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A Partnership Outcome Spaces framework for purposeful student-staff partnerships

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A Partnership Outcome Spaces framework for purposeful student-staff partnerships

The benefits of student-staff partnerships are widely reported in the Students-as-Partners literature. It is envisaged that partnership initiatives can have a transformative effect on institutional cultures, however, how this transformation might be achieved is less clear. Building on transdisciplinary and systems change perspectives, we propose a Partnership Outcome Spaces framework to develop understanding of how student-staff partnerships might influence institutional cultures. We identify four outcome spaces: situation, knowledge, learning and relationships, with reflexivity and a structured partnership methodology as key enablers of these outcomes. This framework is applied to a case study examining a Student Services Hub project in one Australian university. Through this analysis, the importance of less-tangible and relational outcomes arising from student-staff partnerships is highlighted. To influence institutional culture change, we encourage student-staff partnership practitioners to purposefully negotiate the various possible outcomes of their initiatives as an integral part of the partnership process.

Keywords: student-staff partnerships, Students-as-Partners, transdisciplinarity, systems change, outcomes.

Introduction

Students-as-Partners (SaP) is an emerging movement in higher education promoting opportunities for students and staff members to 'work together to shape the university' towards more egalitarian learning cultures (Matthews, et al. 2019, 2197). There is a great variety of SaP initiatives, with partnership approaches being applied in the domains of teaching, research and institutional quality enhancement (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014). Partnerships engage small groups or whole cohorts of students with academic and professional staff members and other institutional stakeholders (Mercer-Mapstone, et al. 2017). SaP promotes reciprocal opportunities for all participants 'to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or

pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis' (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014, 6-7). While the term SaP has gained prominence in the higher education literature, it has been critiqued for naming only students in a partnership relationship, undermining the relational framing of partnerships (Cook-Sather et al. 2018). In this paper, we use the term SaP in reference to the broader body of literature on partnerships in higher education, and the term 'student-staff partnerships' in a more specific sense to describe the efforts to create more reciprocal relationships between students and university staff members. By staff members, we mean individuals in academic and non-academic roles who directly engage with students through teaching or other learning and teaching initiatives aimed at enhancing student experience.

The growing body of research into student-staff partnerships highlights individual benefits gained through these types of initiatives including increased confidence, sense of leadership and empathy between participants (Mercer-Mapstone, et al. 2017). Multiple authors also report more enjoyable, engaging and inclusive classroom cultures as a result of partnership initiatives (Mercer-Mapstone, et al. 2017; Curran 2017; Cook-Sather and Agu 2013). Many higher education practitioners are drawn to the egalitarian and participatory nature of student-staff partnerships, seeking to transform institutional cultures by challenging the traditional power differentials between students and staff members, as well as troubling the prevailing institutional framing of student-as-consumer (Matthews et al. 2018).

Despite widely reported benefits of student-staff partnerships, many authors also point out the limitations of these types of initiatives. For example, there is a tendency for partnerships to involve small groups of students in projects outside of formal curriculum, which privileges certain types of students (Mercer-Mapstone, et al. 2017;

Mercer-Mapstone, Islam, and Reid 2019). Some authors indicate the drawbacks of short-term project-based engagements that involve transient partners, including difficulties securing funding, resourcing and staff hours to keep these initiatives going (Curran 2017). Overall, the impact and scalability of student-staff partnerships is questioned (Curran 2017), and academics are urged to embrace whole-of-curriculum approaches to benefit broader cohorts of students (Mercer-Mapstone, et al. 2017). The tendency to over-report benefits for individuals in SaP literature is questioned (Mercer-Mapstone, et al. 2017), calling for a more collective understanding of impact in such initiatives (Curran 2017). Although change stimulated by SaP initiatives is frequently experienced as being profound by participants, the institutional effects of partnerships are often difficult to articulate.

