learning Final Report 2023-2025

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Executive Summary

Background

Student-staff partnership (SSP) is located within traditions of democratic education and critical pedagogy, foregrounding reciprocity, agency and shared responsibility. It is a values-based way of working enacted through everyday practices that redistributes power in knowledge production and educational decision-making. Across settings, reported SSP benefits include enhanced belonging, agency, confidence and metacognitive awareness and motivation for students and staff, and stronger enhancement cultures and coherent quality cycles at an institutional level. Limitations in this evidentiary base, however, include small-scale, cross-sectional case studies with self-selecting participants and limited attention to counterfactuals or longer-term outcomes. Systematic accounts of tensions, partial realisations and unintended consequences of SSP are emerging in the literature.

What we did

We used a realist inquiry framework to support programme theory development about how student–staff partnership practices operate in different institutional contexts. We first conducted a realist review to develop mid-range (explanatory) theory about how SSP in higher education works, for whom, in what ways and under what conditions it could become a sustainable way of being and working together. We next conducted a realist-informed survey across four schools in UCD to test the plausibility and contextual variation of these theories. We then conducted a realist evaluation workshop with academic and professional staff and students in UCD to adjudicate, refine and consolidate final UCD-specific programme theories.

What we found

Explanatory evidence across the published literature supported five mid-range programme theories of SSP. These addressed how Inclusive Institutional Cultures Enable Partnership; Cross-Boundary Collaboration Strengthens Learning and Practice; Curriculum Co-Design Builds Shared Ownership; Reflective Dialogue Sustains Partnership Practice; and Boundary-Spanning Practices Enable Collaboration and Change. Evaluation in the local context of UCD directed analytical attention towards three theories with the greatest contextual resonance and explanatory coherence. These were further refined using team-based adjudication and individual written feedback derived during the workshop. Results suggest that in the context of UCD:

When the university intentionally flattens hierarchies and designs inclusive, shared learning spaces where roles are clear, resources are equitable, and participation is transparent, collaboration and mutual learning flourish. Under these conditions, mechanisms of trust, humility, facilitation and reflective dialogue are activated, generating belonging, confidence, professional growth and authentic co-creation across disciplinary and professional boundaries. Sustained impact depends on institutional leadership, resourcing and recognition that legitimise participation and ensure equity of voice.

When the university cultivates inclusive and dialogical environments in which power dynamics are acknowledged, roles are clear, and time and resources are intentionally allocated, mechanisms of trust, mentoring, recognition and shared ownership are activated. These mechanisms generate belonging, confidence, professional growth and sustained engagement among students, faculty and professional staff.

When students and staff co-design teaching, learning or assessment within transparent and well-resourced frameworks, aligned to task complexity and student experience, mechanisms of shared authority, relevance, motivation, trust and openness are activated. These mechanisms generate deeper learning, shared ownership, improved dialogue and meta-pedagogical insight. Sustainable curriculum co-design depends on institutional support, preparation, compensation for students and clarity about structural constraints.



Our Key Recommendations

Institutional-level recommendations include embedding SSP in policy, structures, and recognition, supporting structured relational partnership practices. At a school and college level these include developing localised, discipline-relevant SSP approaches and strengthening the inclusion of professional staff in SSPs. At a programme and module level these include prioritising feasible and high-impact co-design activities and using transparent frameworks to support trust and shared authority. Finally at a partnership/ project-level providing adequate preparation and ongoing support for all partners, and ensuring equity through compensation or recognition. We are preparing the following resources to support SSP at UCD:

- Self-assessment checklist
- Workshops
- Symposium
- Videos



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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale

Across higher education, student participation has moved from the margins of governance to the centre of quality assurance and enhancement agendas. International quality frameworks now position students as co-creators of learning and as partners in decision-making, rather than as passive recipients or consumers of educational services (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Healey & Healey, 2019, 2024; Bovill, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). In Europe, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and associated Bologna communiqués explicitly require meaningful student representation in institutional and external review processes (ENQA, 2015), while comparable frameworks in the UK, Australasia and North America emphasise the deliberate engagement of students as partners in governance, curriculum design and enhancement (QAA, 2018; TEQSA, 2021; CHEA, 2019; Matthews, 2017). Universities are expected to demonstrate not only that they listen to students, but that they work with them in sustained, dialogical ways that support learning, equity and institutional change (HEA, 2016; QQI, 2016, 2024).

In the Irish context, a specific policy architecture has developed around student engagement in decision-making. The *Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making* report (HEA, 2016) articulated higher education institutions' responsibility to model democratic practices in their own governance structures and to embed student voice at all levels of decision-making. More recently, the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 (Part 4) has strengthened statutory expectations for student engagement, mandating more systematic involvement of students and renewed attention to equity of access and participation in higher education (Government of Ireland, 2022). The Student Engagement in Teaching and Learning (SETL) Committee was established under the HEA–National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education to provide sector-wide leadership on engagement and partnership. Complementary national initiatives – including the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), StudentSurvey.ie and N-TUTORR (National Technological University Transformation for Recovery and Resilience) – have helped move the sector from a narrow focus on student feedback toward broader ideas of partnership, co-creation and shared responsibility for learning and institutional change, supported by case studies and resources that showcase student–staff partnership in action (NStEP, 2016, 2022; StudentSurvey.ie, 2017, 2018, 2023; HEA, 2022).

Within UCD, successive institutional strategies and frameworks explicitly position student experience, partnership and inclusive culture as core priorities, and call for more dialogical, partnership-oriented approaches to teaching, learning and governance. UCD's *Strategy 2020–2024: Rising to the Future*, the *Education and Student Success Strategy 2020–2024* and the *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan 2021–2024* each emphasise student engagement, inclusion and co-creation as key drivers of educational quality and organisational change (University College Dublin (UCD), 2019, 2020a, 2020b). The more recent *UCD Strategy to 2030 – Breaking Boundaries* further reinforces partnership and inclusive culture as central to the university's future direction (University College Dublin, 2024).

Across schools, colleges and professional units, many colleagues already work in partnership with students on curriculum design, learning, teaching, services and governance. These practices include module-level curriculum co-design, advisory and representative roles, co-research, and collaborations in professional

and support services. However, existing activity is unevenly distributed, often dependent on individual enthusiasm or short-term funding, and not always clearly connected to institutional systems of governance, quality, recognition and resourcing, echoing international evidence that partnership work is frequently localised, project-based and vulnerable to changing priorities (Bovill et al., 2016; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

International scholarship and review in student-staff partnerships point to persistent challenges that resonate across systems. These include variation in how partnership is defined and evidenced, uneven opportunities for capacity building, and risks that formal structures for student voice become tokenistic or primarily symbolic (Mercer Mapstone et al., 2017; Smith, 2021; Governance Models for Student Involvement in Higher Education, 2025). These tensions underline the importance of context-sensitive models that can translate high level policy commitments into sustainable practice in particular institutional settings.

There is therefore a need for a clearer, evidence-informed account of how student–staff partnership currently operates in a large research-intensive university like UCD; how it is understood and experienced by students, academic staff and professional staff; what conditions support or constrain it; and how promising practices can be strengthened, better aligned, and sustained. In line with calls for more context-sensitive, mechanism-focused accounts of student-staff partnership (Ní Bheoláin et al., 2020; de Bie et al., 2021; Matthews et al., 2021), this requires moving beyond catalogues of "good practice" toward explanatory frameworks that can travel across diverse local settings.

This report results from a UCD Teaching and Academic Development Fellowship project addressing Engagement through Partnership: Students as Partners in Teaching & Learning. It investigates how students can be meaningfully involved as partners in curriculum design, teaching, assessment, and enhancement activity across diverse disciplines. In doing so, it seeks to translate policy aspirations around student engagement and partnership into lived practice within a large research-intensive university.

1.2 Student-staff partnership

We use the term student–staff partnership (SSP) to describe collaborative work in which students and staff contribute, in different but complementary ways, to shaping learning, teaching, governance and services. Our understanding is informed by the international Students as Partners literature, including work by Alison Cook-Sather, Catherine Bovill, Peter Felten, Mick Healey, Kelly Matthews and others, which treats partnership as a relational, values-based way of working, grounded in respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility, rather than as a time-limited initiative or "intervention" to be rolled out.

In line with this tradition, we understand partnership as:

- a process and way of being in relationship, not a fixed model to be replicated;
- inherently contextual, taking different forms in different disciplines, programmes and services;
- potentially transformative but not automatically equitable, requiring explicit attention to who participates, whose knowledge counts, and how power is shared.

The project therefore focuses less on identifying partnership activities that "work" or "do not work" and more on understanding how partnership is conceptualised, aligned and lived in UCD: where it is flourishing, where it is struggling to realise its potential, and what can be learned from tensions, discomfort and partial successes as well as from widely celebrated examples.

1.3 Aim, approach and research questions

The overarching aim of the Fellowship project was to develop and test a set of programme theories and practical considerations for student–staff partnership at UCD that:

- are grounded in international scholarship and realist evidence synthesis;
- are informed by the lived experience of students, academic staff and professional staff in UCD;
- can be adapted across disciplines, schools and services;
- foreground equity, inclusion and sustainable cultural change.

To address the complexity and relational nature of partnership work, the project adopted a realist approach. Realist inquiry asks not simply whether something works, but how, why, for whom and under what conditions particular practices or ways of working take root, struggle or evolve. In this project, realist methods were used to explore how student–staff partnership is shaped by UCD's specific cultures, structures and histories, and what can be enabled when particular contextual conditions are in place.

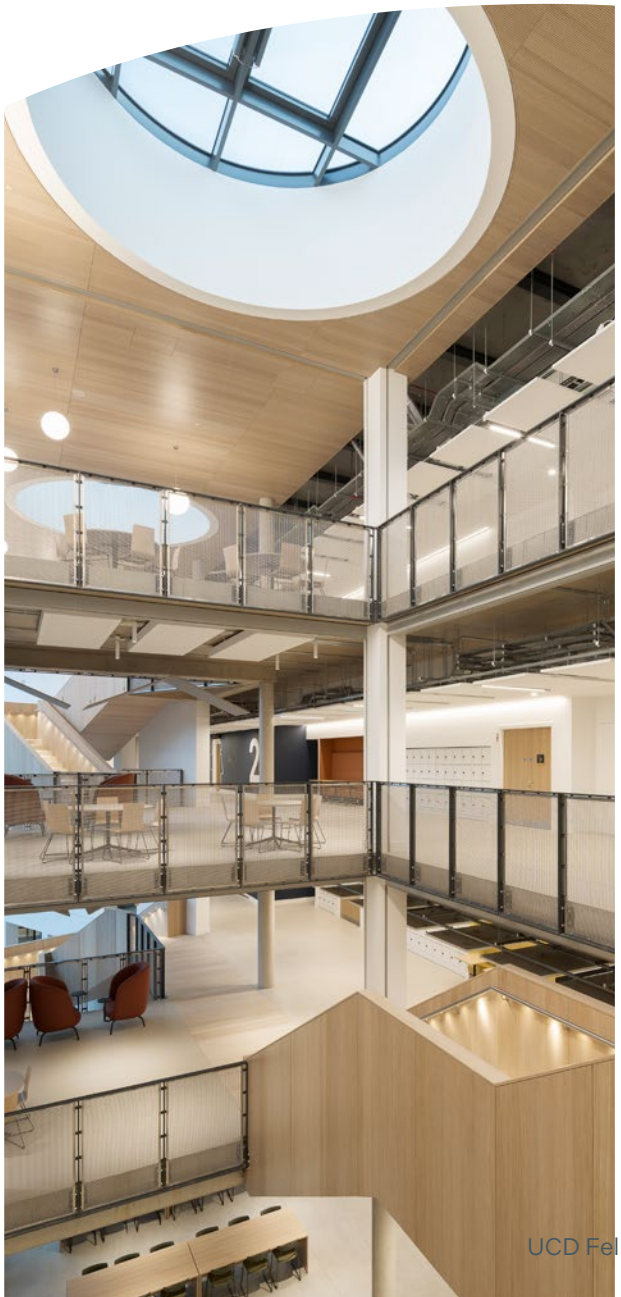
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Figure 1: Programme of Work



Guided by the feedback of practitioner and expert panels, and by the findings of the realist review, the study was framed around the following research questions:

1. How might student–staff partnership work be conceptualised and aligned with institutional and cultural contexts in a large research-intensive university such as UCD?
2. What mindsets, relational practices and cross-role collaborations enable student–staff partnership to be experienced as meaningful, equitable and sustainable by students, academic staff and professional staff?
3. What forms of support, structures and resources help people to navigate common tensions in partnership work, for example, around power dynamics, role clarity, time and workload, continuity and equity of participation?



1.4 Contribution of the Fellowship

This study is designed to contribute at three interconnected levels.

- **For UCD**, it offers an institution-specific account of how student–staff partnership is currently understood and practised; identifies enabling and constraining conditions in UCD's cultures, structures and systems; and presents a set of Programme Theories, examples and tools that can support colleagues who wish to embed partnership more deeply in their work.
- **For the wider sector**, it provides a detailed case study of partnership work in a large research-intensive university, using realist methods to illuminate how national and institutional policy commitments are translated into local practices across academic and professional domains. The Programme Theories and resources have been designed so that they can be adapted by other institutions with similar ambitions.
- **For scholarship on partnership**, it adds a realist perspective that focuses explicitly on context, mechanism and outcome, and that attends to professional staff, equity and institutional conditions alongside classroom-based initiatives. By tracing how theories developed from an international realist review travelled into, and were reshaped by, the UCD context, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of partnership as an anchoring innovation in higher education.

2. Conceptual and evidence base

The review drew primarily on international scholarship published in journals such as the *International Journal for Students as Partners, Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education, and the Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, alongside books and open-access resources on student-staff partnership.

2.1 Conceptual foundations and terminology

SSP is typically located within traditions of democratic education and critical pedagogy that resist consumerist framings of higher education and instead foreground reciprocity, agency and shared responsibility (Bovill, 2012; Bovill, 2013; Cook- Sather, 2013). In this tradition, partnership is not simply a mechanism for increasing "engagement" but a values-based way of working that seeks to redistribute power in knowledge production and educational decision-making.

Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten's definition of partnership as a collaborative and reciprocal process in which all participants have opportunities to contribute – though not necessarily in the same ways – to curriculum and pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, investigation and analysis remains a touchstone (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp. 6–7). Parallel work by Healey and colleagues similarly emphasises partnership as an open-ended process grounded in respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility rather than a fixed model to be replicated (Healey et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2016; Healey & Healey, 2019, 2024).

More recent writing conceptualises partnership as an "anchoring innovation" that re-orientates institutional practices without being easily reduced to a project or scheme (Cook-Sather, 2022). Cook-Sather, Ho, Kaur and Tamim (2024) show how partnership principles are translated and re-translated in academic staff development in the Global South, illustrating how partnership travels as a stance that must be negotiated within specific institutional histories, cultures and power relations.

Terminology in the field remains diverse. Authors write about Students as Partners, co-creation, student voice, partnership, and collaboration, with overlapping but not identical meanings (Healey et al., 2014; Healey & Healey, 2019, 2024; Matthews, 2017; Cook-Sather et al., 2019). We adopt the term student-staff partnership (SSP) to keep the relational dyad between students and staff explicit and to acknowledge the multiple roles involved in our study, which include academic and professional staff alongside students. This usage is nested within, and informed by, the broader literature rather than replacing it (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014).

For us, partnership is a way of being in relationship that is anchored in values, enacted through everyday practices, and supported or constrained by institutional context, rather than as a bounded "intervention" to be piloted and then judged as successful or not.

2.2 From student voice to co-creation: scope and modalities

Historically, student engagement work has tended to focus on representation and feedback: committee membership, surveys, and consultation exercises designed to gather student opinion and feed it into quality processes (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Evans, Mujis, & Tomlinson, 2015). The realist review confirmed a now well-documented shift from this voice-as-input model towards co-creation, where students and staff collaborate in curriculum design, assessment, pedagogical innovation, governance and enhancement projects (Bovill, 2013; Bovill et al., 2016; Healey et al., 2014; Healey & Healey, 2019, 2024; Mercer Mapstone et al., 2017).

Modalities include curriculum and assessment partnerships, scholarship of teaching and learning collaborations, undergraduate research, co-facilitated communities of practice, and redesign of services such as libraries, IT, estates, wellbeing and advising (Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Marquis et al., 2019; Matthews, Cook-Sather, & Brough, 2018; de Bie et al., 2021). The review highlighted that non-academic partnerships remain under-represented in the canonical literature despite their central importance for student experience (Healey et al., 2014; Mercer Mapstone et al., 2017), a gap that directly informs our inclusion of professional staff as key partners in this study.

Mercer-Mapstone et al.'s (2017) systematic review illustrates both the breadth of activity and the uneven depth of power-sharing. Many initiatives remain episodic, grant-funded or bounded within individual modules. From a realist perspective, this pattern prompts questions such as: *When do supportive local contexts suffice to trigger partnership activities, and when are wider institutional conditions required to enable sustained and scaled partnerships?* The programme theories developed in this study respond directly to these types of questions.

2.3 Claimed benefits and the evidentiary base

For **students**, partnership is associated with enhanced belonging, agency, confidence and metacognitive awareness; development of graduate capabilities such as communication, collaboration and leadership; and improved assessment and feedback literacy (Bovill et al., 2016; Bovill, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Narrative accounts in *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* similarly trace students' growth in self-authorship, voice and criticality as they navigate new partnership roles (Mathrani, 2018; Mathrani & Cook-Sather, 2020; Koltun-Fromm & Eze, 2019).

For **staff,** authors describe deeper insight into student learning processes, renewed pedagogical creativity and motivation derived from more dialogic relationships with students (Cook-Sather, 2013; Curran, 2017; Matthews, 2017). Cook-Sather and Kaur (2022), working with staff partners, show how epistemic confidence, open-mindedness and co-creation attitudes shape staff contributions to partnership, while the edited collection by Cook-Sather and Wilson (2020) documents how partnership can build courage, confidence and capacity across diverse institutional and disciplinary contexts.

At **institutional** level, partnership is associated with stronger enhancement cultures, better alignment between curriculum intent and learner experience, and more coherent quality cycles in which student knowledge is treated as expertise rather than raw data (Healey et al., 2014; Matthews et al., 2021).

The realist review conducted identified important limitations in this evidentiary base, however. Reviews point to a preponderance of small-scale, cross-sectional case studies with self-selecting participants and limited attention to counterfactuals or longer-term outcomes (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Ní Bheoláin et al., 2020). Positive narratives are common, while systematic accounts of tensions, partial realisations and unintended consequences are less visible (Bovill et al., 2016; Matthews et al., 2019). Recent work begins to address this by interrogating how and when partnership struggles to shift power relations, or produces ambivalent experiences for participants, rather than seeking clear-cut "successes" or "failures" (Abbot & Cook-Sather, 2020; Zhang, Matthews, & Liu, 2025).

From a realist standpoint, this means that while there is considerable evidence that partnership can be beneficial, we know less about how particular configurations of context and enablers produce particular patterns of outcomes, especially in large, complex institutions like UCD.

2.4 Power, equity and representation

A significant strand of the literature foregrounds equity, representation and social justice. Authors caution that, without deliberate design, partnership can reproduce existing privilege when opportunities are taken up mainly by already confident and well-connected students or those with substantial cultural capital (Bindra et al., 2018; Marquis et al., 2018; Masuku, 2024). Casey (2024) highlights dynamics of representation: who is invited, who feels able to speak, whose contributions are taken up, and whose knowledge is legitimised in decision-making.

Building on earlier work, de Bie et al. (2021) reframe Cook-Sather, Bahti and Ntem's (2019) *Checklist for Developing a Pedagogical Partnership Program* through an explicit equity lens. Their analysis asks institutions to consider who has been well- and under-served by existing structures, who stands to benefit from partnership, what harms might be inadvertently reproduced, and how programmes can redress epistemic, affective and ontological harms. Drawing on an equity-focused stream at McMaster University, they argue for intentionally seeking, supporting and remunerating students from equity-seeking groups, not simply involving them in proportion to existing demographics.

Matthews (2017) similarly proposes principles for good partnership practice, fostering inclusive partnerships, nurturing power-sharing relationships through dialogue and reflection, accepting partnership as a process with uncertain outcomes, engaging in ethical partnerships, and enacting partnership for transformation. De Bie et al. (2021) and others urge institutions to push these principles further by naming specific power dynamics and harms, and by committing to ongoing struggle for greater equity rather than passively accepting "uncertain outcomes."

Across this work, authors warn of performative partnership and "voice-washing", whereby consultation is branded as co-creation without corresponding shifts in power or decision rights (Healey & Healey, 2019; de Bie, 2020). This risk is particularly acute when partnership is used as evidence for quality assurance, but students have limited influence on actual decisions (Naylor et al., 2020; Matthews et al., 2021). Suggested responses include co-created charters, role agreements, shared decision logs and transparent reporting on how student contributions have shaped outcomes (Casey, 2024; Coombe et al., 2018).

These concerns are directly informed by our emergent Fellowship Programme Theories, where Programme Theory 1 (inclusive institutional culture) and Programme Theory 5 (boundary-spanning relational practices) both foreground equity, representation and visible power-sharing as conditions for meaningful partnership.

2.5 Mindsets, relationships and the craft of collaboration

A growing body of scholarship focuses less on structures and more on mindsets, relationships and readiness. Gauthier (2020) and Rideau (2022) suggest that growth-oriented and reflexive stances, including curiosity, humility and a willingness to interrogate assumptions, are as consequential as formal roles or governance diagrams. Cook-Sather, Gauthier and Foster (2020) similarly emphasise the role of growth mindsets in enabling participants to remain open to uncertainty and challenge.

Narrative accounts by Koltun-Fromm and Eze (2019), Mathrani (2018), Mathrani and Cook-Sather (2020) and others describe "dwelling in discomfort", navigating uncertainty and translating one's voice into new contexts. Abbot and Cook-Sather (2020) argue that constructive disagreement is integral to authentic collaboration, and propose practices for surfacing and working productively with difference rather than smoothing it away.

Taken together, these studies portray partnership as relational work that unfolds over time, with

moments of friction and vulnerability that can be developmental rather than simply problematic. Mechanisms such as trust, recognition, shared authority, epistemic confidence and openness can be understood as latent capacities that are triggered, or suppressed, by particular contexts and practices (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Manzano, 2016). This moves us from asking *"Did the partnership work?"* to realist-informed questioning *"What kinds of relational work were made possible here, for whom, and with what consequences?"*

2.6 Implementation complexity and institutional conditions

Implementation studies highlight how partnership moves, or fails to move, from isolated pilots to sustainable institutional practice. Bovill et al. (2016) and Mercer Mapstone et al. (2017) note that many projects are grant-dependent, enthusiast-led and vulnerable to personnel changes or shifting local priorities, and often weakly connected to programme boards, committee structures and institutional strategies (Healey & Healey, 2019; Dollinger & Lodge, 2020).

Across the literature, a bundle of mutually reinforcing conditions recurs:

- **Governance links** so that partnership outputs inform programme and school-level decisions and feed into assurance and enhancement cycles (Matthews et al., 2021).
- **Capability-building** for students and staff through onboarding, mentoring, communities of practice and academic development programmes (Curran, 2017; Chittle et al., 2024; Healey & Healey, 2024).
- **Recognition and reward** through role descriptions, workload allocation, promotion criteria and credentials (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017; Healey & Healey, 2019; Ortquist-Ahrens, 2021).
- **Transparent feedback loops** that make impact visible through accessible "you said, we did" narratives and public reporting (Coombe et al., 2018; Matthews, 2017; Rideau, 2022).

Cook-Sather (2024) invites us to think of **time** not only as a logistical constraint but also as a conceptual and relational resource: how time is structured for preparation, reflection and dialogue shapes whether partnership feels rushed and extractive or spacious and empowering. Cook-Sather, Ho, Kaur and Tamim (2024) show how academic development can act as a translation space where partnership principles are adapted to specific contexts, while the practical guide by Cook-Sather, Bahti and Ntem (2019) offers concrete steps and checklists for programme development that can be reframed through an equity lens (de Bie et al., 2021).

Our realist review confirms that institutional culture, shared spaces and curriculum co-design operate together as a **layered configuration of context, mechanism and outcome**, echoing the later programme theories: inclusive culture (PT1), boundary-spanning relational practice (PT5) and curriculum co-design (PT3).

2.7 Methodological directions and knowledge gaps

Three methodological gaps stand out.

First, **definitional clarity** remains uneven. The same label can cover activities ranging from consultative focus groups to co-governance of programmes or services (Healey et al., 2016; Matthews, 2017; Mercer Mapstone et al., 2017). Authors increasingly call for explicit specification of the locus of partnership (academic or non-academic), the degree of power-sharing and the duration or intensity of involvement (Casey, 2024; Liang & Matthews, 2022).

Second, **mechanism-focused research** is relatively scarce. Many accounts describe what was done and what participants reported but do not theorise or test how specific practices, such as paid roles, co-assessment, partnership agreements or equity-focused recruitment, shape mechanisms like trust, recognition or

agency (Dollinger & Lodge, 2020; Hassan, 2021). There is growing interest in mid-range theories and the use of Context–Mechanism–Outcome configurations to explain how partnership generates particular effects (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Manzano, 2016; Ní Bheoláin et al., 2020), but realist studies in the SSP field are largely absent and remain relatively rare in teaching and learning scholarship in general.

Third, **equity and readiness** are under-explored empirically in partnership practices. Few studies disaggregate outcomes by student group or examine whether partnership narrows or widens disparities in participation, attainment or satisfaction (Bindra et al., 2018; Marquis et al., 2018; de Bie et al., 2022). Gauthier (2020) and others argue for more attention to partnership readiness, how participants are prepared, supported and invited into this work, rather than assuming readiness as a given. Professional staff perspectives also remain less visible than those of academic staff and students, despite their central role in many initiatives (Luke & Evans, 2021; Brown et al., 2020).

Methodologically, the review points toward the value of design-based research, realist evaluation and mixed-methods impact studies that can unpack how partnership is translated, adapted and sustained across disciplines and professional services.

2.8 Implications for the present study

Taken together, the realist review positions SSP as both principled, grounded in democratic and critical traditions, and pragmatic, oriented toward improving learning, experience and institutional quality (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Bovill, 2020; de Bie et al., 2021). It also cautions that benefits are not automatic. Outcomes depend on context, design, mechanisms and relationships (Healey & Healey, 2019; Matthews, 2017; Cook-Sather, 2022).

Our study responds to gaps in current understanding in several ways:

- **Broadening scope** beyond classroom partnerships by including governance, curriculum processes and professional and administrative domains that shape student experience, with students, academic staff and professional staff all treated as potential partners (Healey et al., Healey & Healey, 2019, 2024; 2014; Mercer Mapstone et al., 2017).
- **Focusing on enablers for effective partnership practices as well as outcomes** by adopting realist inquiry, developing initial programme theories from an international realist review and then testing and refining these theories through a realist-informed survey and adjudication workshops that attend explicitly to context, enablers and outcome (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Manzano, 2016; Ní Bheoláin et al., 2020).
- **Foregrounding equity, readiness and representation** by drawing on equity-focused frameworks (de Bie et al., 2021), readiness work (Gauthier, 2020) and accounts of discomfort and conflict as generative (Abbot & Cook-Sather, 2020; Koltun-Fromm & Eze, 2019; Mathrani & Cook-Sather, 2020).
- **Aligning partnership with institutional systems** by examining how SSP programme theories can be anchored in UCD's governance, quality and academic development structures, consistent with work on anchoring innovations and academic developers' roles in SaP (Cook-Sather, 2022; Healey & Healey, 2024; Cook-Sather et al., 2024).
- **Producing portable, mid-range explanations** (the Programme Theories) that can travel across local contexts while remaining sensitive to differences in culture, structures and relationships.

In sum, the realist review encourages us to treat partnership not as a one-off intervention but as complex processes that are culturally embedded, relationally enacted, resourced and accountable. It invites us to ask, throughout the report, not only whether SSP "works" at UCD, but for whom, in what ways, and under what conditions it becomes a sustainable way of being and working together.



3. Methodology



A realist inquiry framework was adopted to support theory development about how SSP practices operate in different institutional contexts, rather than to evaluate the effectiveness of a single, discrete partnership practice.

3.1 Realist inquiry

Realist inquiry is a theory-driven approach designed to understand complex, relational practices by asking what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Wong et al., 2013). It is particularly suited to settings such as higher education, where practices are shaped by multiple interacting contextual, structural and relational factors rather than linear cause–effect relationships.

A core realist assumption is that outcomes are not produced by activities alone. Instead, outcomes arise when particular mechanisms (such as trust, recognition, or sense of ownership) are activated within specific contexts (such as institutional culture, power relations, or resource conditions). From this perspective, SSP practices do not "cause" outcomes in a deterministic way but can support particular outcomes under certain conditions (Wong et al., 2017). Table 1 illustrates the phases of the realist inquiry and how Programme Theories (PTs)—that is, explanations of how and why SSP may work or not, were developed and refined across the study.

Table 1. Phases of the Realist Inquiry and Development of Programme Theories

Phase	Purpose	Key output
Realist review	To develop explanatory theories about how student–staff partnership operates across contexts, drawing on existing evidence	Programme Theories (PTs) (developed iteratively from Candidate/Initial Programme Theories within the review)
Theory refinement (realist-informed survey)	To test the plausibility, resonance and contextual variation of PTs within the UCD setting	Refined Programme Theories (PTs)
Realist evaluation	To adjudicate, refine and consolidate PTs through stakeholder reasoning and contextual testing	Final Programme Theories (PTs)

3.2 Realist review

The realist review formed the foundational stage of the realist inquiry. Its purpose was not to determine whether SSP "works", but to explain how SSP practices may lead to different outcomes for different groups, in different institutional settings.

Realist review (also referred to as realist synthesis) is a method for reviewing diverse bodies of literature in order to refine theories about how outcomes are generated through interactions between context, mechanism, and outcome (Pawson et al., 2005; Wong et al., 2013).

Our review focused on understanding how SSP practices can support meaningful engagement, inclusion and sustainability under particular conditions (Teeling et al., 2025).

A key analytical tool in realist inquiry is the Context–Mechanism–Outcome Configuration (CMOC). CMOCs provide a structured way of explaining how outcomes may arise when certain mechanisms are triggered in particular contexts (Pawson, 2013a; Wong et al., 2013). Rather than predicting outcomes, CMOCs support explanatory insight into why similar partnership practices may lead to different experiences and results across contexts.

3.3 Realist review methods

The realist review followed established RAMESES guidance (Wong et al., 2013) and proceeded through iterative stages of theory development, refinement and synthesis.

Figure 2. Realist review cycle used in this study

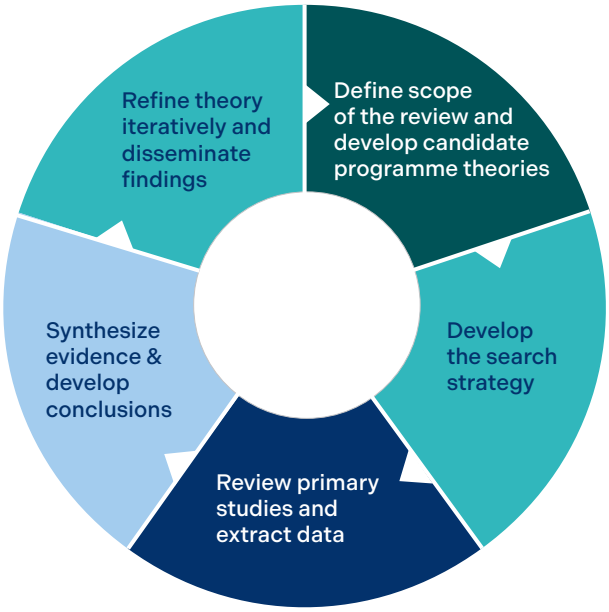


Table 2. Context–Mechanism–Outcome Configuration (CMOC)

Term	Definition	Example	Source
Context (C)	The institutional, cultural and relational conditions	e.g. organisational structures, norms, policies, power relations	Pawson, 2013a; Manzano, 2016
Mechanism (M)	The underlying responses, reasoning or reactions of individuals or groups	e.g. feeling valued, trusted or marginalised	Pawson & Tilley, 1997
Outcome (O)	The effects that arise when mechanisms are activated in particular contexts	outcomes vary across settings and groups and may be intended or unintended	Pawson, 2013a; Greenhalgh et al., 2017

3.3.1 Scoping and early theory development

An initial scoping review of international SSP literature identified recurring themes and conceptual gaps. Five broad domains were identified: co-creation, peer mentoring, curriculum co-design, ethics of care, and employability. From this scoping work, 27 Candidate Programme Theories (CPTs) were developed to capture early explanations of how SSP might operate under different conditions.

3.3.2 Practitioner and expert engagement

The CPTs were discussed with UCD teaching and learning stakeholders to ensure institutional relevance and grounding. These discussions highlighted issues of inclusion, power, role clarity and sustainability. CPTs were then consolidated and reviewed by a Practitioner Panel and an international Expert Panel, resulting in the refinement to seven Initial Programme Theories (IPTs). Each IPT articulated a provisional explanatory relationship linking context, mechanism and outcome.

Table 3. Initial Programme Theories (IPTs)

IPT	Focus	Provisional theory statement
IPT1	Project-based partnerships	Collaborative SSP projects can support shared learning and trust when co-working enables mutual appreciation.
IPT2	Inclusivity and power	SSP structures that attend to inclusion and power-sharing may support meaningful engagement by enabling trust and mutual respect.
IPT3	Peer mentoring	Student-led or co-led mentoring can support confidence and engagement by strengthening identity as contributors.
IPT4	Institutional support	Strategic recognition and resourcing may support sustainability by legitimising partnership work.
IPT5	Employability	SSP linked to professional development can be valued when relevance to future roles is recognised.
IPT6	Curriculum co-design	Co-design of curriculum or assessment may support agency by affirming student voice and expertise.
IPT7	Sustainability	Reflective and relational SSP processes can support sustainability by addressing tensions and power dynamics.

3.3.3 Literature searching and synthesis

With support from a UCD librarian, a structured search strategy aligned to the developing programme theories was applied across key education and social science databases (ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, PsycInfo), supplemented by targeted hand-searching of *The International Journal for Students as Partners*. Searches were conducted from 2014 onwards, reflecting the emergence of SSP as a recognised field (Healey et al. 2014; Higher Education Authority, 2016).

Using the IPTs as an analytical framework, titles and abstracts and then full manuscripts were screened, followed by detailed analysis of included studies. Data were extracted using bespoke templates and coded for CMOCs. Through iterative synthesis, cross-case comparison and retroductive reasoning, IPTs were refined. IPTs with limited explanatory reach were excluded, resulting in the consolidation of five **Programme Theories** (PTs).

3.4 Realist survey

To test and refine the PTs within the UCD context, a realist-informed survey was conducted across four schools in UCD. In realist inquiry, surveys are used not to measure prevalence, but to explore the plausibility and resonance of theories across different groups (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Rycroft-Malone et al., 2012).

Survey items were explicitly linked to the five PTs developed and framed around their underlying CMO propositions. Respondents rated how well statements reflected their experience of SSP, and open-ended questions invited explanations of contextual conditions and mechanisms. Staff (n=29) and student (n=28) responses were analysed descriptively and thematically to inform theory refinement (Manzano, 2016; Westhorp, 2014).

3.5 Realist evaluation

A realist evaluation workshop was then undertaken to further test and refine the Programme Theories in the context of UCD. Thirty-eight participants (students, faculty and professional staff) took part in a structured adjudication workshop using vignette-based realist methods (Manzano, 2016; Teeling, Dewing & Baldie, 2021).

Working in mixed-role groups, workshop participants examined how the developed PTs operated in practice at UCD, identifying contextual conditions, mechanisms and outcomes. Individual reflections and whole-group synthesis enabled comparison of interpretations and identification of areas of convergence and divergence (Westhorp, 2014).

3.6 Summary of methodological approach

Across the realist review, survey and evaluation phases, this inquiry developed and refined explanatory theories about how SSP can operate within UCD. Rather than offering prescriptive claims, the methodology supported a nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of partnership practices, grounded in both international evidence and local experience.



4. Findings

4.1 Realist Review findings

Five Programme Theories (PTs) emerged from the Realist Review:

PT 1 – Inclusive Institutional Cultures Enable Partnership
When universities cultivate inclusive environments and mutual dialogue **(context)**, enablers of trust, recognition, and belonging are activated **(mechanism)**, leading to engagement and sustainable partnership cultures **(outcome)**.

PT 2 – Cross-Boundary Collaboration Strengthens Learning and Practice
When interdisciplinary and inter-role collaboration is structurally supported and recognised **(context)**, enablers of empathy, creativity, and shared understanding are triggered **(mechanism)**, producing innovation, professional growth, and confidence **(outcome)**.

PT 3 – Curriculum Co-Design Builds Shared Ownership
When students and staff co-design curricula and assessment within transparent frameworks **(context)**, enablers of shared authority, relevance, and motivation are activated **(mechanism)**, resulting in deeper learning and shared ownership of educational outcomes **(outcome)**.

PT 4 – Reflective Dialogue Sustains Partnership Practice
When opportunities for structured reflection and feedback are embedded at all levels **(context)**, enablers of openness, reciprocity, and accountability are activated **(mechanism)**, enabling adaptive, resilient partnership cultures **(outcome)**.

PT 5 – Boundary-Spanning Practices Enable Collaboration and Change
When partnership practices cut across disciplinary, professional, and hierarchical boundaries **(context)**, enablers of trust, humility, and relational negotiation are activated **(mechanism)**, generating co-creation, confidence, and sustained cultural change **(outcome)**.

Following review and adjudication by the Expert Panel, these five Programme Theories were prioritised for empirical testing in the subsequent realist evaluation phase, as all were judged to be relevant and explanatory within the UCD Fellowship context.

Survey findings (See Appendix 11.4 and 11.5) were then used to corroborate and refine the Programme Theories, before adjudication workshops with UCD professional staff, faculty and students. The workshops explored how these propositions played out in practice. Individual and group feedback informed further refinement, resulting in the final Programme Theories presented below.

4.2 Realist Evaluation Findings

4.2.1 Programme Theory Ranking and Selection for Adjudication

To determine which of the Programme Theories (PT1–PT5) derived from the realist review demonstrated the strongest explanatory potential for further testing at UCD, a structured ranking exercise was undertaken during the realist evaluation workshop.

Five mixed-role teams comprising professional staff, faculty, and students (n = 38) ranked the five PTs according to resonance, relevance, and explanatory power in relation to their lived experience of partnership within the university. Rankings were aggregated using a cumulative points system (five points for first place to one point for fifth place).

Table 4. Programme Theory ranking

Programme Theory	Total Points	Overall Rank
PT5	24	1st
PT1	17	=2nd
PT3	17	=2nd
PT2	12	4th
PT4	10	5th

There was strong consistency across teams. PT 5 received the highest overall ranking, with PT 1 and 3 jointly ranked second. These three theories were therefore prioritised for detailed adjudication and refinement. This progressive focusing aligns with realist principles, which direct analytical attention towards theories with the greatest contextual resonance and explanatory coherence (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Wong et al., 2016).

4.2.2 Overview of Adjudication and Refinement Process

The three prioritised Programme Theories (PT5, PT1 and PT3) were examined in depth through a structured realist evaluation process comprising:

- team-based adjudication during the workshop (five mixed-role teams; n = 38); and
- subsequent analysis of individual written feedback (PT5: n = 26; PT1: n = 25; PT3: n = 32).

Across all three theories, findings were analysed using realist logic, identifying how particular **contexts** enabled or constrained the activation of underlying **mechanisms**, and how these configurations generated observed **outcomes**. The sections below present the consolidated findings for each Programme Theory, showing how they were progressively refined from their initial review-derived form to their final empirically grounded articulation.

4.2.3 Boundary-Spanning Practices Enable Collaboration and Change (PT5)

Programme Theory 5 was ranked highest by workshop participants and consistently described as strongly reflective of lived experience across roles and disciplines.

Initial review-derived proposition

When universities intentionally flatten hierarchies and create shared learning spaces, mechanisms of trust, reciprocity and shared purpose are activated, enabling collaboration, innovation and sustained cultural change.

Workshop adjudication findings (n = 38)

Across teams, participants affirmed the value of flattened hierarchies and shared spaces but emphasised that collaboration was contingent on explicit institutional commitment. Time allocation, recognition structures, clarity of roles, and resourcing were repeatedly identified as critical contextual conditions. Participants stressed that hierarchy cannot be eliminated entirely, but can be rebalanced through transparent participation, shared responsibility and visible leadership support. Equity of voice, accessibility and inclusion of marginalised perspectives were also highlighted as necessary for authentic collaboration.

Individual feedback findings (n = 26)

Individual responses confirmed trust, dialogue, inclusivity and recognition as key mechanisms, alongside facilitation, gentle challenge, structured reflection and distributed leadership. Contextual enablers included institutional commitment, interdisciplinary environments and access to shared spaces, while constraints related to time, workload, unclear selection processes and persistent hierarchies. Outcomes included collaboration, belonging and innovation, as well as professional growth, confidence and reflective learning, with frustration and disengagement arising where implementation was partial or insufficiently supported.

Final Programme Theory 5
When universities intentionally flatten hierarchies and design inclusive, shared learning spaces where roles are clear, resources are equitable, and participation is transparent, collaboration and mutual learning flourish. Under these conditions, mechanisms of trust, humility, facilitation and reflective dialogue are activated, generating belonging, confidence, professional growth and authentic co-creation across disciplinary and professional boundaries. Sustained impact depends on institutional leadership, resourcing and recognition that legitimise participation and ensure equity of voice.

4.2.4 Inclusive Institutional Cultures Enable Meaningful Partnership (PT1)

Programme Theory 1 was jointly ranked second and strongly associated with participants' experiences of inclusion, power and institutional culture.

Initial review-derived proposition
Inclusive institutional cultures that attend to power dynamics and support dialogue enable meaningful and sustainable partnership.

Workshop adjudication findings (n = 38)
Participants endorsed the intent of the theory but emphasised that inclusion requires more than goodwill. Time, clarity of roles, mentoring, and resourcing were identified as essential. Teams highlighted risks of tokenism, emotional labour and uneven participation, particularly where partnership relied on voluntary engagement. Modelling by leaders and supervisors was viewed as important for legitimising partnership.

Individual feedback findings (n = 25)
Individual responses reaffirmed trust, recognition and dialogue as core mechanisms. Additional mechanisms included readiness, facilitation skills, incentivisation and institutional endorsement. Contextual barriers included hierarchical decision-making, workload imbalance and limited capacity. Outcomes included belonging, confidence and professional growth, alongside disengagement where inclusion was perceived as symbolic.

Final Programme Theory 1
When universities cultivate inclusive and dialogical environments in which power dynamics are acknowledged, roles are clear, and time and resources are intentionally allocated, mechanisms of trust, mentoring, recognition and shared ownership are activated. These mechanisms generate belonging, confidence, professional growth and sustained engagement among students, faculty and professional staff. Where institutional support is absent, partnership risks becoming tokenistic rather than transformative.

4.2.5 Curriculum Co-Design Builds Shared Ownership (PT3)

Programme Theory 3 was also jointly ranked second and focused on partnership within teaching, learning and assessment.

Initial review-derived proposition
When students and staff co-design curriculum and assessment within transparent frameworks, mechanisms of shared authority, relevance and motivation are activated, producing deeper learning and shared ownership.