The growth of the SaP scholarship and practice creates an urgent need to begin conceptualising the transformative potential of student-staff partnerships (Matthews, et al. 2019; Mercer-Mapstone, et al. 2017). The well-known and widely-applied SaP frameworks concentrate on strategies for establishing authentic partnerships (for example, see Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014; Dunne and Zanstra 2011; Bovill and Bulley 2011), with less attention paid to conceptualising how an institution-wide cultural change might occur. Further, some scholars note that the SaP research field typically draws on a limited range of literature (de Bie 2020; Mercer-Mapstone, et al. 2017), with SaP researchers being encouraged to begin theorising and enriching the idea of 'partnership' by building on adjacent research areas (de Bie 2020). In this paper, we draw from the fields of transdisciplinarity and systems change to propose a conceptual framework that extends how we might think about the impact of student-staff partnerships. This framework specifically seeks to conceptualise how partnership initiatives can influence university 'cultures', despite their outcomes being often

'intangible or broadly distributed across multiple actors' (Duncan, Robson-Williams, and Fam 2020, 218).

The paper begins with a short introduction to the principles of transdisciplinarity and the transdisciplinary outcome spaces framework (Mitchell, Cordell, and Fam 2015). Our Partnership Outcome Spaces framework builds on this work to articulate a way of thinking about the purpose, impact and transformative potential of student-staff partnerships. We identify four possible outcome spaces: situation, knowledge, learning and relationships, with reflexivity and a structured partnership methodology as key enablers of these outcomes. A systems change perspective is briefly explained to conceptualise the link between partnership outcomes and institutional culture change. The Partnership Outcome Spaces framework is then applied by examining a Student Services Hub project in an Australian university to demonstrate how the outcomes of these types of initiatives can be conceptualised. Through this analysis, we highlight the importance of less-tangible outcomes arising from student-staff partnerships in influencing institutional culture change.

Transdisciplinarity and Partnership Outcomes

Transdisciplinarity is a heterogeneous area of research and practice. Initially, it gained prominence in sustainability-related fields (Mitchell, Cordell, and Fam 2015; Polk and Knutsson 2008; Scholz and Steiner 2015), but these approaches are now commonly used in multiple other contexts such as urban studies (Ramadier 2004), design (Crosby, Fam, and Lopes 2018) and education (Baumber et al. 2020; Kligyte et al. 2019). A wide range of commitments are accommodated, with the purpose of transdisciplinary research ranging from descriptive, to normative and transformational (Mitchell, Cordell, and Fam 2015). Typically, the transdisciplinary process, or transdisciplinary innovation (McPhee, Bliemel, and van der Bijl-Brouwer 2018), begins in response to complex real-

world problems, issues and questions seeking to create change (Gibbs 2015; Max-Neef 2005; Scholz and Steiner 2015). Transdisciplinary initiatives commonly involve a range of participants who are embedded in the context of enquiry as equal partners, and not solely as informants or stakeholders. These participants contribute to, and benefit from, the collective processes of problem framing, new knowledge generation and implementation of initiatives (Klein 2004; Polk and Knutsson 2008).

Transdisciplinarity is a practice-based, action-oriented, and purposive area of academic practice, that has engaged with the question of impact since the early 1970s (Jantsch 1972; McPhee, Bliemel, and van der Bijl-Brouwer 2018). Similar to student-staff partnerships, transdisciplinary academic practice crosses boundaries of disciplinary knowledge and incorporates contextualised, local and practice-based knowledges (Polk and Knutsson 2008; Scholz and Steiner 2015). As with student-staff partnerships, the experience and benefits of transdisciplinary engagement can be difficult to articulate (Duncan, Robson-Williams, and Fam 2020). Mitchell, Cordell, and Fam (2015) developed the transdisciplinary outcome spaces framework to specifically grapple with this challenge, presenting one way to think about the purpose, scale and impact of process-oriented transdisciplinary initiatives.

The transdisciplinary outcome spaces framework encourages collaborators to 'begin at the end' (Mitchell, Cordell, and Fam 2015, 86), by negotiating the purpose and multiple possible outcomes of an initiative. Mitchell, Cordell, and Fam (2015, 87) argue that such an explicit consideration of project outcomes, together with the participants can have 'profound implications for the conception, design, implementation and evaluation of […] projects'. Drawing on decades of experience working in the sustainability field, Mitchell, Cordell, and Fam (2015) identify three outcome spaces of transdisciplinary collaborations: (1) creating positive change in a problem situation; (2)

knowledge stocks and flows, highlighting the need to generate new knowledge but also to make knowledge more accessible to wider populations; and (3) mutual and transformational learning by participants, including the researchers.