Workshop adjudication findings (n = 38)
Participants viewed curriculum co-design as feasible but resource-intensive. Effective co-design required advance planning, training, scaffolding of curriculum knowledge, and alignment with institutional timelines. Discipline-specific and regulatory constraints were identified as fixed contextual boundaries that needed to be made explicit. Smaller-scale, classroom-based initiatives were viewed as more inclusive and manageable.

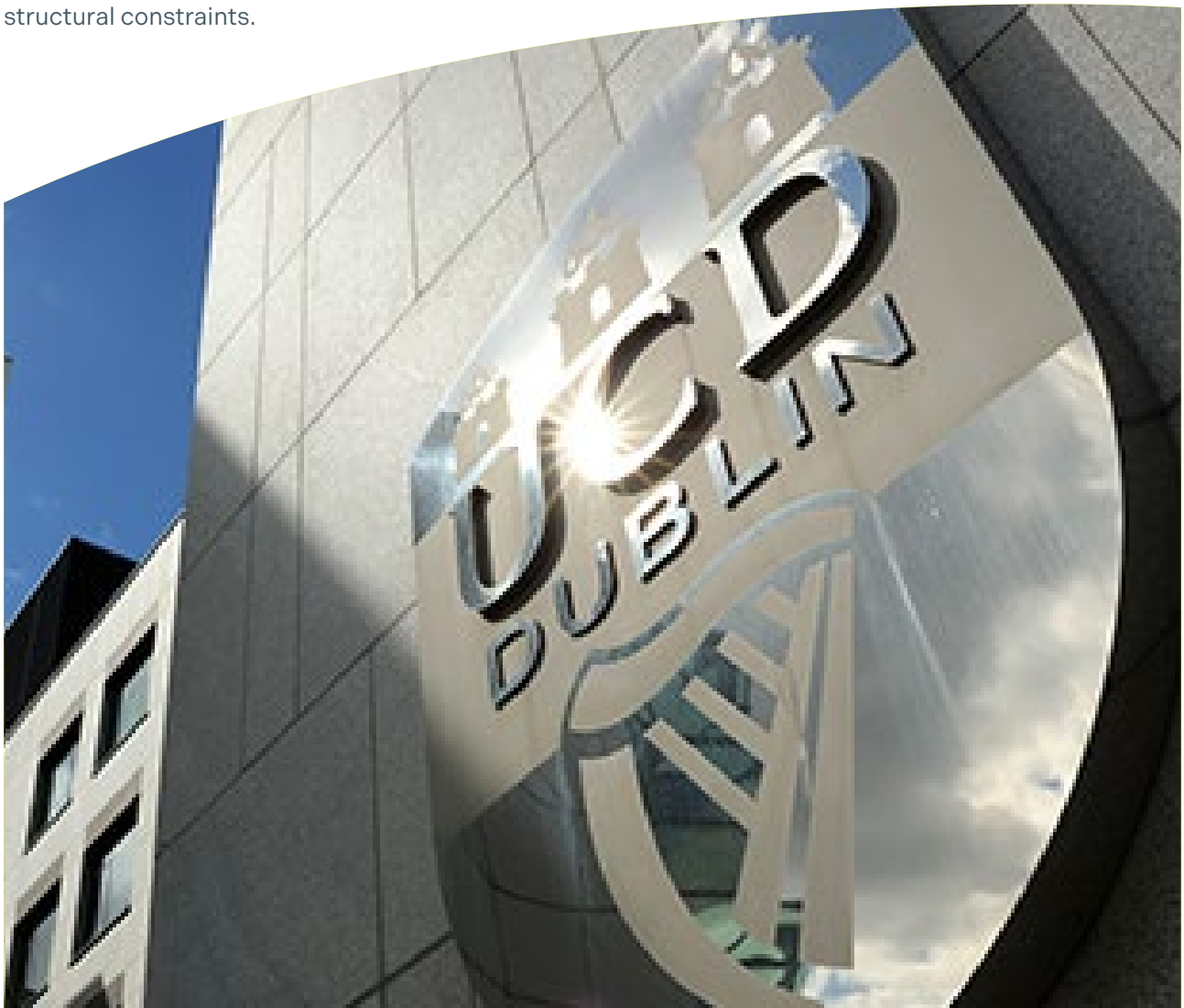
Individual feedback findings (n = 32)
Individual responses confirmed motivation, relevance and shared authority as key mechanisms, alongside trust, openness and transparency about non-negotiables. Contextual enablers included institutional commitment, compensation for student partners, diversity in selection, and alignment of task complexity with student experience. Outcomes included deeper learning, meta-pedagogical insight, improved dialogue and personalised learning, alongside stress where support was insufficient.

Final Programme Theory 3
When students and staff co-design teaching, learning or assessment within transparent and well-resourced frameworks, aligned to task complexity and student experience, mechanisms of shared authority, relevance, motivation, trust and openness are activated. These mechanisms generate deeper learning, shared ownership, improved dialogue and meta-pedagogical insight. Sustainable curriculum co-design depends on institutional support, preparation, compensation for students and clarity about structural constraints.

4.2.6 Summary of Findings

Across the three Programme Theories, findings demonstrate that student–staff partnership operates through the interaction of **structural conditions** (such as time, resourcing, leadership and role clarity) and **relational mechanisms** (including trust, dialogue, recognition and facilitation). Partnership is most effective when these elements are intentionally aligned. Where contextual supports are weak or symbolic, mechanisms do not fully activate and intended outcomes are undermined.

Together, the refined Programme Theories provide an empirically grounded explanation of how partnership functions at institutional, relational and curricular levels. The following discussion synthesises these insights, considers their implications for policy and practice, and outlines recommendations for strengthening student–staff partnership across the university.



5. Discussion

This realist evaluation sought to understand how SSP practices work, for whom, and under what conditions within a large research-intensive university. Building from IPTs developed through an extensive realist review of international SSP literature, the evaluation tested and refined three Programme Theories within the specific context of UCD.

In what follows, the three Programme Theories are discussed in order of how UCD participants ranked them according to relevance, explanatory power, and resonance with their lived experience. Taken together, these theories provide an integrated explanation of how partnership becomes meaningful, sustainable, and educationally generative for students, faculty, and professional staff.

5.1 Communicative Partnership Practices Build Trust, Motivation, and Agency (PT5)

(Highest ranked PT by UCD participants)

This programme theory highlights the centrality of dialogue, communication, and relational practices in enabling partnership. Across the evaluation workshops, participants stressed that meaningful SSP work depends on honest conversation, mutual listening, and reciprocal recognition. One staff member noted, *"We get better outcomes when we sit down as humans first, roles second,"* while a student described partnership as *"being treated like someone whose view actually matters."*

These mechanisms of trust, recognition, motivation, and agency are well documented in the SSP literature. Cook-Sather (2020) argues that partnership's transformative potential rests on "honest conversations" and the willingness of staff and students to engage in difficult dialogue. Piotti et al. (2022) similarly emphasise the creation of partnership learning communities through supportive interaction, developing shared repertoire, and collective sense-making, precisely the processes seen across UCD teams.

The evaluation also identified tensions and vulnerabilities. Some staff felt anxious about *"getting it wrong"* or being judged by students; some students were unsure how fully they could speak openly with staff who graded them. These findings align with Dollinger et al. (2022), who show that co-research partnerships expose uncertainty, uneven expertise, and emotional labour that must be actively supported. Godbold et al. (2022) likewise highlight conflict, both interpersonal and internal, as a generative but challenging element of partnership.

Within UCD, PT5 suggests that partnership cannot rely on goodwill alone. Structural support is required to sustain the relational mechanisms: protected time, facilitation, clarity on expectations, training for both students and staff, and recognition for professional staff contributions. Without these enabling conditions, relational mechanisms may not fully activate, and partnership risks becoming superficial, extractive, or dependent on individual personalities rather than shared institutional practice.

5.2 Inclusive Institutional Culture as the Foundation of Partnership (PT1)

(Joint second ranked PT)

This programme theory demonstrated that partnership is fundamentally shaped by the wider institutional culture in which it occurs. Participants consistently described the importance of transparency, psychological safety, communication, and recognition at an organisational level. As one student observed, "I'd contribute more if I knew my feedback wouldn't be dismissed because I'm a student," while a professional staff member noted, *"Students see that we also shape their experience, but we're rarely included."*

This strongly echoes the wider SSP literature. Mercer-Mapstone et al.'s (2017) systematic review underscores that partnership is premised on reciprocity, negotiation, and equitable engagement, all of which require institutional commitment to inclusivity and openness. Curran and Millard (2015) similarly stress that strategic alignment, resourcing, and recognition mechanisms (including awards, paid roles, and embedded structures) are essential cultural enablers for SSP work.

At UCD, participants noted significant variation in cultural readiness across colleges, schools, and staff groups. Faculty spoke of workload pressures and differing interpretations of partnership; students raised experiences of tokenism or unclear expectations; professional staff described being peripheral to SSP initiatives but eager to contribute. These findings align with Moore-Cherry et al. (2016), who argue that inclusive partnership challenges established norms and requires cultural shifts in how institutions perceive authority, expertise, and belonging.

From a realist perspective, PT1 shows that cultural context is not a backdrop but an active determinant of whether mechanisms of trust, recognition, and motivation are triggered. Where culture is transparent, supportive, and inclusive, partnership flourishes. Where culture is fragmented, opaque, or hierarchical, mechanisms stall, leading to disengagement or disillusionment.

5.3 Curriculum Co-Design as a Mechanism for Learning, Inclusion, and Shared Ownership (PT3)

(Joint second ranked PT)

This programme theory demonstrated that curriculum co-design, whether in teaching, learning, or assessment provides powerful opportunities for shared ownership and deeper learning. Across teams and individual feedback, participants emphasised that co-design demystifies the curriculum, enhances assessment literacy, and builds students' confidence and understanding. As one student put it, *"This was the first time I really understood why we are assessed the way we are."* A staff member noted that student contributions *"made me rethink what I assume students already know."*

These findings resonate strongly with the wider literature. Bovill, Lubicz-Nawrocka, and colleagues show that co-creation deepens learning, strengthens belonging, and fosters confidence, provided that roles are clear and support is available. Quesada et al. (2019) similarly document benefits of co-assessment including improved reflection, communication, and shared responsibility. Riva et al. (2022) demonstrate that co-creation can even rebalance power dynamics in hierarchical relationships such as PhD supervision.

However, the UCD evaluation also surfaced realistic constraints: time, workload, alignment with approval cycles, student compensation, and clarity on non-negotiable programme elements, particularly in externally accredited programmes. One staff member observed *"have to reach standards of practice in curriculum -students can't always get what they want".* These reflect concerns raised by Peseta et al. (2021), who describe co-design as compromise-filled, incremental, and shaped by institutional processes. Several UCD participants felt that curriculum co-design is most practicable at module or assessment-task level, rather than whole-programme redesign, consistent with findings across the literature and realist logic.

PT3 reinforces a key insight: co-design is not merely pedagogical enhancement; it is a context–mechanism–outcome configuration that requires preparation, training, scaffolding, and realistic scope. When these conditions are met, curriculum co-design activates mechanisms of agency, motivation, shared authority, and meta-pedagogical insight; when absent, it risks burdening students or producing inequitable outcomes.

How the Programme Theories Interact: A Multi-Level Understanding of Partnership

Examined together, the three Programme Theories provide a coherent, multi-level account of partnership within UCD:

- **PT5 (Relational mechanisms)** explains how partnership works at the interpersonal level through trust, dialogue, motivation, and reciprocal engagement.
- **PT1 (Institutional culture)** explains the structural and cultural conditions that enable or constrain these relational mechanisms.
- **PT3 (Curriculum co-design)** illustrates how these mechanisms unfold in concrete teaching, learning, and assessment practices.

This layered configuration demonstrates the generative interdependence of culture, relationship, and pedagogy. When institutional conditions (PT1) support relational practices (PT5), curriculum co-design (PT3) becomes feasible and impactful. When cultural supports are weak or relational trust is underdeveloped, co-design can struggle or becomes limited to surface-level consultation.

Crucially, this multi-level perspective, explaining how, why, and under what conditions SSP works, is a direct strength of realist methodology, allowing insights far beyond descriptive or celebratory accounts of partnership.

5.4 Implications for Students, Faculty, and Professional Staff at UCD

5.4.1 Students

Students benefit when mechanisms of agency, trust, recognition, and shared authority are activated. They experience deeper learning, increased confidence, more personalised curricula, and stronger belonging. However, time, clarity, preparation, and compensation remain essential contextual conditions.

6.4.2 Faculty

Faculty value the enhanced insight, dialogue, and improved teaching that partnership offers, but require supportive structures, realistic workload expectations, and clarity around roles and decision-making. Emotional labour and vulnerability were noted repeatedly, echoing international evidence.

5.4.3 Professional Staff

Professional staff expressed enthusiasm to be more involved in SSP but felt structurally marginalised in some initiatives. Their inclusion is essential: they hold critical expertise in student experience, systems, and university operations. PT1 and PT5 show that partnership must extend beyond classroom and faculty roles to be institutionally authentic.

5.5 Methodological Contribution: The Novelty of Realist Inquiry in Student-Staff Partnership

To our knowledge, this study is one of the first to apply realist review and realist evaluation to Student-Staff Partnership in higher education. SSP research is rich in case studies, reflective narratives, and conceptual frameworks, but few studies trace the generative causal mechanisms that explain partnership success or failure across contexts.

Realist inquiry contributed distinct value by:

1. **Clarifying causation:** identifying enablers (e.g., trust, shared authority, recognition) that can generate positive outcomes.
2. **Foregrounding context:** demonstrating how institutional culture, relational readiness, and structural constraints shape partnership practices.
3. **Enhancing transferability:** producing mid-range theories that different UCD units can adapt rather than adopt wholesale.

This methodological innovation positions UCD at the forefront of theory-driven partnership research and offers a model for other institutions seeking to embed SSP systematically.

5.6 Summary

Overall, the findings show that partnership work in UCD is both promising and complex. When the cultural conditions (PT1), relational mechanisms (PT5), and pedagogical practices (PT3) align, SSP can activate agency, belonging, shared ownership, and deeper learning for all partners. When these conditions misalign, partnership can become fragile, tokenistic, or unsustainable.

The discussion demonstrates clear alignment between UCD findings and the wider SSP evidence base while illuminating context-specific realities within a large, diverse institution. The following section outlines recommendations to support UCD in embedding partnership as a sustainable, inclusive, and institution-wide practice.

6. Recommendations

There are already a wide range of student-staff partnership activities within UCD at university, college, school, unit, subject and module level. We suggest that UCD can support, leverage, and promote these activities by further building an institutional environment where relational partnership practices are supported (PT5), inclusive and transparent culture enables trust and shared authority (PT1), and structured, feasible curriculum co-design is embedded in teaching and learning practice (PT3). These conditions will help institutionalise SSP across all roles (students, faculty, and professional staff) and support its long-term sustainability.

6.1 Institutional-Level Recommendations

6.1.1
Embed SSP in Policy, Structures, and Recognition.
Strengthen the visibility and value of partnership by embedding SSP within institutional policies, workload models, quality processes, and formal recognition mechanisms (e.g., awards, paid roles, transcript recognition).

Resource: UCD Teaching & Learning – *Students as Partners in Teaching and Learning* (existing institutional SSP framework).

6.1.2
Support Relational Partnership Practices
Provide structured opportunities for cross-role dialogue, partnership facilitation, and shared learning, ensuring that relational mechanisms such as trust, motivation, and reciprocity can activate effectively.

Resource: Partnership facilitation guides and staff-student dialogue tools (e.g., Cook-Sather & Matthews, 2023).

6.2 School and College-Level Recommendations

6.2.1
Develop Localised, Discipline-Relevant SSP Approaches
Encourage Schools and Colleges to adapt SSP principles locally, with clear expectations around roles, decision-making boundaries, and alignment with disciplinary accreditation where relevant.

Resource: Bovill (2019) Co-creation typology for programme-/module-level planning

6.2.2
Strengthen Inclusion of Professional Staff
Ensure professional staff, who hold essential knowledge of student experience and institutional processes, are fully integrated into partnership work.

Resource: Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) – Partnership values and inclusivity principles.

6.3 Programme and Module-Level Recommendations

6.3.1
Prioritise Feasible, High-Impact Co-Design Activities
Adopt structured, appropriately scoped co-design activities (e.g. rubric co-design, assessment review, co-created learning materials) that are manageable within programme timelines.

Resource: Healey, Flint & Harrington (2016): SSP conceptual model for curriculum and assessment.

6.3.2
Use Transparent Frameworks to Support Trust and Shared Authority
Ensure partnership activities include clear guidance on non-negotiable elements, time expectations, and matching task complexity with students' level of experience.

Resource: Quesada et al. (2019) – Frameworks for co-assessment and clarity around student roles.

6.4 Partnership/Project-Level Recommendations

6.4.1
Provide Preparation and Ongoing Support for All Partners
Offer short, practical training for students and staff on working in partnership, communicating across roles, and making shared decisions.
Resource: SaLT (Bryn Mawr) materials, Student consultant training resources.

6.4.2
Ensure Equity Through Compensation or Recognition
Where students contribute substantial time or leadership, provide paid roles or formal recognition to ensure equitable participation.

Resource: UCD's existing Student Partnership funding schemes and micro-credential initiatives.

7. Dissemination activities to date

The findings of the realist review were disseminated through three invited conference papers delivered across national and international higher education forums. These contributions focused exclusively on the development, refinement, and early validation of the Programme Theories arising from the review. Importantly, these presentations shared *review-level insights only*: data and findings from the subsequent realist evaluation have not yet been disseminated.

Taken together, these activities served as early dissemination and scholarly validation points for the realist review. They supported critical interrogation of the emerging Programme Theories, strengthened their theoretical coherence, and ensured that the final PTs were informed not only by systematic synthesis but also by engagement with diverse higher education communities. Dissemination of the realist evaluation findings will follow.

7.1 Published paper

First, the paper "Developing a Protocol for a Critical Realist Approach to Authentic Student–Staff Partnerships in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education" (Teaching and Learning Conference 2025, 3 July 2025) introduced the methodological underpinning of the realist review and the resulting Initial Programme Theories (IPTs). This presentation outlined how the review synthesised fragmented SSP evidence into candidate explanatory theories focusing on institutional culture, partnership practices, curriculum co-design, and mechanisms of trust and empowerment. As a conference paper, it enabled early dialogue with academic developers about the feasibility and contribution of a realist approach to the SSP field.

7.2 Panel presentation

Second, the three-paper panel presentation "Promoting Inclusive Student–Staff Partnerships in a Teaching and Academic Development Fellowship Programme: Affordances and Challenges" (Students as Partners Roundtable 2025, 27 June) provided a focused opportunity to share PTs relating to inclusivity, relational partnership work, and the cultural conditions that enable or constrain meaningful partnership. Participants at the roundtable interrogated the mechanisms identified in the realist review, particularly psychological safety, transparency, recognition, and shared authority, providing valuable field-level feedback that supported refinement of PT1 (inclusive institutional culture) and PT5 (relational partnership practices). As with the other contributions, this was a non-published conference paper.

7.3 Conference presentation

Finally, the conference paper "Understanding University Teaching as Craft and as Care Through Realist Inquiry: Developing Programme Theories for Student–Staff Partnership Interventions" (7th Annual Philosophy and Theory of Higher Education Society Conference, 11 June 2025) allowed deeper theoretical engagement with the realist review findings. This forum supported exploration of the mechanisms of care, belonging, and empowerment within broader philosophical debates on relational pedagogy and academic craft. The contribution again centred on review-derived PTs, offering conceptual grounding for mechanisms identified in the literature without presenting any empirical findings from the subsequent evaluation.

8. Other Project Outputs

Project-specific outputs that build on the existing resources are proposed, drawing upon our realist inquiry and its learnings.

8.1 SSP Self-Assessment Toolkit

The Self-Assessment Toolkit outlines our project's key findings on promoting meaningful student-staff partnership at UCD. The target audiences are new and ongoing partnership teams in UCD as well as students, faculty, and professional staff interested in developing partnership initiatives at subject, school, college, unit, or university-level. See Appendix 11.1.

8.2 Workshops

Our workshops will bring the SSP Self-Assessment Toolkit directly to mixed groups of students, faculty, and professional staff at subject, school, college, unit, or university-level. There is a longer two-hour workshop designed to give participants an in-depth understanding of meaningful student-staff partnerships in theory and in practice; and a shorter 50-minute workshop designed to give participants an introduction to the Self-Assessment Toolkit and how it might support partnership teams. The workshop will be facilitated by members of the fellowship team. See Appendix 11.2.

8.3 Symposium on Student-Staff Partnerships in UCD

This practice-sharing symposium (date tbc) will bring together students, faculty and professional staff who have been involved in, or are interested in becoming involved in, student-staff partnership activities at UCD, as well as national leaders on student-staff partnerships in HE. See Appendix 11.3.

8.4 Video Promoting Student-Staff Partnerships in UCD

A suite of videos (1 minute to 5 minutes) will help students (and staff) understand what partnership is, encourage them to get involved, and showcase the variety of partnership activities at UCD. Students who have been involved in a variety of formal and informal partnership activities e.g. Student Partners in Teaching and Learning, University for All Student Partners, student partners in SATLE projects, student committee members, students involved in subject or module-level partnership, will be invited to participate. They will be invited to reflect on the following questions:

- What does partnership mean to you?
- What did you learn from your partnership work?
- What did you find challenging and how did you overcome it?
- Why would you recommend partnership work to other students?

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10.1 UCD Student-Staff Partnership Self-Assessment Toolkit

1. **In what ways are hierarchies intentionally flattened and power dynamics openly addressed?**
   - Have traditional roles (faculty-student-professional staff) been openly discussed and re-negotiated?
   - Are facilitation roles rotated rather than held by staff only?
   - Do students hold real decision-making power, not just advisory roles?
   - Are meeting structures designed so all voices can participate equally (rounds, small groups, co-chairing)?
   - Are concerns about power safe to raise and acted upon?

2. **In what ways are shared learning spaces intentionally designed to bring together students, faculty, and professional staff?**
   - Do people from different roles and disciplines participate together, not in parallel?
   - Does the partnership use dialogical methods (circles, inquiry sessions, collaborative workshops)?
   - Are physical or digital spaces accessible, comfortable, and inclusive for all partners?
   - Is time allocated for mutual learning - not just project tasks?
   - Are there opportunities to understand each other's contexts, expertise, and constraints?

3. **In what ways are roles, responsibilities, and expectations clear, equitable, and transparent?**
   - Has the team co-created a partnership agreement or charter?
   - Are responsibilities distributed according to capacity and interest rather than status?
   - Are expectations written down and visible to all partners?
   - Is role negotiation an ongoing process, not a one-off conversation?
   - Is there transparency around who leads what and why?

4. **In what ways are participation structures inclusive, accessible, and supportive of equity of voice?**
   - Are meetings scheduled at times that work for students as well as staff?
   - Are there multiple ways to contribute (verbal, written, anonymous)?
   - Are accessibility needs met (captions, travel support, quiet spaces, food, digital access)?
   - Are minoritised voices actively included rather than left to self-advocate?
   - Are participants from different disciplines or roles heard equally?

5. **In what ways are the conditions in place for trust, reciprocity, and humility?**
   - Do partners share information openly (e.g., constraints, decision processes, data)?
   - Do staff show vulnerability and model learning-with rather than teaching-to?
   - Are mistakes framed as learning opportunities rather than failures?
   - Are contributions acknowledged publicly and privately?
   - Is there an ethic of "giving back" rather than extracting student labour?

6. **In what ways are reflective dialogue and facilitation practices embedded in the partnership?**
   - Is time set aside in meetings for reflection ("what are we learning together?")?
   - Are reflective tools used (journals, check-ins, learning logs, appreciative inquiry)?
   - Are facilitators trained or supported to guide inclusive dialogue?
   - Are reflective conversations used to shape next steps and adapt the process?
   - Do partners revisit their shared purpose and assumptions?

7. **In what ways are mentoring, capacity-building, and confidence-building intentionally supported?**
   - Are students offered mentoring from staff or experienced student partners?
   - Are training or workshops provided (e.g., facilitation, research methods, communication)?
   - Are peer-to-peer support structures in place?
   - Are students encouraged to take leadership roles with guidance?
   - Are achievements and learning milestones recognised meaningfully?

8. **In what ways are creativity, experimentation, and cross-boundary collaboration encouraged?**
   - Does the partnership treat experimentation as a legitimate part of the process?
   - Are small resources or time set aside for trying new ideas?
   - Are partners encouraged to collaborate across departments, cultures, and expertise areas?
   - Are unconventional methods (visuals, storytelling, prototyping) welcomed?
   - Are reflective debriefs conducted on both successes and "productive failures"?

9. **In what ways are resources, recognition, and institutional commitments in place to sustain the work?**
   - Are students compensated (payment, credit, recognition) for partnership contributions?
   - Are staff given workload allocation to support partnership activity?
   - Are partnership principles embedded in policy, not dependent on individuals?
   - Are leaders visibly supporting and endorsing the work?
   - Is there continuity planning (handover processes, documentation, succession support)?

10. **In what ways is the partnership contributing to belonging, mutual growth, and cultural transformation?**
    - Do participants report feeling valued, heard, and part of a shared community?
    - Are identity shifts happening (students seeing themselves as contributors; staff as co-learners)?
    - Is partnership influencing broader curricular, pedagogical, or cultural practices?
    - Are successes and learning shared institutionally to build momentum?
    - Is the partnership helping foster long-term change, not just project outputs?

10.2 UCD Student-Staff Partnership Workshops

Participants: Subject, school, or college-level student-staff partnership teams
e.g. new SATLE-funded project teams

10.2.1 Two-hour Workshop

By the end of the workshop, participants will be able to:
- Explain the three theories underpinning meaningful student-staff partnership in UCD.
- Use the self-assessment toolkit to analyse the strengths of the partnership group and areas for development.
- Identify enabling conditions (e.g., flattening hierarchies, shared learning spaces, trust, equity).
- Develop practical next steps to enhance collaboration, mutual learning, and impact.

---

0. Welcome & Icebreaker (10 minutes)

Purpose: Establish psychological safety and flatten hierarchy from the outset.

Activity (individual and group):
In mixed groups of faculty, students, and professional staff, each person identifies:
- One strength they bring to partnership work
- One hope for the workshop

Facilitator highlights themes of shared expertise and mutual learning.

---

1. Introduction to the Three Theories (15 minutes)

Purpose: Provide a shared conceptual foundation.

Format: Mini presentation with visuals
Each theory is introduced with one slide each:
- Flattened Hierarchies and Shared Learning Spaces Enable Collaborative Practice (PT5)
- Inclusive Institutional Culture Enables Meaningful Partnership (PT1)
- Curriculum Co-Design Builds Shared Ownership (PT3)

Active element: Participants identify the theory they feel their partnership understands best and briefly share why.

---

2. Self-Assessment Toolkit Carousel (25 minutes)
Purpose: Participants experience the full toolkit interactively.

Setup: 10 stations around the room — one for each self-assessment question.
Each station includes:
The question
Key practical considerations
Continuum line (Not in place > Emerging > Strong)
Sticky dot and sticky notes

Activity (Carousel Walk):
Participants rotate in their partnership team (or mixed groups) and spend 2 minutes per station:
Discuss: "Where does our partnership stand on this?"

Mark a sticky dot on a continuum line (Not in place > Emerging > Strong)
Add a sticky-note with an insight or question.

Outcome: Visual heat-map of strengths and challenges.

---

3. Deep-Dive Analysis in Partnership Teams (25 minutes)

Purpose: Apply theory and toolkit to real partnership work.

In partnership teams (students + staff together):
Teams identify two areas of strength and two development priorities based on the carousel.

Structured prompts:
What mechanisms are activated here? (trust, transparency, reflection, mentoring...)
What conditions enable or constrain this?
How does hierarchy or inclusion show up?
What institutional factors are influencing this?

Output:
A four-quadrant chart:
Strengths
Emerging practices
Challenges
Aspirations

---

4. Case Scenario Activity (20 minutes)
Purpose: Reinforce conceptual understanding through application to fictional situations.

Activity:
Each group receives a short scenario based on common partnership challenges (e.g., tokenism, unclear roles, lack of resources, distrust).

Task:
Using the toolkit, identify:
What's going wrong?
Which enabling conditions are missing?
What practical actions would help?

Mini-presentations:
Each group shares a 1-minute insight.

---

5. Action Planning (15 minutes)
Purpose: Move from reflection to actionable next steps.

Teams identify:
One immediate change (next 2 weeks)
One structural change (next 2 months)
One relational practice to strengthen trust, dialogue, or reciprocity
Support needed from leadership, colleagues, or students

Output: A concrete, achievable plan for enhancing partnership work.

---

6. Closing Circle (10 minutes)

Purpose: Create shared ownership and reinforce partnership ethos.

In a circle, each participant shares:
One insight they're taking away
One commitment for future partnership work

Facilitator highlights:
Mutual learning
Cross-boundary collaboration
Long-term cultural transformation

10.2.2 Fifty-Minute Workshop

Participants will:

- Understand at a high level three theories underpinning meaningful student-staff partnership in UCD.
- Use 3–5 key toolkit questions to evaluate their partnership.
- Identify one strength and one improvement priority.
- Agree one concrete next step for their partnership.

---

0. Welcome & Purpose (3 minutes)

Facilitator introduces:
Workshop aim (to analyse partnership practice using theory + toolkit)
Importance of cross-role learning
Encourage openness and curiosity

---

1. Fast Icebreaker (5 minutes)

Purpose: Immediately flatten hierarchy and establish shared ownership.

Activity
In mixed-role groups of 4–6, each person briefly states:
One strength they bring
One hope for the partnership

---

2. Mini-Input: The Three Theories (7 minutes)

Presentation:
Facilitator gives a brief overview (2 min per theory):
Flattened Hierarchies and Shared Learning Spaces Enable Collaborative Practice (PT5)
Inclusive Institutional Culture Enables Meaningful Partnership (PT1)
Curriculum Co-Design Builds Shared Ownership (PT3)

Activity:
Participants raise a hand for the theory they feel most confident about - briefly share why.

---

3. Rapid Toolkit Audit (Choose 5 Key Questions) (15 minutes)

Activity:
Facilitator provides a sheet with 5 of the 10 toolkit questions:
Are hierarchies intentionally flattened?
Are shared learning spaces created across roles?
Are roles clear, equitable, and transparent?
Are trust, dialogue, and reciprocity present?
Are institutional supports (time, recognition, resources) in place?

Activity:
Partnership teams rate themselves against each item on a traffic light scale:
🟢 Strong
🟠 Emerging
🔴 Needs attention

Then teams discuss:
One green: What enables this strength?
One yellow/red: What's getting in the way?

---

4. Pair Activity: Theory-to-Practice Application (10 minutes)

Purpose:
Connect their findings to theoretical mechanisms (trust, reciprocity, inclusivity, shared learning).

Activity:
In pairs (but within their own team):
Choose one challenge from the audit
Identify which mechanisms are missing (e.g., trust, transparency, mentoring)
Identify which conditions are missing (e.g., inclusive space, role clarity, institutional support)

Pairs report back in one sentence to their team.

---

5. Action Planning: One Concrete Next Step (8 minutes)

Each partnership team completes a One-Step Action Card:
What's the priority we will focus on?
What small action will we take in the next two weeks?
Who will lead it (shared leadership encouraged)?
What support do we need?

Short sharing across the room (rapid-fire: one sentence per group).

---

6. Closing Reflection (2 minutes)

In teams or as a whole group:
Each participant shares one word describing how they feel leaving the session (e.g., "energised," "clear," "connected," "curious").

10.3 UCD Student-Staff Partnership Symposium

Goal: Promoting student-staff partnership through practice-sharing

Participants: Students, faculty and professional staff who have been involved, or are interested in becoming involved, in student-staff partnership activities at UCD, as well as national leaders on student-staff partnerships in HE.

Keynote speaker: Alison Cook-Sather, Bryn Mawr/UCD (tbc)

Proposed schedule:

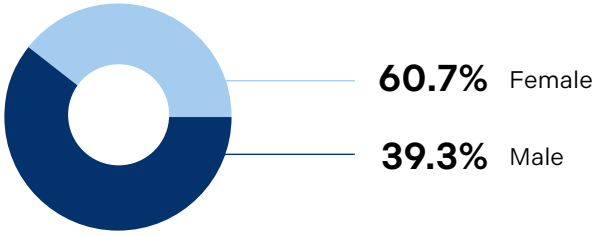
9.30-10	Welcome and coffee
10-11	Keynote: National and international perspectives on partnership
11-12	Case studies: established partnerships in UCD
12-12.30	Presentation by UCD Fellows in Teaching and Academic Development
12.30-1.30	Lunch and SSP book raffle
1.30-2.30	Lightning talks: Student-staff partnership in SATLE projects
2.30-3.00	Panel discussion: challenges and rewards of partnership work
3.30-4	Lightning talks: emerging T&L partnerships in UCD
4-4.30	Learnings and next steps
4.30-5.30	Reception and launch of the UCD SSP Self-Assessment Toolkit

10.4 UCD Student-Staff Partnership - Student Survey April 2025

Section 1 - All respondents provided informed consent [n=28]

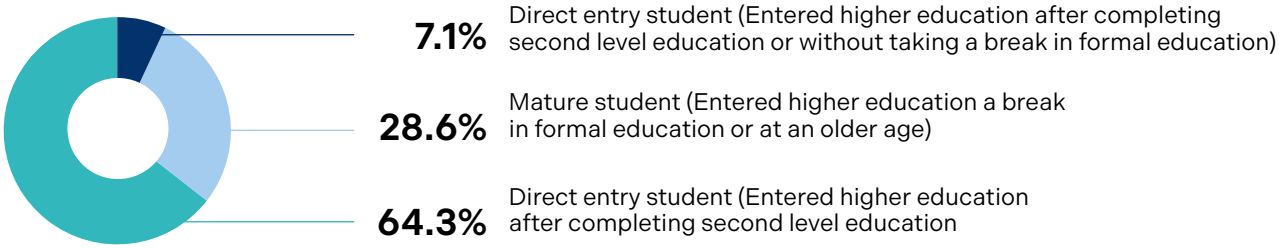
Section 2-Demographic and Background Information

Gender Breakdown
I am (28 responses)



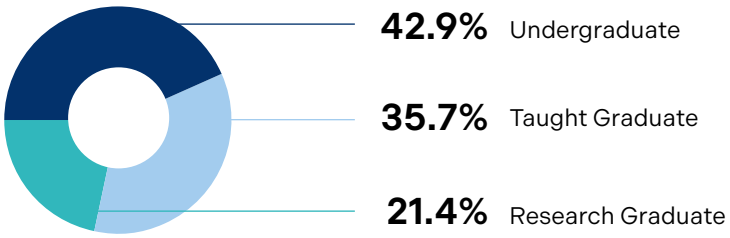
The gender distribution shows a higher proportion of female respondents (approx. 60% of the total sample) compared to male respondents (approx. 40%). No respondents identified as non-binary or chose not to disclose their gender.

Academic Background
I am (29 responses)



The majority of respondents (64.3%) identified as direct entry students, entering higher education directly after completing second-level education. A smaller proportion (28.6%) were mature students, while 7.1% entered through another direct entry pathway.

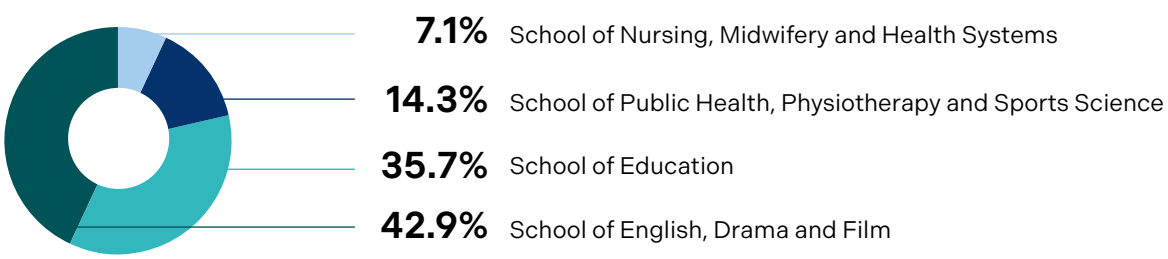
Academic Level
I am (28 responses)



The data indicate that undergraduate students make up the largest proportion of respondents (42.9%), followed by taught postgraduate students (35.7%) and research postgraduate students (21.4%). This distribution shows a diverse mix of academic levels, with both undergraduate and postgraduate perspectives represented.

School Affiliation

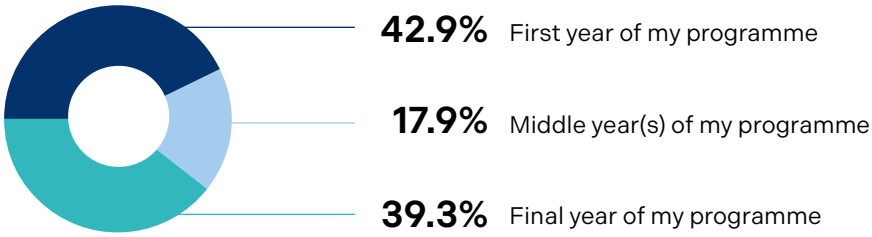
I am a student in the(28 responses)



The majority of respondents were students from the School of English, Drama and Film (42.9%), followed by the School of Education (35.7%). Smaller proportions were enrolled in the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science (14.3%) and the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems (7.1%).

Year of Study

I am in the (28 responses)



The majority of respondents were in the first year of their programme (42.9%), while 39.3% were in their final year and 17.9% were in the middle years. This spread shows a balanced representation between early-stage and completing students, ensuring that feedback reflects both initial impressions and more comprehensive, end-of-programme experiences.

Section 3-General Experience of Partnership

Have you participated in any of the following ways during your time as a student at UCD?

Provided module feedback during or at the end of a module	25 (89%)
Helped to create module resources	5 (18%)
Provided ideas for assessment	7 (25%)
Participated in a student role such as but not limited to: Peer Mentor, Access Leader, T&L Leader, University for All Leader, Global Guide etc.	5 (18%)
Represented other students in areas such as but not limited to: university, college or school boards; committees; Students Union etc.	9 (32%)
Worked with academic and/or professional staff on a specific project within UCD e.g SATLE funded project.	7 (25%)

When asked about their involvement in various engagement activities and partnerships, the majority of students (89%) indicated that they have provided module feedback during or at the end of a module. Smaller numbers had contributed in other ways, such as representing students on boards or committees (32%), providing ideas for assessment (25%), or working on projects with staff (25%). A smaller proportion had taken on student roles (18%) and helped create module resources (18%).

If you have participated in any of the activities listed above, what have been the main benefits to you as a student?

Responses reflect overwhelmingly positive experiences with student engagement initiatives, particularly around feedback mechanisms, teaching opportunities, and collaborative projects. While most participants provided concise answers, one respondent submitted an extended reflection that addressed several engagement activities and benefits in depth.

Student Voice and Feedback

Many students valued the opportunity to provide feedback on modules and contribute to improving learning experiences for future students. They saw feedback as empowering and important in shaping teaching and assessment. Giving module feedback potentially helped make a given module better for future students.

> *"Completing module feedback ensures that views are heard and opportunity to make changes are afforded to teaching staff."*

> *"Having a way to give feedback that is anonymous is incredibly valuable."*

Students appreciated being heard and involved in decision-making. Anonymous feedback mechanisms were viewed as especially important in ensuring honest communication and continuous improvement. However, a few students expressed uncertainty about whether their feedback ultimately benefited future cohorts.

> *"Difficult to assess as the feedback provided at the end of a module would benefit (or not) the next block of students to take that module"*

Collaboration, Relationship Building and Networking

A strong theme was collaboration, with peers, lecturers, and staff. Some participants also noted that participation created new connections and opportunities with staff, peers, and external organisations.

> *"Formed closer relationships with academic staff through collaboration on projects."*

> *"Relationship building is so conducive to building and sustaining collaborations between students and lecturer."*

> *"Mostly the connection to other students, as well as valuable insight from the staff I worked with."*

> *"Wide range of contacts and opportunities that presented as a result of those contacts"*

Collaborative experiences contributed to a sense of community and trust, making students feel more integrated and supported within UCD.

Professional and Skill Development

Many respondents highlighted the practical and professional skills gained, including presentation, communication, teamwork, and leadership abilities, all contributing to their development as teachers.

> *"Teaching experience", "presentation skills."*

> *"Gained experience in teaching and developing modules."*

> *"As a class rep it felt rewarding... taught me invaluable skills—organisation, communication, and people skills."*

Personal Growth and Confidence

Several students described the experiences as transformative, helping them build confidence, motivation, and self-awareness.

> *"Each one has had a hugely positive impact on me both personally and professionally."*

> *"All of these experiences have helped me grow into a more confident, capable, and passionate teacher."*

Respondents were of the opinion that engagement provided not just academic benefits, but also emotional and personal development, reinforcing confidence and identity as emerging professionals.

Cross-Curricular Learning

A major theme (primarily drawn from one detailed response) centred on experiential learning projects such as Shared Island, Adventures in Cyberland, and the TAP-TS Sustainability course. These experiences connected academic theory to contemporary global issues like sustainability, digital literacy, and cultural inclusion.

> *"The shared Island project built on the foundations of sustainability and global awareness by helping me explore powerful themes such as identity, inclusion, and connection across borders.*

> *"The Cyberwise short course and Adventures in Cyberland projects were brilliant and added another essential layer to my development as a teacher. They deepened my understanding of key contemporary issues such as cybersecurity, digital literacy, and gender bias online."*

Overall, students reported strongly positive experiences from their participation in feedback, mentoring, and collaborative activities, with benefits including improving interpersonal skills, greater confidence and personal growth, meaningful collaboration with staff and peers and opportunities for practical, real-world learning with a sense of voice within the university.

If you have participated in any of the activities listed above, what have been the main challenges for you as a student?

Balanced Time and Workload

The most common challenge was managing time and balancing commitments alongside coursework, placement, and other responsibilities.

> *"Takes up time which is occasionally difficult to balance with other responsibilities."*

> *"Addition to workload around time of activities."*

> *"One of the biggest challenges has been balancing my academic workload with the various commitments I've taken on."*

> *"Balancing coursework, school placement, and participation in projects mentioned above stretches my schedule."*

> *"Managing my time effectively, as I had to balance academic coursework, part-time work, and project commitments simultaneously."*

> *"High workload, often not recognised or appreciated."*

> *"Balancing my time spent on my own research and other activities."*

> *"Time to ensure everything is completed to a high standard."*

Confidence and Public Speaking

Several respondents described the difficulty of speaking in public or putting forward ideas with confidence.

> *"As a student teacher, putting my ideas forward in large-scale projects or during public presentations can be intimidating."*

> *"Stepping into leadership roles, like being on the committee or taking students on a bus to UCD and Belfast, also pushed me out of my comfort zone at times."*

> *"The project also pushed me outside of my comfort zone, particularly when presenting ideas to staff or taking the lead in group discussions."*

Emotional Responsibility and Leadership Pressure

Some students found leadership and mentoring roles emotionally demanding.

> *"Sometimes it was also emotionally challenging to take on roles that involved responsibility for others, whether it was being a peer mentor or bringing a class of students on a trip."*

Feedback Structure and Scope
A few respondents highlighted limitations with module feedback design and usefulness.

> *"Module feedback could be overly broad and difficult to properly quantify such as what (%) of the time you did or did not go to class for example."*

> *"I do wish module feedback could be a little longer – there isn't much space to fully explore what did and didn't help in a given module."*

> *"Was difficult to figure out what aspects of the course could be improved."*

Institutional or Structural Barriers
One respondent raised concerns about restrictions on student expression and support for initiatives.

> *"UCD is not the most supportive of student projects, ideas, and societies - there are many regulations restricting how much students can express themselves politically, especially when it concerns marginalised non-white groups."*

Navigating Systems and Cultural and Language Barriers
A small number noted challenges in learning how to participate effectively.

> *"It was difficult to break into - no 101 class on how to, just a small intro."*

One participant also mentioned challenges arising from cross-cultural communication.

> *"Yes, language and different cultures are challenging."*

No Challenges Reported
Two respondents indicated that they experienced no particular difficulties.

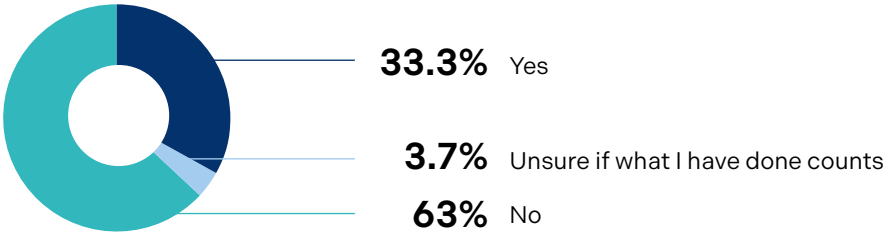
> *"None come to mind"*

> *"None.*

Overall, the main challenges reported by students centred on time management, and developing confidence in leadership. Several students pointed to limitations in module feedback, while a few reported no challenges at all.

Participation in Student-Staff Partnership

We define meaningful student-staff partnership as a collaborative, reciprocal process where students and faculty or professional staff contribute equitably — though their contributions may take different forms — to shaping courses, teaching approaches, support services, or university decision-making. (Adapted from Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014). Have you participated in student-staff partnership as we define it here?



The majority of respondents (63%) reported that they had not participated in a student–staff partnership as defined in the question. A smaller proportion (33.3%) indicated that they had participated, while one respondent (3.7%) was unsure whether their activities qualified as partnership involvement.

This suggests that while around one-third of students have direct experience with student–staff collaboration, most respondents have not yet engaged in such partnerships or may be unaware that their existing contributions (e.g., feedback, mentoring, or committee work) could be considered partnership activity.

If you answered yes to the above question, can you please briefly describe the nature of the partnership and your role in it? 10 responses

Module and Curriculum Development

Several respondents described engaging in informal and formal collaboration with staff around module design, delivery, and assessment.

> *"Informal conversations with staff around ideas for improving future module content and delivery."*

> *"Participating in new or reworked modules, provided feedback."*

> *"Many of my modules ... are shaped by the interest of students – for example, the final weeks of many modules are commonly reserved for topics that students would like to know more about."*

Student Voice and Co-Creation

One respondent provided a detailed account describing how student-staff partnership empowered them as a co-creator in course design and delivery, particularly through the digital storytelling project.

> *"My role centres on amplifying student voice within the digital storytelling project, I contribute by representing the student perspective in discussions around course design, assessment formats, and how digital tools are integrated into our learning., Student–staff partnership in my PME empowers me by positioning me as an active collaborator rather than a passive recipient of knowledge."*

Collaborative Project Work and Initiatives

Detailed accounts from two respondents highlighted significant engagement in joint student-staff projects, including Cybersecurity Education, Cyberwise, Shared Island, and Education for Sustainability. These examples illustrate how student-staff partnerships often extend beyond the classroom, involving event co-ordination and project development.

> *"Yes, I have been actively involved in two significant projects -Cybersecurity Education and Education for Sustainability."*

> *"Working on the Cyberwise initiative gave me the chance to showcase my students' work through a well-planned activity day in UCD....Through the Shared Island project, I was able to bring my students to the Ulster Transport Museum... college staff worked on organising the day's itinerary."*

> *One respondent highlighted collaboration through public and cultural events that promoted diversity and inclusion.*

> *"I've collaborated with staff members in the lecture series 'Talking Black: Voices from the Diaspora,' as well as the panel discussion during Black History Week."*

This demonstrates that student-staff partnership also supports community engagement and representation, fostering inclusive educational environments.

Resource Creation and Knowledge Sharing

Some students described creating learning resources or contributing examples of good practice for others to use.

> *"I created resources around the use of artificial intelligence in education and presented them to my own peers"*

> *"My assessments have been used in the years below me as examples of good working leading up to assignment submissions".*

If you are not interested in student-staff partnerships, could you briefly share why?

10 respondents answered this question, with most responses brief, and several clarified that they were not.

Lack of Awareness or Opportunity

This was the most frequently mentioned reason. Several respondents stated that they have not been aware of partnership opportunities or that such options have never come up during their time at UCD.

> *"I don't recall the opportunity ever coming up in my time in UCD"*

> *"Not sure when opportunities presented itself"*

Many students are not disengaged, but simply unaware of partnership structures or invitations to participate.

Perception of Inaccessibility or Structural Barriers
Some respondents expressed that staff can feel distant or difficult to approach, and that partnership opportunities are not always designed to promote equal participation.

> *"It's not that I'm not interested, it's just that staff often feel unreachable, Most opportunities to share experiences are in 1 on 1 sessions during meeting hours, and not shared passions that draw the two together."*

> *"I am interested but find that the equitable contribution piece is often missing."*

Competing Priorities, Personal Focus and Social Factors
Several participants explained that their current focus, such as adjusting to university life or returning to education, limited their ability to engage in partnerships.

> *"As a first-year undergraduate I have been focused on my own journey (especially as a mature student) back to education."*

> *"Haven't spent enough time in UCD as a student."*

One respondent reflected that the societal nature of partnership made participation less appealing.

> *"I would not say I am not interested in student–staff partnerships rather that I have just not thought to seek out opportunities... perhaps in part due [to] the highly social nature of it which I tend to avoid where possible."*

Positive but Irrelevant Responses
Some responses did not indicate disinterest at all, but indicated that this question was not applicable to them.

> *"N/A"*

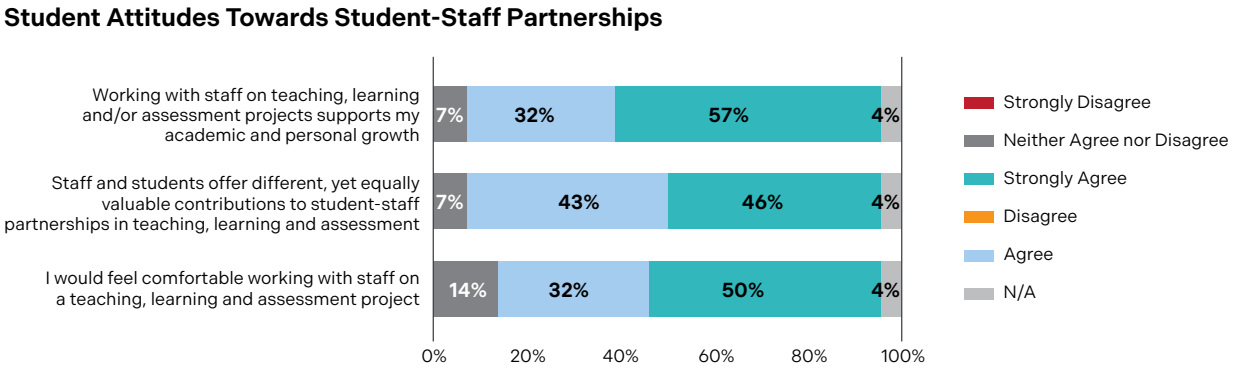
> *"N/A - I think they are vital to our university experience!"*

Summary
Overall, most respondents were not disinterested, but rather unaware, inexperienced, or constrained by time or confidence.

Section 4- Teaching and Learning and Assessment Student-Staff Partnership in Projects and Fellowships

At university, students sometimes work with staff on teaching and learning projects where students and staff bring different, but equally important, contributions. This might include projects commissioned at school or college level, or funded teaching and learning projects (e.g. SATLE projects). This section explores your experience or perception of student-staff partnerships in teaching, learning and assessment projects.

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements.



Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with three statements relating to comfort, value, and personal growth associated with student-staff partnerships in teaching, learning and assessment.

Statement 1: "I would feel comfortable working with staff on a teaching, learning and assessment project."

The majority of respondents (82%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would feel comfortable collaborating with staff on teaching, learning, or assessment projects. No respondents disagreed, and only 14% expressed neutrality. This indicates that students generally felt confident and positive about engaging in partnership activities with staff.

Statement 2: "Staff and students offer different, yet equally valuable contributions to student–staff partnerships in teaching, learning and assessment."

Almost nine in ten respondents (89%) agreed that both staff and students contribute equally valuable perspectives to partnership activities. The high level of agreement, coupled with the absence of disagreement, reflects a strong sense of mutual respect and recognition of complementary roles within teaching and learning partnerships.

Statement 3: "Working with staff on teaching, learning and/or assessment projects supports my academic and personal growth."

This statement received the highest overall agreement, with 89% of respondents indicating that partnership activities support both academic and personal development. Over half (57%) strongly agreed, highlighting a perception that collaborative experiences are particularly enriching. Students appear to recognise the developmental benefits of these partnerships.

Across all three statements, responses were overwhelmingly positive. Between 82% and 89% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with each statement, and no respondents expressed disagreement. This indicated a high degree of openness and enthusiasm among students towards student-staff partnership. The results suggest that students not only feel comfortable engaging in collaborative projects but also view them as mutually beneficial and personally rewarding.

What helps or would help students feel like an equal partner in a student-staff teaching, learning and/or assessment project?

Communication, Feedback, and being Heard

A dominant theme that emerged in responses was open, two-way and ongoing communication is fundamental to feeling like equal partners. They want their feedback to be acknowledged, listened to, and acted upon, with clear opportunities for dialogue.

> *"Open and ongoing communication in an inclusive environment between students and staff, Students want to feel heard, and having a line of communication open makes us feel valued."*

> *"Having open, two-way communication is important when collaboratively working on a project."*

> *"Feeling like their feedback is taken seriously."*

> *"Clear, open communication and lots of opportunities for feedback from both sides"*

Respect, Trust and Equal Treatment

Many respondents linked equality to be respected and treated as legitimate contributors. Mutual respect, trust, and openness were described as prerequisites for collaboration. Students valued being recognised as knowledgeable and capable, even if staff hold more expertise.

> *"Be treated equally and respected"*

> *"To feel like equal partners students like me need to experience genuine collaboration, respect, and shared responsibility."*

> *"Equal recognition for the work."*

> *"Providing a degree of freedom to students is also important to make them feel equal in the partnership."*

Genuine collaboration and equal treatment was a strong supporting theme linked to being respected and treated as legitimate contributors. Respondents stressed that equality comes from active involvement in decisions. Students want their ideas implemented and responsibility shared. Several responses also pointed out that approachability and informality help reduce barriers between students and staff.

> *"Seeing that their ideas are listened to, and to go even further, worked on to become tangible."*

> *"One of the key factors ... is being given genuine responsibility and a voice in decision-making."*

> *"Sharing and implementing ideas equally."*

> *"Student voice and student considerations being taken on board and developed into meaningful elements of the project."*

> *"Sitting face to face on the same level, informal setting with tea or coffee that makes it more open and welcoming, less scary and formal."*

> *"Perhaps teaching staff could approach students about the project directly?"*

Clarity, Guidance and Defined Roles

Some students highlighted the need for clear expectations, boundaries, and structure to make collaboration effective. They also valued staff guidance, especially early in the process.

> *"Clear boundaries and guidelines on what is expected of students and staff."*

> *"Thinking of power dynamics at play."*

> *"To be guided, getting feedback and timely directions."*

> *"The word 'equal' is a little ambiguous... I want staff to take the lead. They are experts... and have an understanding about the shape of it."*

Flexibility, Inclusivity, and Tailored Support

Finally, a few respondents mentioned the need for flexibility and personalised opportunities.

> *"Making sure each and every student gets a tailored experience to suit their academic needs."*

> *"Providing a degree of freedom to students is also important to make them feel equal in the partnership."*

Conclusion

Students consistently emphasised that feeling equal in partnership is about communication, respect, and participating, rather than having identical authority to staff. They value collaboration with boundaries, where staff still provide leadership and expertise, but students are treated as respected contributors whose ideas shape outcomes. Overall, the responses reflect a desire for partnership that is authentic, built on mutual respect, feedback loops, and genuine dialogue.

If you participated with professional or academic staff on a teaching, learning and/or assessment project, what helped it succeed or made it challenging?

Responses were analysed thematically to identify key facilitators and barriers to successful student-staff collaboration. Of the 12 responses, most participants highlighted positive experiences of support, communication, and inclusivity. Some noted challenges around different goals in teaching destination, lack of institutional support and understanding required workload.

Support and Communication

The success of projects was credited to supportive, encouraging, and approachable staff, and emerged as the most dominant theme in responses. The importance of communication, reassurance, and regular check-ins were noted.

> *"Working with [xxxx]... created a positive and collaborative environment when I felt genuinely valued., Her approachable and encouraging manner helped build my confidence and made the experience both productive and enjoyable."*

> *"The people I worked with were absolutely wonderful, and they believed in our project."*

> *"Frequent check-ins providing opportunities to ask questions and ensure that work being done is relevant and correct"*

Strong, empathetic leadership from staff fosters trust and confidence, making students feel valued and capable. Facilitators were credited directly and even mentioned by name.

Recognition and Value of Student

Several respondents linked successful collaboration to feeling listened to, respected, and recognised as equal contributors. In contrast, others described frustration when contributors were undervalued or presented merely as "good learning opportunities" for students rather than genuine partnerships, as one student stated These opportunities are often presented as a 'good learning experience/good for the cv... and so there's often a lack of recognition of valuable contribution the student makes.

> *"She always gave me the opportunity to voice my opinions and took the time to listen."*

Institutional and Structural Challenges

While personal interactions were positive, several comments pointed to wider systemic barriers, such as lack of institutional support, uneven workload distribution, or differing priorities between students and staff.

> *"Most of the hurdles were a lack of institutional support."*

> *"The majority of the workload was handed over to the students involved without effective communication channels."*

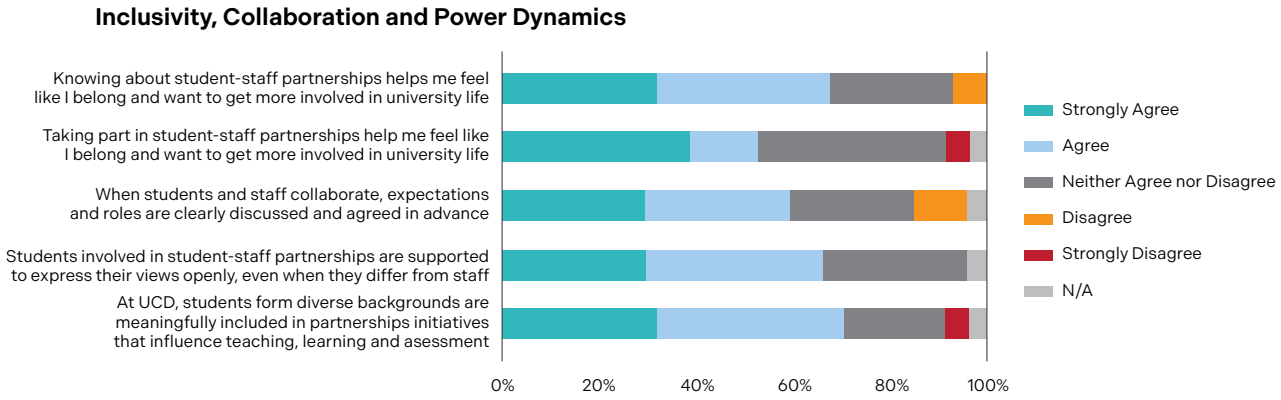
> *"Huge gap and different goals of teaching destination."*

Overall, responses students identified strong staff support and clear communication. Success is dependent on individual staff commitment, with challenges being structural, limited institutional support.

Section 5- Inclusivity, Collaboration, and Power Dynamics in Student-Staff Partnerships

At its best, student-staff partnership creates space for everyone's voice to be heard and valued, no matter their background or experience, which means working together in ways that are inclusive, fair, and open. This section explores your experience and/or perception of inclusion in student-staff partnerships.

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:



Inclusion and Openness

A majority (71%) agreed or strongly agreed that students from diverse backgrounds are meaningfully included in partnership initiatives, and 67% felt supported to express differing views. These results suggest that students perceive UCD as an inclusive and open environment, though around one-fifth remained neutral, indicating that some students may not yet experience inclusion directly.

Clarity of Roles and Expectations

Perceptions were more mixed regarding clarity and structure. Only 60% agreed or strongly agreed that expectations and roles are clearly discussed in advance, while 26% were neutral and 11% disagreed. This highlights the need for greater transparency and communication when forming partnerships.

Sense of Belonging and Engagement

Around 53% agreed that participating in partnerships helps them feel a sense of belonging and motivation to get involved in university life, while 39% were neutral. Similarly, 68% agreed that simply knowing about partnership opportunities promotes belonging. These findings suggest that visibility and awareness of partnerships can positively influence engagement, even for those not directly involved.

What does inclusive student-staff partnership look like to you?

- Valuing All Voices and Perspectives
- Collaboration, Shared Responsibility, and Fair Workload
- Trust, Respect, and Supportive Relationships
- Open Communication

Similar to previous questions, students view inclusive partnerships as those characterised by respectful communication, shared responsibility, and mutual trust. Inclusivity is achieved when all voices are valued, contributions are recognised fairly, and staff provide ongoing support and encouragement. These themes reinforce earlier findings that equality and inclusivity depend on open communication, recognition, and collaborative effort between staff and students.

What makes student-staff partnerships welcoming for students from different backgrounds? (e.g. disability/socio-economic status/race/religion/sexual orientation/ gender) 13 responses

Respect for Diversity and Representation

"Staff members who recognise and value the unique cultural experiences students bring... create an environment where everyone feels included."

"There are few Black lecturers at UCD... hiring more people of colour will make students of various backgrounds feel more represented."

Representation and genuine respect for difference are central to inclusion. This builds on earlier findings (Q15) around valuing all voices and ensuring that equality goes beyond participation to recognition and visibility.

Supportive, Safe, and Respectful Environment

"No judgment environment, inclusive, friendly, diverse community."

"Clear, accessible communication channels and multiple ways to engage. Respect is key."

Fairness, Equal Treatment and Shared Understanding

"Feeling like they are being treated the same as everyone else."

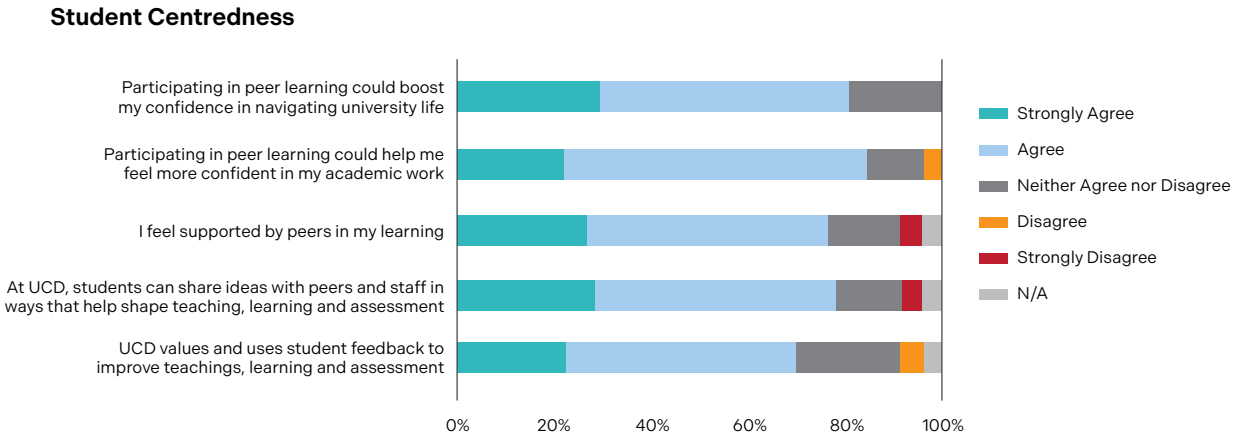
"It fosters inclusiveness and a sense of equality."

"It becomes vital that students and staff see their involvement actually changes things for the better."

Section 6-Student Centredness and Staff Student Partnerships Supporting Peer Mentoring

This section focuses on student-centred approaches and peer mentoring, highlighting how staff foster environments that promote peer-to-peer learning, meaningful student feedback, and support structures designed around students' needs — and how students actively engage with and respond to these opportunities as partners in shaping their learning experience.

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:



*28 responses.

Overall, across all five statements regarding peer mentoring SSP and student centredness, responses were strongly positive, with the majority of students agreeing or strongly agreeing in each case.

Student Feedback and Collaboration

71% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that UCD values and uses student feedback to improve teaching, learning and assessment., and 79% feel they can share ideas with peers and staff in ways that help teaching practices. This reflects a general belief that the student voice is both welcomed and impactful.

Peer Support and Learning

Most students (77%) felt supported by their peers, while over 80% agreed that participating in peer learning could increase their academic confidence and help them navigate university life.

What makes peer learning helpful or meaningful for students?

Shared Understanding and Relatability

The most common theme was that peer learning is meaningful because students can relate to one another's experience and communicate without hierarchy. Learning from someone "in the same position" creates a more comfortable and supportive environment.

> *"You are learning from someone who is directly in your position. You don't feel talked down to."*

> *"Provides opportunities to ask questions in a comfortable environment."*

Collaboration, Confidence, and Community
Many respondents described peer learning as a way to build confidence, connect with others, and create a sense of community.

"Peer learning could be confidence-building for some students."

"Helps connect with others and learn from and with different profiles."

"Encourages communication between peers and builds useful skills such as collaboration."

Safe, Respectful, and Inclusive Spaces
Students emphasised the need for safe and supportive environments where ideas can be shared openly. Meaningful peer learning happens when everyone feels encouraged to participate.

"Students need to feel safe and encouraged in order to share."

"Peer learning is helpful when there is an environment of mutual respect and shared ideas."

Exchange of Ideas and Multiple Perspectives
Several respondents valued the diversity of thought and feedback that peer learning offers

"Recognition of the shared learning experience, seeing alternative perspectives."

"Share ideas and experiences."

"Collaborative reflection when students review each other's digital stories."

What are the barriers and enablers to peer learning?

The most common barriers related to communication and confidence, such as shyness, social anxiety, or discomfort speaking in groups. Students noted that competition or dominant personalities can discourage open sharing, while a lack of confidence or kindness during feedback limits participation.

"Barriers: Students all feel in competition with one another."
"Lack of confidence and kindness that should come with constructively criticising."
"Barriers include: social anxiety, introversion, neurodiversity — all which may effect a students desire to collaborate with peers"

A number of respondents mentioned limited motivation to participate, citing individual learning preferences or lack of engagement as challenges.

"Some peers simply do not want to participate in peer learning."
"A barrier to peer learning is the desire to learn individually."
"One major barrier is perhaps the willingness to share information by others."
"Lack of approachability, not knowing the people that you are trying to talk to."

Additionally, several students described challenges related to culture, language, and lack of open-mindedness:

"Culture and language are the barriers."
"Not being open-minded and inclusive towards people—communication is key."

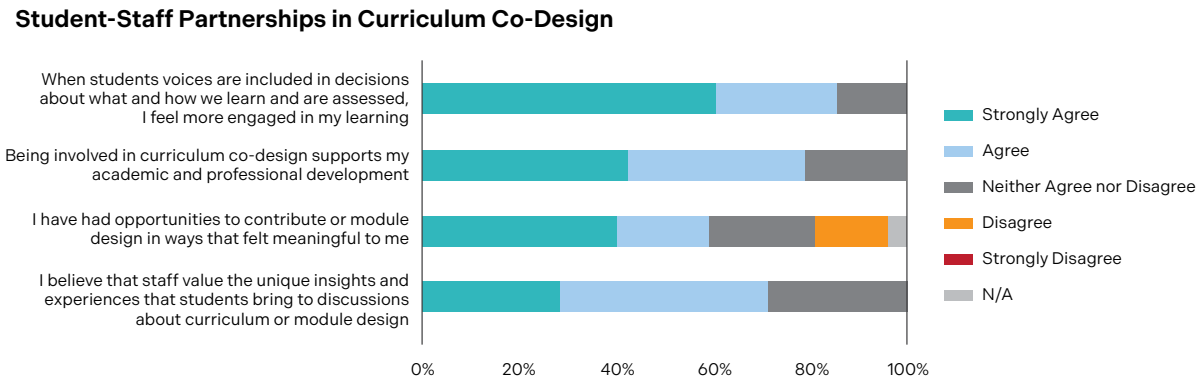
Enablers were identified as supportive structures and safe learning environments that encourage collaboration:

> *"Enablers: A safe environment, a stimulus, guidance, and students who are actually willing to work together."*
> *"More tutoring would be helpful, tutors as contacts on a module to provide an in-between person for advice."*

Section 7-Student-Staff Partnerships in Curriculum Co-Design

Curriculum co-design is about students working together with staff to help shape course content, assessments, teaching methods, or learning experiences. This section explores your experiences and perceptions of curriculum co-design.

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:



Across all four statements, responses demonstrate strong support for student involvement in curriculum and module design, with consistently high levels of agreement and virtually no disagreement.

Valuing Student Insight

A majority of students (72%) agreed or strongly agreed that staff value the unique insights and experiences students bring to curriculum discussions, while 29% remained neutral. This suggests most students perceive staff as open to student perspectives, though a notable minority remain unsure, indicating potential for more visible inclusion efforts.

Meaningful Opportunities for Contribution

Responses to opportunities for meaningful involvement were more mixed. While 60% agreed or strongly agreed, 22% were neutral and 15% disagreed. This indicates that although opportunities exist, not all students have experienced them as personally meaningful or accessible, possibly reflecting uneven engagement across programmes

Impact on Development

The vast majority (79%) agreed or strongly agreed that being involved in curriculum co-design supports their academic and professional development. This reflects a strong belief in the educational value of partnership activities.

Engagement through Student Voice

The highest agreement (86%) was found for the statement *"When students are included in decisions about what and how we learn and are assessed, I feel more engaged in my learning".* This highlights the positive relationship between student voice and engagement, reinforcing themes from earlier qualitative findings around communication, respect, and shared responsibility.

Can you describe a time when you felt your input influenced what or how you were taught, how you learned or how you were assessed? What made that experience meaningful (or not)?

(17 responses, including several 'not applicable')

Meaningful Influence Through Feedback and Responsiveness
The most common theme was when staff actively listened and responded to student feedback, leading to tangible changes in teaching or assessment. Students valued moments when lecturers acknowledged their concerns, adapted workloads, or incorporated feedback into future modules.

> *"I chose to submit my philosophy assignment as a digital story... lecturers adapted their assessments."*

> *"Suggesting that a lecturer could include a topic in a given lecture made me feel competent and capable."*

> *"I requested to be excused from submitting an essay plan... and was allowed to proceed in my own way."*

Several students indicated they had not yet experienced this kind of influence, suggesting that opportunities for meaningful student input are present but inconsistent across programmes.

What helps or motivates students to actively take part in shaping curriculum design at UCD?

Feeling Heard and Seeing Impact
A recurring theme, and motivator was when students believe their feedback is genuinely valued and leads to real change. Respondents emphasised that engagement increases when staff listen transparently, act on suggestions, and show visible outcomes.

> *"Students are more likely to take part when they feel their voices are genuinely valued."*
> *"Completing a feedback form can feel meaningless unless we actually see the change."*

> *This theme echoes earlier findings on communication and recognition, meaningful participation depends on trust and responsiveness from staff.*

Passion, Interest, and Personal Relevance
Many students cited personal interest, passion for their subject, and a desire to improve learning experiences as key motivators.

> *"I am motivated because of my passion for making a meaningful impact on students' lives."*

> *"Passion for the subject at hand."*

Encouragement, Opportunity, and Clear Communication
Several respondents said students need guidance, invitation, and clarity about how to get involved.

> *"Feeling encouraged to participate, such as by the class environment*

> *"Perhaps clearer communication around such opportunities could lead to more student involvement."*

> *"Knowing how to take part."*

This reinforces earlier themes of accessibility and inclusion, students are more likely to engage when opportunities are well-communicated and supported.

Barriers: Lack of Follow-Through or Engagement
A few respondents expressed cynicism or frustration, noting that feedback sometimes feels ignored or only sought after negative experiences.

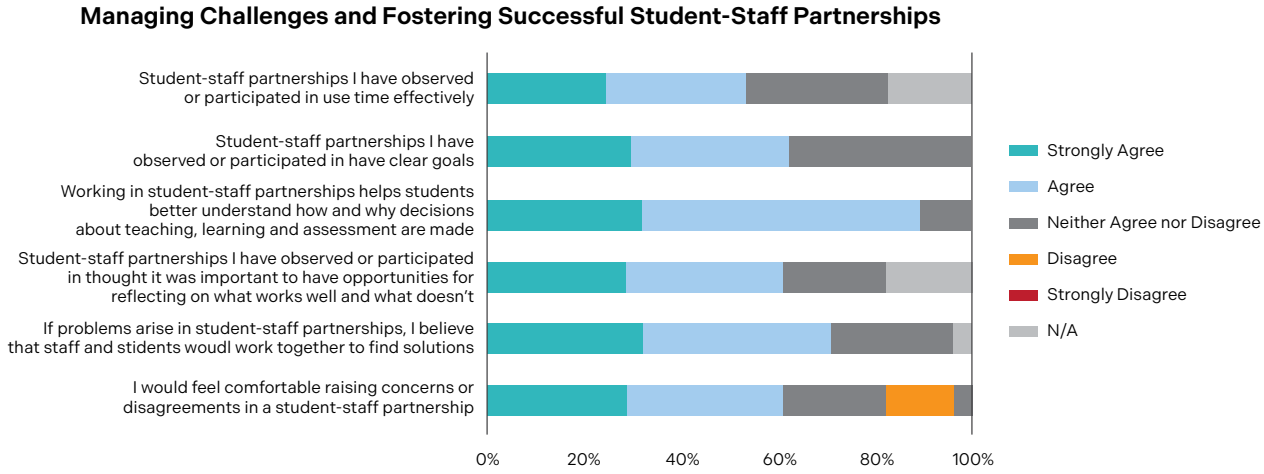
> *"My own experiences of wanting to give feedback are from negative experiences."*

> *"A cynical but realistic answer would be self-interest!"*

Section 8-Managing Challenges and Fostering Successful Student–Staff Partnerships

Student-staff partnerships can bring great benefits, but they can also involve challenges — like resistance to new ways of working, disagreements, or unclear expectations. This section explores these challenges and how to navigate them.

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:



Communication, Collaborative Problem-solving and Reflection

A majority (61%) agreed to some extent that they would feel comfortable raising concerns with a partnership, though 14% disagreed and 21% were neutral. Similarly, 71% agreed that staff and students work together to resolve problems, reflecting trust and cooperation as strong elements of partnership culture.

60% agreed that partnerships include opportunities to reflect on what works well and what doesn't, reinforcing earlier findings that continuous feedback and dialogue are vital to managing challenges effectively.

Clarity, Organisation, and Purpose

While 89% agreed that partnerships helped them understand how and why decisions about teaching and assessment are made, responses were more varied regarding structure and organisation. About 60% agreed that partnerships have clear goals and use time effectively, while nearly one-fifth selected neutral or not applicable.

Overall, responses suggest that while challenges exist, most students view SSP as collaborative, constructive, and valuable for mutual understanding.

What helps make student-staff partnerships feel respectful and fair, even when individuals disagree?

Students emphasised that disagreements within student-staff partnerships can still feel respectful and fair when handled through open communication, mutual respect, and empathy. Many noted that listening and transparency are key to maintaining trust, even when opinions differ.

> *"It helps when both sides understand their roles, and when staff are transparent about what can be changed."*

> *"Even if decisions don't always go the student's way, feeling genuinely heard and included in the process makes a big difference."*

> *Several students described fairness as space to express differing views without fear or hostility, where discussions stay professional and focused.*

> *"Discussion is focused on the event but not personal-related."*

> *"An ability to exchange viewpoints without getting angry or overly emotional."*

Overall, disagreements are seen as opportunities for growth, not conflict, when both students and staff actively listen, acknowledge different opinions, and remain committed to shared learning goals.

What kind of support would help students manage or resolve challenges in student-staff partnerships? 13 responses

The most common suggestion was for regular, structured check-ins where students can express concerns safely and constructively. Respondents highlighted the need for approachable staff and student representatives, and training on communication and feedback to build confidence and prevent misunderstandings.

> *"Regular check-ins with staff, where students can express concerns in a safe and respectful environment."*

> *"Guidance on how to give constructive feedback and knowing there's a safe, respectful space to do so also makes a big difference."*

Several students proposed the involvement of a neutral third party, such as a mediator, student representative, or SU officer, to help manage emotionally charged or complex situations.

> *"Possibly a middleman communicator to ease the stress of emotionally charged conversations."*

> *"Perhaps mediation or the involvement of someone who is neither staff nor student aligned."*

Respondents also stressed the importance of clarity around roles, responsibilities, and decision-making at the start of the partnership.

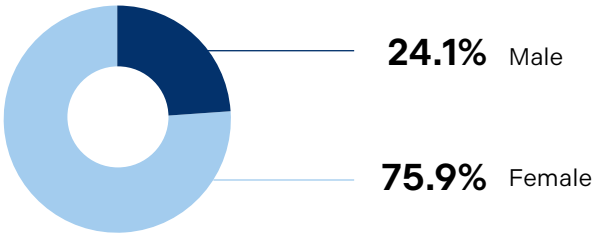
> *"Expectations for both staff and students identified from the outset so everyone is clear."*
> *"Decision-making transparency."*

10.5 UCD Student-Staff Partnership - Staff Survey April 2025

All respondents provided informed consent for participating in the survey, n=29

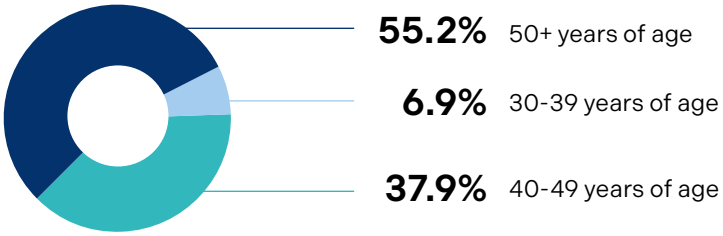
Section 2-Demographic and Background Information

Participant breakdown by gender



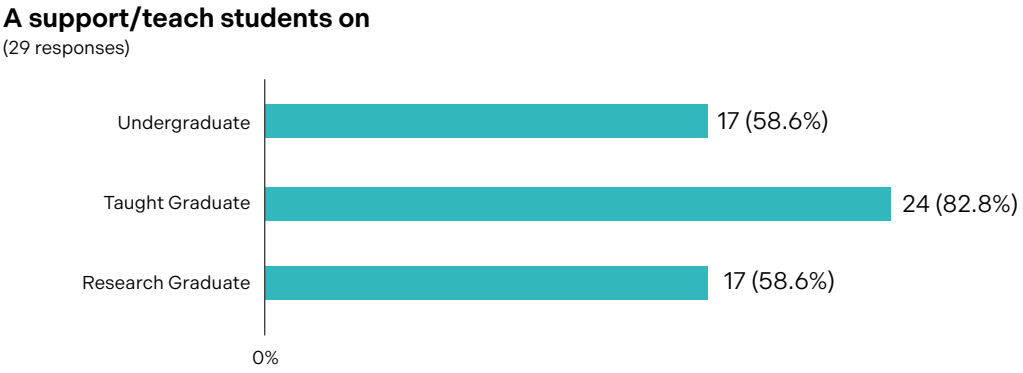
The gender distribution shows a higher proportion of female respondents (approximately three-quarters of the total sample) compared to male respondents (one-quarter). No respondents identified as non-binary or chose not to disclose their gender.

Participant breakdown by age



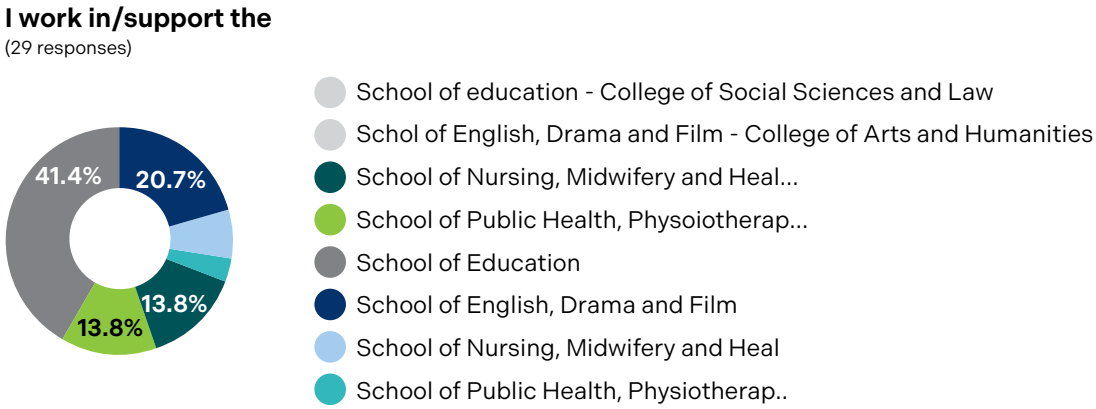
The majority of respondents (55.2%) were the in age bracket 50+ years, followed by 40-49 years of age at just over a third of respondents (37.9%). 30-39 years old made up the remainder at 6.9%, just two out of the 29 respondents, and no respondents falling under the younger age category, 20-29 years of age.

Student group taught/supported by respondents



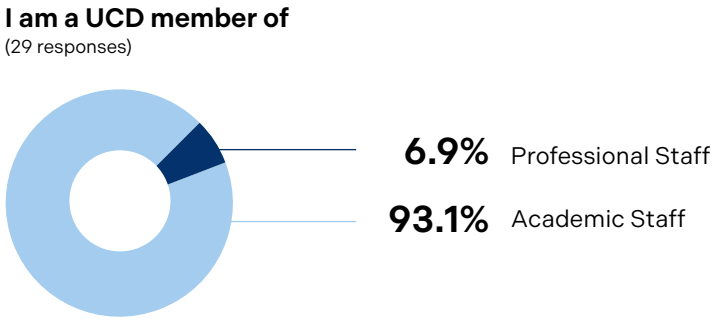
The majority of staff (24 out of 29) respondents support taught graduates, followed by just over half of respondents (58.6%) who support undergraduate and research graduate in the same capacity.

Participant by participating School breakdown



Four Schools across the fellowship were involved in the fellowship. 41.4% of respondents were from the School of Education with 20.7% from the School of English, Drama and Film, 24.1% from the School of Nursing Midwifery and Health Sciences and 13.8% from the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sport Sciences.

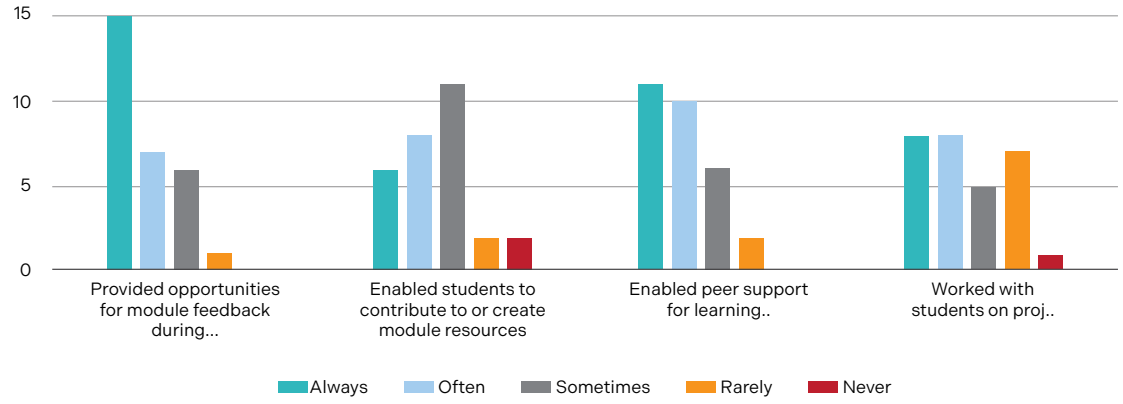
Participant by University role breakdown



Looking further into demographics, academic staff comprised 93.1% of respondents with the remaining 6.9% of respondents being professional staff.

Section 3-General Experience of Partnership

**During your time as staff member in UCD,
how often have you facilitated the following activities**



Full statement provided below:

1. Provided opportunities for module feedback during or at the end of a module (other than UCD module survey).
2. Enabled students to contribute to or create module resources.
3. Enabled peer support for learning.
4. Worked with students on projects within UCD (e.g. research, curriculum development, events etc.).

Overall, the bar charts shows that staff frequently engage in activities that promote SSP, though levels of involvement vary by type of activity. The most consistently facilitated activity was providing opportunities for module feedback, with the majority of staff selecting Always or Often (76% combined). This suggests that feedback remains the most embedded form of partnership across teaching practice. In contrast, enabling students to contribute to or create module resources appears less frequent, with most staff indicating Sometimes or Often (66% combined).

Peer support for learning received strong engagement, with most respondents choosing Always or Often (72% combined), showing a positive commitment to collaborative learning among students. Finally, working with students on projects showed more mixed results, with similar proportions selecting Always or Often (28% each) as Rarely (24%). This may be caused by differences in opportunity across disciplines or schools or workload contexts.

If you have facilitated in any of the activities listed above, what have been the main benefits to you as a staff member?

Many staff highlighted how student collaboration leads to curriculum renewal, innovation, and more dynamic teaching.

"A refreshing of the curriculum and my expectations related to it."
"Identify changes that may be required to modules."
"Students bring a different viewpoint and help to keep things real."

Respondents frequently mentioned gaining insight into how students learn, where they struggle, and what they value. This feedback informs better planning and supports more empathetic, responsive teaching.

"Getting a feeling for where students are and what is hard for them."
"Understanding student needs at various junctures in their professional formation."
"Clear responses from students about what learning pathways and resources they need."

Many staff described a sense of personal and professional fulfilment from working more collaboratively with students. They valued fresh ideas, creativity, and the opportunity to develop new teaching and research practices.

"It serves as a learning opportunity for me as well as the students."
"Involvement and partnership... contributes to my own professional development."
"Fresh ideas and insights resulting from the collaborations involved."

If you have facilitated in any of the activities listed above, what have been the main challenges for you as a staff member?
(27 responses)

Across the 27 responses, staff described a set of interrelated challenges that shape what it feels like to facilitate student–staff partnership work in practice. Most comments clustered around four broad areas: the time and labour involved, uneven student engagement, the delicate work of balancing roles and power dynamics, and the structural conditions that can constrain co-creation—alongside a steady undercurrent about the everyday difficulty of communication and coordination.

A dominant theme was time, workload, and resourcing, where staff emphasised that partnership is not an "add-on" that can be absorbed invisibly into existing workloads. Instead, it requires additional planning, meeting time, and active facilitation—pressures that become even more pronounced with large cohorts, unsuitable spaces, or fragile tech. This challenge was captured plainly in: "Time is a considerable issue." Others pointed to the intensity of sustaining dialogue and closing feedback loops: "Managing discussions and feedback meetings is really labour intensive." Several responses also positioned workload as an institutional recognition issue rather than just a personal capacity issue, for example: "Not having enough staff to support PBL on my module, Heads of Subjects not recognising the amount of work involved in using PBL." A similar point was reinforced in a more cumulative description of practical constraints: "Student numbers. Suitable teaching spaces. Coping with technology. More time and labour intensive."

Alongside workload, staff frequently described uneven student engagement and motivation. The challenge here was not simply low participation, but variability—where partnership approaches can land very differently across the same group, creating an uneven foundation for co-creation. One staff member summarised this as: "Mixed engagement among students—some 'get it' and others demonstrate a shallow response." In a more acute account, another noted: "Students flat-out refused to participate by not attending." There were also comments about the need to justify partnership pedagogies to students who are accustomed to more traditional teaching formats, and the labour involved in "bringing students with you," as reflected in: "Occasionally, persuading students that this a legitimate way to learn can be challenging".

A third strand centred on balancing roles and power dynamics—the ongoing negotiation between staff responsibility (including assessment and quality assurance) and the aspiration to work "as equals." Staff described this as both a relational and ethical challenge: "Sometimes tensions between being the boss or the examiner and wanting to work as equals". Others highlighted the facilitation skill required to ensure partnership doesn't reproduce existing hierarchies within the student group itself, particularly where some voices dominate. One response captured this facilitation challenge as: "Managing strong, vociferous personalities who can dominate so all that voices are heard."

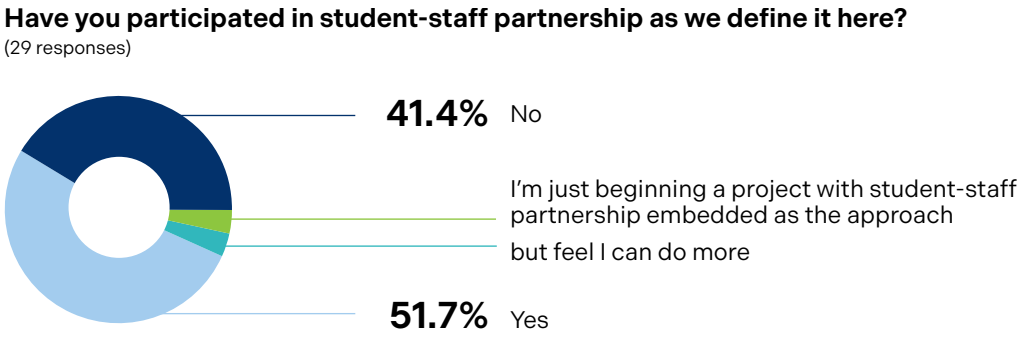
Staff also pointed to institutional and structural barriers that make authentic partnership harder to enact. These included inflexible timelines, pre-set module requirements, and inconsistent leadership recognition of the additional work involved. One practical constraint was expressed as: "Module descriptors are required to be completed prior to delivery." Another directly returned to the issue of recognition: "Heads of subject not recognising the amount of work involved."

Finally, running through multiple responses was the challenge of communication and coordination—the "glue work" of keeping partnership functioning: setting expectations, creating safe conditions for feedback, and simply finding time for the touchpoints that make co-creation possible. Some responses were succinct—"Communication."—while others emphasised boundaries and psychological safety: "Ensuring that clear, respectful boundaries are kept for everyone." The time dimension surfaced here again through the practicalities of scheduling and sustaining dialogue: "Trying to accommodate time for briefing/feedback meetings."

Taken together, the responses show that staff experience partnership facilitation as complex work: it is relational, time-intensive, and often shaped by factors beyond the classroom—resourcing, institutional structures, and the effort required to build shared understanding and participation.

We define meaningful student-staff partnership as a collaborative, reciprocal process where students and faculty or professional staff contribute equitably — though their contributions may take different forms — to shaping courses, teaching approaches, support services, or university decision-making (Adapted from Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014).

Have you participated in student-staff partnership as we define it here?



If you answered yes to the above question, can you please briefly describe the nature of the partnership and your role in it? (14 responses)

1. **Co-Design of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment**
   Several staff described involving students directly in curriculum and assessment design, where learning objectives or module content were negotiated collaboratively. This often included shared decision-making on assessment order, type, or topic selection.

   "Every piece of assessment was negotiated with the students"

   "I let my students essentially design the module... they collaborate to vote up or down on topics."

2. **Research and Project Collaboration**
   Many respondents cited the joint research, outreach, or development projects, including co-producing outputs such as educational resources, awareness campaigns, or interdisciplinary initiatives that were being conducted.

   "The partnership centred around research practice and development of the project"

   "Students produced posters, leaflets, and animations that became a reality."

   "A project that will map competencies across healthcare programmes with staff-student co-creation workshops".

3. **Student Leadership and Shared Decision-Making**
   Some staff described partnerships characterised by student leadership and ownership, where students were empowered to manage activities, contribute to committees, or represent peers.

   "I worked collaboratively with students in organising their annual class ball... they took ownership."

   "PhD reps and I have clear structures for goal setting and problem solving."

   "Membership on school governance committees."

4. **Supportive, Facilitative Roles for Staff**
   Most staff viewed their role as facilitator or enabler rather than authority figure, creating space for dialogue, guiding structure, and supporting student initiative.

   "My role was to facilitate discovery and nurture interpretation of outcomes."

   "I made the space and encouraged engagement in the design and staffing of the module."

   "I strive to support their collective learning rather than be the source of knowledge."

If you are not interested in student-staff partnerships, could you briefly share why? (10 responses)

Most respondents expressed interest in student-staff partnerships but cited previously identified challenges such as limited time, heavy workloads, and a lack of institutional support as key barriers to participation.

A few respondents were critical of the language or barrier of "student-staff part", perceiving it as bureaucratic or tokenistic.

"I'm disinterested in buzz words... I'll never market anything I do as a student-staff partnership."

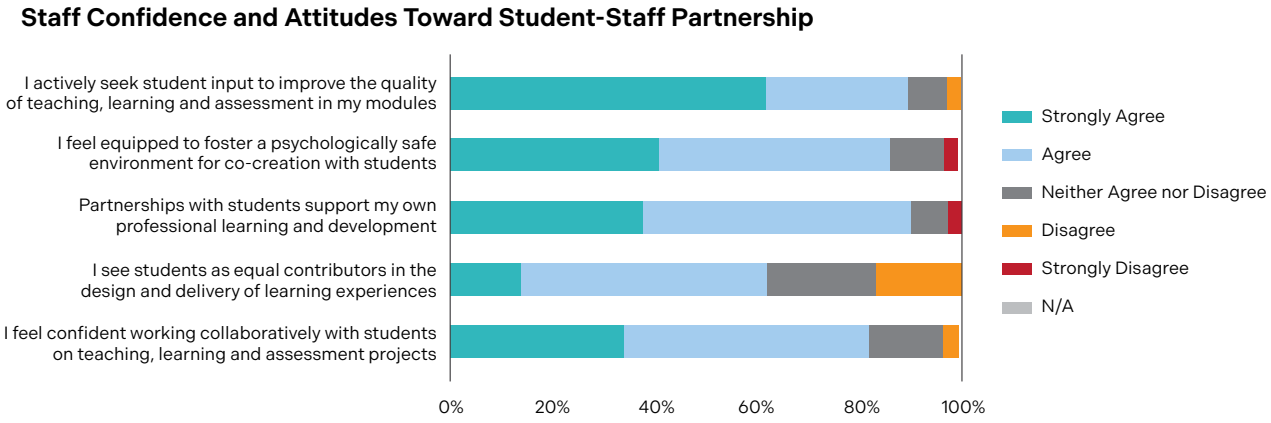
Some respondents questioned the extent of student involvement or the assumption of equal expertise. They emphasised maintaining professional authority and ensuring realistic expectations of students' time and commitment.

"I think respecting the asymmetric knowledge between teacher and student is an important basis for learning."

"I have some hesitation... undergrads often make requests for things they dont have time to use."

Section 4-Teaching and Learning and Assessment Student–Staff Partnership in Projects and Fellowships

This section explores respondents' experiences (or perceptions) of working with students as partners in teaching and learning assessment projects and fellowships.



What supports or structures help staff to work effectively with students on teaching, learning and assessment partnerships?

Across 29 responses, staff identified a range of supports and structures that enable effective engagement in student-staff partnerships. These responses strongly echoed themes already highlighted in earlier questions about benefits and challenges, particularly the need for time, clarity, training, and institutional support.

Many staff emphasised the importance of professional development, especially training in UDL, inclusive teaching, collaborative design, and psychological safety.
Courses from UCD Teaching & Learning, UDL initiatives, and the Innovation Academy were frequently mentioned.

> *"The UDL initiative is especially helpful... it embeds awareness about how people learn."*

> *"UCD Teaching and Learning modules... gave me the skills and confidence to use student-centred approaches."*

> *"I have never had any training on psychologically supporting students when co-creating. That would be helpful."*

Staff feel more equipped and confident when supported through structured professional development.

The most consistently cited requirement was time. Staff emphasised that partnership work is labour-intensive and often undertaken on top of an already overstretched workload. Staff also stressed the importance of institutional recognition of co-creation as legitimate academic work, not an optional extra.

> *"Time. We are time poor... I'm already working evenings as are most colleagues."*

> *"Reasonable workload. Recognition for innovative pedagogy in workload allocation and promotion."*

> *"Often innovation and best practices are limited by a lack of institutional support."*

Staff highlighted the value of educational technology and physical spaces that support collaborations. Technologies mentioned include Brightspace, Zoom & breakout rooms, Teams, OneNote, Library training. In addition, staff highlighted the importance of physical spaces that facilitate collaboration, such as Active Learning Environments (ALEs).

"Brightspace is excellent... technology as a whole."

"Sharing platforms like Teams and OneNote are very helpful."

"We need more collaborative learning environments... more ALEs."

Staff also reported that partnership is far more effective when embedded within a supportive school culture. Peer support from colleagues, student representative, programme teams, advisory groups, and UCD Teaching & Learning all strengthen

Finally, staff highlighted the importance of structured feedback opportunities, surveys, focus groups, ongoing discussions, and regular check-ins, to guide and refine partnership work.

"Student feedback surveys, focus groups, discussions, their participation in committees."

"Reflective practice and communication platforms."

Can you describe a project with students that went particularly well - or not well? Why?

Staff shared a wide range of examples, with most describing projects that went well and a smaller number highlighting challenges.

Projects were described as students co-designing assessments or helping identify suitable assessment types. Other examples included peer-led activities (focus groups, lesson planning, curriculum design) worked especially well. One respondent mentioned organising the annual class ball, as well as another who created sustainability materials.

The success of these projects depended on a clear structure, preparation, and feedback. Projects were most successful when staff set clear expectations, provided ongoing feedback, prepared students well, offered flexibility and aligned projects to authentic tasks (e.g., curriculum meetings, resource creation.)

"Students who were well briefed and supported... the experience went very well."

"Regular opportunities for feedback from both sides."

"Designing the assessment rubric improved the quality of submissions."

Projects were not as successful when roles, purposes or processes were unclear. A smaller number of staff described projects that did not go well often due to uncertainty at the design stage or difficulties navigating new partnership approaches.

"We were unsure of the territory ourselves and weren't quite sure how to bring students along."

"Some groups are not as cohesive... it only takes one student to upset the status quo."

"Some students expressed anxiety that I wasn't in charge."

Several staff highlighted that projects worked well when they were:

- tied to a pedagogical approach they were confident in (e.g., PBL)
- aligned with professional or research practice
- supported by staff expertise or training
- integrated into authentic learning experiences

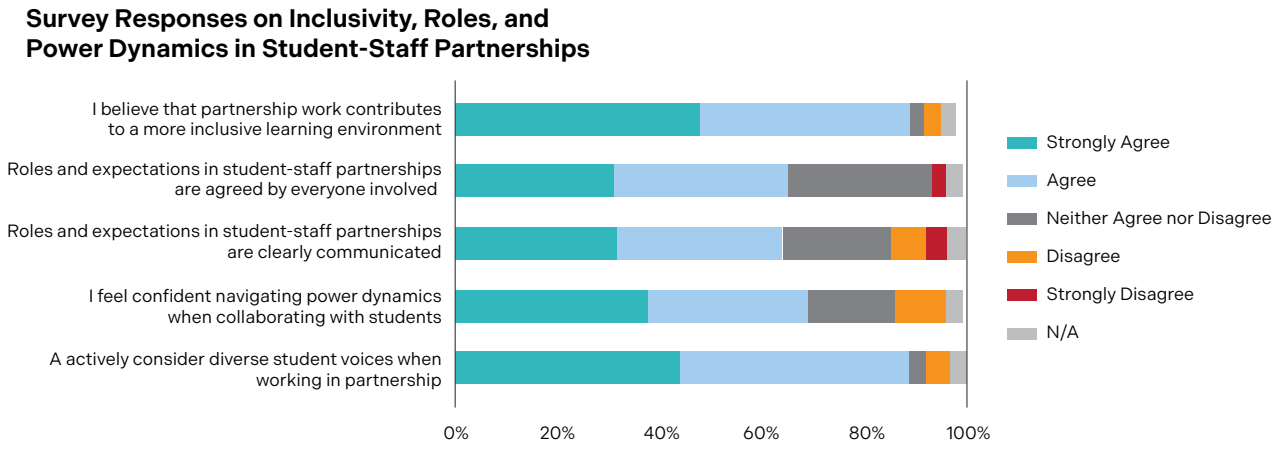
"Rolling out PBL went well because I studied it on my T&L diploma."

"Supervision of thesis students goes very well... the learning is reciprocal."

Section 5-Inclusivity, Collaboration, and Power Dynamics in Student-Staff Partnerships

This section looks at how inclusive and equitable student–staff partnerships feel from a staff perspective. It considers diversity, power dynamics, shared decision-making, and staff support for inclusive practices.

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements.



"I believe that partnership work contributes to a more inclusive learning environment - "
Highest overall agreement (89%) of all statements.
Respondents overwhelmingly view partnerships work as supporting a more inclusive environment. Very few were neutral or disagreed.

"I actively consider diverse student voices when working in partnerships."
This statement received the second-highest agreement (89%), identical overall to statement This indicates a strong perceived commitment to inclusivity and diversity in partnership practice.

"I feel confident navigating power dynamics when collaborating with students."
69% agreement, lower than than the inclusivity-related items.
This statement also has the highest Neutral (17%) and second-highest Disagree (10%), suggesting that confidence in navigating power dynamics may be an area of uncertainty or development.

"Roles and expectations in student–staff partnerships are clearly communicated."
64% agreement, one of the lowest.
Neutral (21%) and some disagreement (11%) suggest mixed experiences with communication clarity.

"Roles and expectations in student–staff partnerships are agreed by everyone involved."
65% agreement, also on the lower end compared to other items.
Neutral responses (28%) are relatively high, indicating uncertainty around whether roles are collaboratively agreed.

What factors contribute to creating student-staff partnerships that are inclusive and sustainable?

Part 1
Staff survey responses strongly echoed this theory, with many respondents describing partnership as contributing to a more inclusive learning environment and highlighting how they actively consider diverse student voices in their practice.

A short descriptive thematic analysis of these quotes indicates that staff see meaningful student–staff partnership and related innovation as contingent on a small set of practical, relational, and institutional conditions. The strongest theme is **time and workload capacity**: staff repeatedly frame partnership as labour-intensive work that cannot be absorbed into existing teaching loads, and they link "time" directly to resourcing and workload relief (e.g., "Time and some allocation of resources."; "Time, time time....."; "Reasonable teaching load, dedicated time for innovation..."). Closely connected is a theme of **institutional resourcing and recognition**, where staff describe a need for material supports (staffing, class size, spaces, and training) and for formal acknowledgement that partnership and innovative pedagogy require investment ("Resources, support from the School."; "Smaller class sizes and more time and training."; "Often innovation and best practices are limited by a lack of institutional support."; "Recognition for innovative pedagogy in workload allocation and promotion.").

A third theme concerns **clarity, shared understanding, and exemplars**. Staff suggest that partnership works best when its purpose, processes, and roles are explicit and when they can see concrete examples of how it should operate ("Clarity of purpose... The way this works/is supposed to work would need to be explained to me. I'd like to see examples."; "Having clear expectations about roles and responsibilities..."). A fourth theme highlights **relational and ethical practice**, including the skills required to listen meaningfully, avoid tokenism, and manage boundaries and power sensitively ("learning to listen and consider all voices... rather than tokenism"; "respect for students as equals"; "Staff need training... to collaborate with respectful boundaries while not dominating..."). Related to this is the need for **psychological and interpersonal support capabilities,** with staff explicitly identifying gaps in training for supporting students during co-creation ("I have never had any training on psychologically supporting students when co-creating. That would be helpful.").

Finally, staff point to **communication and connective infrastructure**—both interpersonal and practical—as enabling conditions. This includes time to engage with others, accessible platforms, and a culture of reflective practice that supports iteration ("Open communication, time to engage and support from team."; "Accessibility to each other (platforms to connect)... Reflective practice, and communication platforms."). A complementary enabling theme is **collegial expertise and cross-unit collaboration**, where staff value working with knowledgeable colleagues and specialist supports ("Working with colleagues... in ALL or the Centre for T and L."). Overall, the analysis suggests staff perceive partnership as achievable and worthwhile, but vulnerable to becoming individualised ("It seems to be very much left up to me and my own initiatives.") unless the work is scaffolded through institutional recognition, clear structures, and resourced, relationally skilled support.

Part T 2
This programme theory is reinforced by staff who described partnership projects that spanned roles and programmes as generating fresh ideas and insights, supporting their own professional learning and development, and enabling innovative co-created outputs.
A short descriptive thematic analysis indicates that staff experience student–staff partnership as both professionally generative and practically enabled by supportive contexts, while curriculum co-design is described as a shared-ownership process that improves relevance and assessment quality through negotiated, transparent collaboration. In the partnership quotes, staff emphasise reciprocal benefit: partnership "serves as a learning opportunity" and "contributes to my own professional

development," with collaboration producing "fresh ideas and insights" and linking to authentic work such as "research practice and development of the project." Staff also highlight concrete outputs as evidence of meaningful partnership, where "posters, leaflets, and animations... became a reality," suggesting co-creation results in tangible products beyond discussion. These experiences are shaped by enabling environments and infrastructures, including a "supportive" university/School context and the usefulness of "sharing platforms" such as Teams and OneNote for sustaining collaboration.

Within PT3, staff describe curriculum co-design as improvement-oriented and responsive, prompting "a refreshing of the curriculum" and helping to "identify changes" needed at module level. Students' perspectives function as a practical reality-check—helping to "keep things real," revealing "where students are and what is hard for them," and offering "clear responses" about needed learning pathways and resources. Co-design is most often enacted as adaptation within constraints rather than starting from scratch: staff describe assessment being "negotiated," beginning from a staff plan and then "adapted" to what is "fair and helpful," and module design occurring through structured choice ("basket of topics") and democratic decision-making ("Consensus wins"). Finally, staff link co-created assessment processes to improved outcomes, noting that "Designing the assessment rubric [with students] improved the quality of submissions," suggesting co-design can strengthen both student learning support and the quality of assessed work.

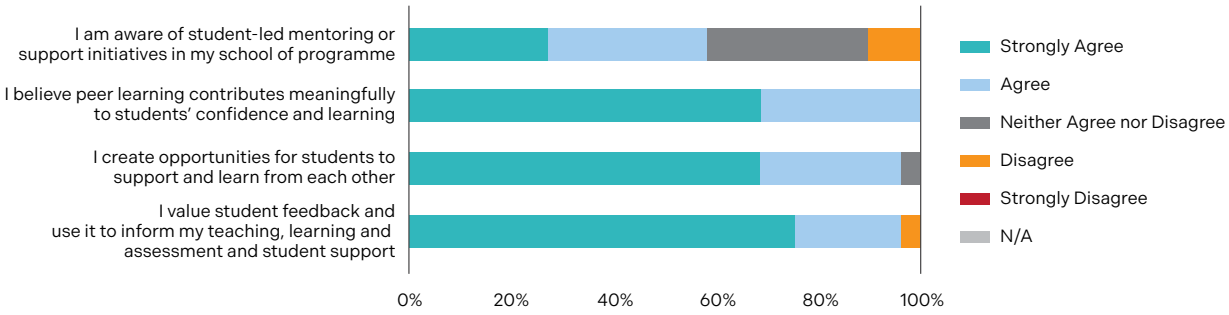
What challenges have you experienced - or do you think might arise - when trying to create or maintain inclusive and sustainable staff-student partnerships?

A short descriptive thematic analysis of these responses suggests staff see inclusive and sustainable staff–student partnerships as challenging not because partnership is undesirable, but because the enabling conditions are often fragile or uneven. A first cluster of challenges concerns **clarity and shared expectations**: staff describe difficulties when "partnership" and "inclusivity" are not clearly defined, when objectives are vague, and when expectations of what is sustainable are incompatible, leading to misunderstandings and uneven commitment. A second dominant theme is **time, workload, and the long lead-time required to build trust**. Staff emphasise that partnership requires time to move beyond transactional interactions, yet module timelines, competing responsibilities, staff illness, and cohort turnover make sustained relationship-building difficult. Closely related are **resourcing and environmental constraints**, including the need for funding, staff capacity, and supportive teaching and learning environments; without these, partnership is experienced as additional labour rather than embedded work.

Inclusivity is also framed as a **process and participation problem**, where confident students can dominate and disengaged or less confident students remain absent, making it hard to "include all voices" and avoid reproducing existing inequalities. Staff link this to **capability and preparedness**, noting that students may be unfamiliar with collaborative modes of learning, may lack confidence, and may misunderstand staff's professional obligations around assessment. A further theme concerns **power, boundaries, and role tensions**, including managing respectful relationships, avoiding blurred boundaries, and navigating situations where staff have limited influence over decision-making. Finally, staff highlight **continuity and coordination barriers**—difficulty securing face-to-face time, students moving between university and placements, and shifting cohorts—alongside wider **institutional constraints and traditions** that can resist partnership approaches, particularly in assessment. Overall, staff describe partnership as most vulnerable when it is under-defined, under-resourced, and rushed, and when participation patterns mean only certain students consistently benefit from voice and visibility.

Section 6-Student Centredness and Staff Students Partnerships Supporting Peer Mentoring

Student Centredness and Supporting Peer Mentoring



Across all four statements, on student-centredness and peer mentoring, responses were overwhelmingly positive, with 97–100% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing in three of the four areas. This indicates a strong commitment to student voice, peer learning, and collaborative teaching practices.

Student Feedback as a Driver of Practice

The strongest endorsement relates to the use of student feedback. Ninety-seven per cent of respondents agree or strongly agree that student feedback is actively used to inform teaching, learning, assessment, and student support, with 76% strongly agreeing. This suggests a mature feedback culture in which the student voice is not only welcomed but meaningfully integrated into pedagogical decision-making.

Peer Learning and Collaborative Pedagogy

There is unanimous agreement (100%) that peer learning contributes meaningfully to students' confidence and learning, reflecting a shared understanding of its pedagogical value. This belief is reinforced by practice, with 97% of respondents indicating that they actively create opportunities for students to support and learn from one another. Together, these findings point to a strongly embedded collaborative learning ethos.

Awareness of Student-Led Mentoring and Support

In contrast, awareness of student-led mentoring or support initiatives is less consistent. While a majority (59%) report being aware of such initiatives, a substantial proportion remain neutral (31%), and 10% disagree. This distribution suggests that mentoring structures may exist but are not uniformly visible or clearly communicated across the school or programme.

How do you integrate student voice or peer support into your professional support or teaching, learning and assessment practices?

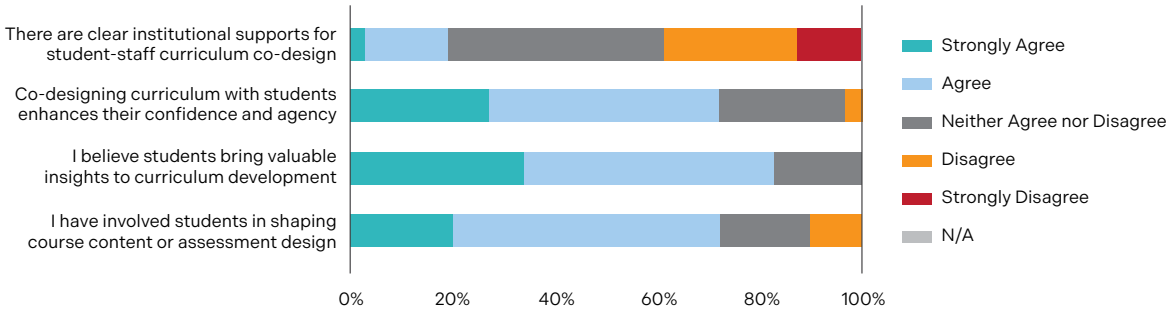
A short descriptive thematic analysis of these responses suggests staff integrate student voice and peer support through a mix of **continuous feedback processes, dialogue-rich teaching, and assessment designs that deliberately structure peer interaction**. Student voice is most often positioned as an ongoing input rather than a one-off evaluation, with staff describing regular collection of feedback through meetings, discussion boards, Q&A sessions, and in-class check-ins, and then using it to refine teaching and assessment in real time and for future iterations. In some cases, feedback is used diagnostically to create targeted supports after assessments (e.g., addressing common mistakes through worksheets or structured follow-up activities), signalling a clear feedback-to-action loop.

A second pattern is the intentional creation of **participatory learning environments** where students are encouraged to speak, question, and connect content to experience, with staff emphasising facilitation moves that keep discussion inclusive and prevent domination by a few voices. Alongside this, peer support is embedded through **structured peer review and peer assessment**, often designed to make critique constructive and safe (e.g., guided peer review, structured observation and feedback in skills practice, and low-stakes group sharing). Many accounts also describe **collaborative learning designs**—group work, problem-solving, scenario-based learning, and team-based assessments—as routine ways students learn from each other and co-construct understanding.

Beyond classroom activity, staff also mention **formal mechanisms for student input** (e.g., meetings with reps, student advisory panels, peer-led world cafés, co-designed workshops), indicating student voice is incorporated into planning and programme development as well as delivery. Finally, several responses point to **assessment transparency and assessment literacy supports**, where student feedback informs clearer guidance, exemplars, and consistent systems, sometimes enabled by platforms and tools (e.g., Teams, OneNote, PeerScholar, Feedback Fruits) that support collaboration and peer feedback at scale.

Section 7-Student-Staff Partnership in Curriculum Co-Design

Student -Staff Partnership in Curriculum Co-Design



*I have involved students in shaping course content or assessment design - More than one item was selected for question. Two respondents selected "Strongly Agree" and "Agree", as well as "Neither agree nor disagree" and "Disagree" in the one response.

Responses indicate strong support for student–staff partnership in curriculum co-design, particularly in relation to engagement and developmental value. Where students are involved, the impact is clearly perceived as positive; however, opportunities to participate are less consistently experienced.

Value of Student Voice

There is a clear perception that staff value student perspectives, though the sizeable neutral response (29%) suggests this value may not always be explicitly demonstrated or visible in practice. This points to respect for student input being present, but not uniformly experienced across contexts.

Engagement and Development

The strongest theme to emerge is the link between student voice and engagement. High levels of agreement indicate that inclusion in learning and assessment decisions has a direct and meaningful effect on student engagement. Similarly, involvement in curriculum co-design is widely seen as supporting academic and professional development, reinforcing the educational value of partnership approaches.

Opportunities for Meaningful Participation

In contrast, perceptions of access to meaningful co-design opportunities are more mixed, with evidence of uncertainty and some disagreement. This suggests that while partnership is valued and impactful, opportunities to participate may be uneven, limited, or concentrated among a subset of students.

What makes curriculum co-design with students productive and meaningful?

Across these responses, staff describe productive curriculum co-design as most meaningful when it **broadens perspectives, increases relevance and engagement, is grounded in genuine listening and clear purpose, and supports democratic participation and student agency**, while also requiring negotiated boundaries about what can realistically be co-decided.

A first theme is **expanding perspectives and opening new viewpoints**, captured in "Many factors including an expansion of perspective" and "broadened viewpoints." Staff also value student input because it brings timely, applied insight: "They provide valuable insights from real-world and recent professional experiences that can be used as cases-in-point." Co-design is therefore described as productive when it shifts how staff see content and learners and introduces perspectives that keep curriculum fresh.

A second theme is **relevance and engagement**, with staff linking co-design to increased learner engagement and more meaningful learning experiences: "materials might increase engagement; relevance of what is taught and how", "you can work from where they are at." and "Keeps curricula relevant". Some frame this as improving learning for diverse students and over time: "Mainly more engaging for all types of learners and more future proofed."

A third theme emphasises **democracy, inclusivity, and student-centredness**, where co-design is meaningful because it is "democratic, inclusive and responsive to students' needs" and "much more inclusive and student centred and facilitates motivation and active participation and learning." This is expressed most fully in the statement that co-design is productive "When students' lived experiences, interests, and aspirations are not only heard but actively shape the learning journey... cultivating democratic values like voice, agency, and shared responsibility." Relatedly, staff highlight agency as an outcome: "Having the student perspective is important so that they feel that their voice is being heard and that they have some agency," and note the importance of making impact visible: "showing students where they or their peers have been involved in curriculum is powerful and improves their feelings of agency and likelihood to act for change."

A fourth theme concerns **conditions for meaningfulness: clear purpose, open dialogue, and genuine listening**. Staff stress "Clear purpose and intentional contribution" and "Open dialogue, accommodation of difference, meaningful engagement." One response frames meaningful co-design as requiring staff to interrogate purpose and alignment beyond the module itself, asking what the curriculum is for, how it meets students' needs "beyond the university," and whether it balances "theory and practice" and supports "lifelong learning" and career navigation.

Finally, a fifth theme highlights **negotiated boundaries and scepticism about scope**, especially the difference between curriculum design and module co-design. One respondent cautions that asking students what modules should exist could "cut out anything they found challenging or boring," and argues that "Module co-design honestly is a gimmick." At the same time, this respondent acknowledges the potential value of "increase diversity and open new perspectives." Another response frames co-creation as necessary for curriculum evolution in a changing system, so that change "align[s] with the experiences they are having and the needs they need met," but also emphasises choice around areas students "enjoy or need help in." This tension points to a recurring requirement: "A negotiated and accepted line relating to the true value of the module and the approach we are taking to the learning it requires."

What barriers exist to involving students in shaping curriculum in your context?

Across these responses, staff describe barriers as largely structural and temporal (timing, short terms, approval cycles), resource-based (time, space, infrastructure, funding), cultural (traditional power dynamics and "normal" expectations), and participation-related (student availability, confidence, engagement, and representation). Several also point to policy and regulatory constraints that limit what can be changed and when.

A first theme is **time and timing misalignment**, including the mismatch between curriculum processes and student availability. Staff note that "curriculum review happens over the summer when students are off," alongside "Time limits. Short terms." and "restrictions of time... other competing demands on time." Others describe practical disruptions to planning: "late notification about my teaching inputs." Timing is also framed as a system constraint: "Students cannot shape curriculum in the year that they are registered- they do for the subsequent offerings. Timing of module descriptors."

A second theme concerns **institutional and regulatory structures that constrain change**, including prescribed outcomes, approval processes, and external requirements. One response highlights "rigid timetables, high-stakes assessments, and prescribed learning outcomes," while another specifies "Standards and requirements of the regulator. Timelines for approval of curriculum changes in the university." Staff also mention the practical need for students to understand these constraints: "obtaining volunteers, funding and having students understand restrictions from e.g. academic regulations, or staffing ratios."

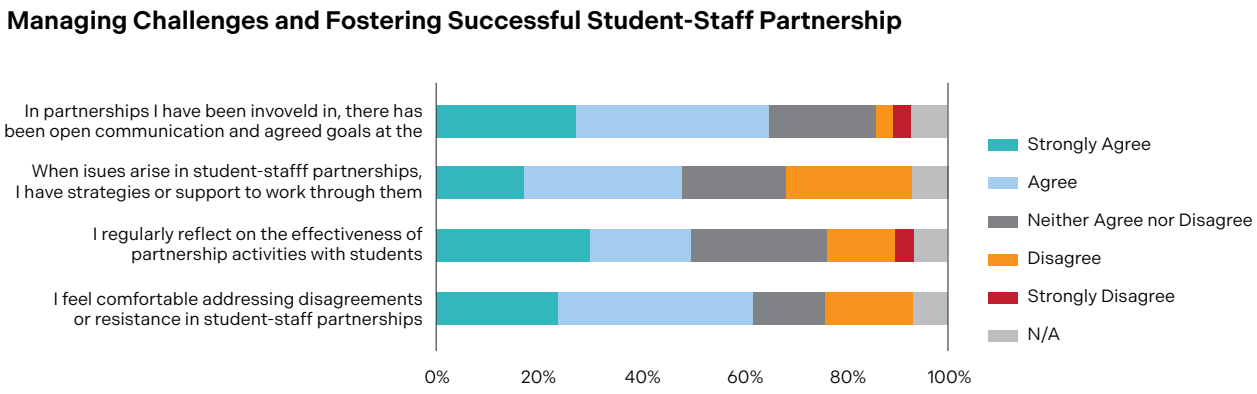
A third theme is **resource and infrastructure constraints**, including physical space, technology, and the workload involved in designing and implementing change. Examples include "restrictions of time, physical infrastructure and resources," and "lack of supports, lack of space to be creative in traditional structures." Sustainability and workload recognition also appear as barriers: "Time, recognition, so time-consuming to plan and implement new approaches on the curriculum."

A fourth theme relates to **student capacity, availability, and engagement**, with staff noting competing pressures on students' time and uneven participation. Responses include "They are too busy.", "Time and engagement from students," and a detailed account of students' limited bandwidth: "Some of my students work full time... already tired after a day's work. They want to achieve good grades but don't have the luxury of spending time delving into topics." Representation issues also matter: "students aren't at curriculum meetings." and the challenge of recruitment: "obtaining volunteers".

A fifth theme is **power dynamics, confidence, and unfamiliarity with co-design**, where staff describe cultural barriers that can make collaboration surface-level or dominated by a few voices. One response identifies "the persistence of traditional power dynamics" and assumptions that "curriculum expertise lies solely with teachers or institutions." Others point to student readiness: "Their confidence, lack of familiarity and time," and curriculum literacy: "Lack of understanding on the students' behalf of what is core in a curriculum." There is also concern about voice equity: "Allowing the loudest voices to shape a curriculum."

Finally, staff describe **fragmentation and lack of continuity across programmes** as limiting coherent student involvement: "The fragmented nature of the course experience in a typical programme; multiple lecturers and few options for continuities in content spaces." This points to structural complexity as a barrier: even when student voice is valued, programme organisation can make it difficult to sustain meaningful engagement in curriculum shaping.

Section 8-Managing Challenges and Fostering Successful Student–Staff Partnership



*I regularly reflect on the effectiveness of partnership activities with students- More than one item was selected for when responding to this question, with one respondent selecting "Agree" and "Disagree" in the one response.

Responses suggest a moderate level of confidence in managing challenges within student–staff partnerships, alongside clear evidence of uncertainty and variability in practice. Unlike earlier sections, agreement is less consolidated, indicating this is a more complex and less embedded area of partnership work.

Confidence in Managing Disagreement

While a majority (62%) feel comfortable addressing disagreement or resistance, the presence of 17% disagreement and 14% neutrality points to uneven confidence. This suggests that managing conflict in partnership contexts may rely more on individual experience than shared frameworks or guidance.

Reflective Practice

Engagement in reflection on partnership effectiveness appears inconsistent. Although 50% agree or strongly agree that they regularly reflect, a substantial 27% neutral and 16% disagreement indicate that reflective partnership practice is not yet routine or systematically supported.

Strategies and Support for Challenges

Perceptions of having strategies or support to work through partnership issues are particularly mixed. With only 48% agreement and 24% disagreement, this emerges as a key pressure point, suggesting gaps in training, structures, or access to support when challenges arise.

Communication and Shared Goals

Open communication and agreed goals represent a relative strength, with 66% agreement. However, the notable neutral response (21%) indicates that clarity and alignment may vary between partnerships rather than being consistently established.

What types of challenges have you encountered in student–staff partnerships, and how did you address them?

Across the responses, staff describe challenges clustering around **clarity of what counts as partnership, negotiating boundaries and power, structural constraints (time and course requirements), uneven engagement and responsibility, and managing group dynamics and expectations**. Where staff describe responses, they most often address challenges through **clear communication, negotiated expectations, flexible coordination, and active facilitation to ensure fairness and productive collaboration**.

A first theme is **lack of clarity and misalignment of expectations**, including uncertainty about what "partnership" means and how decisions should be shared. This appears in "(Difficult to answer since survey hasn't made fully clear what is considered a partnership)" and "Misunderstanding/ lack of clarity/ lack of consensus." Staff describe addressing this by investing time in shared framing and outcomes: "begin with clear conversations about roles, values, and shared goals" and "spent time making sure outcomes where clear and project needs was well understood."

A second theme concerns **constraints and non-negotiables in professional programmes**, where statutory or academic requirements can conflict with student suggestions. This is described as "tension on a professional prgramme with what needs to be taught for statutory approval and what students are suggesting" and "a mismatch between competing needs and a lack of clear understanding on the part of students of the academic's responsibilities." Staff responses here involve maintaining transparency and realism: "providing context to ensure students remain realistic" and "Making sure the Academia... goals of the university are adhered to while still supporting students."

A third theme is **time and organisational practicality**, including rigid course expectations, scheduling difficulties, and continuity. Staff note "lack of time, rigid course expectations," and address this through flexibility and alternative formats: "Tried to create as much flexibility, online meeting instead of in person as needed." Others describe the "Continuity piece, lining up staff / student availability to meet, offering flexibility."

A fourth theme is **student engagement, responsibility, and confidence**, with staff describing passivity, half-hearted participation, and reluctance to take ownership: "Passivity, lack of engagement. Scepticism.", "Very few. I have had some students who are unwilling to take responsibility and who are half hearted in their approach to collaboration." and "lack of effort by some participants". Strategies described include reinforcing accountability and relationship-building: "stressing personal accountability, the need for peer dialogue" and "Building trust takes time, so we also prioritise relationship-building early on."

A fifth theme relates to **equity, voice, and group dynamics**, especially when confident students dominate and others are marginalised. This is captured in "Certain students who had very strong voices... dictate to other students" and the response: "The 'unheard' approached me and I addressed the issue collaboratively." Another staff member describes an equity approach through participation design: "offering varied entry points for participation, using anonymous feedback tools, and actively reaching out to underrepresented groups."

Finally, staff describe **managing conflict and maintaining appropriate boundaries**, including the distinction between partnership and friendship. This appears in "partners but not friends and how to manage these boundaries keeping the ethos of equals;" and accounts of "Inter student conflict." Responses emphasise facilitative approaches and communication: "resisting expectations to get stuck in the middle of disputes and conflicts by acting a coach or mentor to facilitate productive engagement." and "Talking things through openly and honestly resolves most issues and challenges."

What kinds of training or institutional support would help sustain meaningful student–staff partnerships?

Across the responses, staff describe sustaining meaningful partnerships as dependent on a small set of reinforcing supports: **practical guidance on "how to do it", clearer shared expectations, capability-building for staff (and students), protected time and resourcing, relational supports, and visible institutional endorsement and recognition.**

Staff first emphasise the need for **practical exemplars and modelling**, asking for "more examples from good practice", "Case studies of effective projects", and "modelling of best practice" alongside opportunities for dialogue about "what works". Closely linked is a call for **clearer local expectations and starting structures**, including "better clarity about expectations at a local, course specific level", "Clear starting structures", and a "clear understanding... regarding how true partnership can and should operate."

A further theme centres on **skills development for partnership**. Staff describe partnership as requiring professional development in facilitation, power-sharing, inclusive practice, and relationship management: "developing faculty skills in student partnership", and support for "how to manage relationships in a respectful manner; how to navigate issues when they arise." Several responses also stress the importance of **student preparation**, for example having "student panels that are knowledgably informed about the process, roles and responsibilities" and training that builds students' capacity for reflective dialogue and collaborative decision-making.

Sustainability is repeatedly tied to **mentoring and relational support**, including "Mentoring", having an "experienced mentor... to bounce ideas back and forth", and workshops that anticipate challenges through perspective-taking (e.g., "A walking in the other's shoes workshop") and "conflict resolutions". Alongside this is a consistent emphasis on **time, workload relief, and resourcing**, including "Course release", "Time given to meaningful planning and collaboration", "additional funding", and even structural solutions such as "1/2 day per week... open up university timetable." Staff also point to infrastructure and systems that enable delivery—"Better teaching spaces and technological training and equipment" and "University structures and approval systems that support this initiative."

Finally, staff describe sustainability as strengthened when partnership work is **institutionally legitimised and rewarded**, with "visible endorsement from leadership" and recognition mechanisms that value partnership as legitimate work rather than optional extra effort.

Overall, staff portray sustained partnership as most achievable when it is **made doable (examples, structures), supported as skilled practice (training, mentoring), resourced (time, funding, spaces), and legitimised (recognition and leadership endorsement).**

Fellows 2023-25



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Rachel Farrell is Director of the Professional Master of Education Programme (PME) in the UCD School of Education and Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies in the UCD College of Social Sciences and Law. Her main research interest is in the area of Democratic Pedagogical Partnerships and Expansive Learning in Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Rachel has led many collaborative initiatives where UCD students play a central role, including: effective use of immersive technology in post-primary education with SchooVR, an evaluation of digital portfolios in ITE with MS Education Ireland, cyber resilience education with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, busting gender bias in STEAM with SFI, and Oide Young Economist of the Year national awards for post-primary students in association with multiple universities and government agencies.



Associate Professor Olive Lennon, BPhysio, MSc, PhD, PGDip Stats, PGDip Health Services Management, Prof Dip University Teaching and Learning
UCD School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science
Olive Lennon is an Associate Professor in the UCD School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science. Her research centres on neurorehabilitation and on exploring how to best prepare entry-level students for evidence-based professional practice and interprofessional working. In her teaching, she tries to promote collaborative, interactive learning. In her former role as Associate Dean for postgraduate education (2019-2023), Olive worked alongside postgraduate research students to form a student-led committee, support peer-to-peer learning and codesign a postgraduate pathway map for self-regulation.



Associate Professor Naomi McAreavey, BA, MA, PhD, GradDip University Teaching and Learning
UCD School of English, Drama and Film
As a Renaissance Literature lecturer in the UCD School of English, Drama and Film, Naomi McAreavey tries to provide a warm and inclusive learning environment for her students by offering them different ways of engaging. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is at the heart of her teaching through which she embraces the diversity in her classrooms and helps her students become more engaged and empowered learners. As a University for All Faculty Partner, Naomi has helped increase UDL practice in her school and college to ensure that inclusion is at the heart of their activities.



Dr Seán Paul Teeling, BSc Health Service Management (hons), MA, PhD, MBA (Merit), BMus, HDip Nursing (distinction), PGDip Operating Department Nursing, GradDip Lean Six Sigma, RN, RCN
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Seán Paul Teeling holds a joint appointment with the UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems and the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital. His teaching addresses the opportunities and challenges inherent in implementing person-centred quality improvement programmes in the health system; for example, enabling healthcare professionals in clinical, educational, managerial and research roles to explore new ways of working individually and collectively to improve service providers' and service users' experience of care.


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