Building on our student-staff partnership practice and Mitchell, Cordell, and Fam's (2015) transdisciplinary outcomes spaces framework, we propose a framework of Partnership Outcome Spaces (see Figure 1).
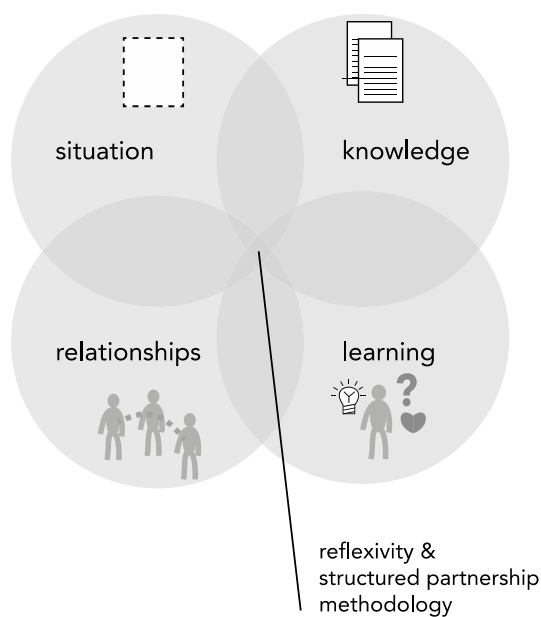

Figure 1. The four partnership outcome spaces.

Similar to Mitchell, Cordell, and Fam (2015), we define the *situation* outcome space as the challenge that student-staff partnerships seek to address, for example, issues in curriculum, learning and teaching or whole-of-institution practices. In many practice-led student-staff partnerships, improving the problem situation is the focal point of the activity that brings a partnership together. Second, we identify new *knowledge* created through unusual configurations of experts and non-experts assembling around a shared problem space as another important outcome space. *Learning,* the third outcome space is defined as both growth and development in

individual's knowledge and skills, as well as mutual learning, frequently discussed as a key outcome in both transdisciplinarity and student-staff partnerships. In contrast to Mitchell, Cordell, and Fam's (2015) framework, we see mutual learning as a specific type of learning, but not the only kind of learning that can take place in a partnership. Fourth, the *relationships* outcome space emphasises that the evolution of relationships through the process of partnership could be seen as a worthy outcome in itself.

Reflexivity and a structured partnership methodology are placed at the centre of the Partnership Outcomes Space framework, conceptualised as enablers of fruitful student-staff partnerships. We build on Polk's (2015, 114) definition of reflexivity as 'on-going scrutiny of the choices that are made when identifying and integrating diverse values, priorities, worldviews, expertise and knowledge' through a partnership process. In other words, a partnership methodology that supports reflexivity is about 'complexifying thinking or experience by exposing contradictions, doubts, dilemmas and possibilities' (Cunliffe 2002, 28) within the group. In particular, a reflexive stance requires the participants to respect, understand and integrate different types of knowledges and epistemologies, recognising the power dynamics and status differentials between university staff members and students. By situating reflexivity at an intersection of all four outcomes spaces, we emphasise that reflexivity is a key ongoing practice that stimulates learning and transformation in student-staff partnerships. Importantly, a well-considered partnership methodology is needed to facilitate a reflexive process; it does not simply emerge by completing project tasks.

The Partnership Outcome Spaces framework names and draws our attention to the less tangible and distributed outcomes of partnerships. But how does it contribute to our understanding of the purpose, scale, impact and transformative potential of student-

staff partnerships? We now turn to the systems change perspective to conceptualise the link between partnership outcomes and institutional culture change.

Student-staff partnerships and systems change

Recognising the limitations of rational organisational change theories, systems change approaches are being increasingly adopted to understand change in contemporary organisations (Snowden and Boone 2007; Stacey 2012; Wheatley 2006). The rational management paradigm conceptualises organisations as controllable systems, highlighting the importance of leadership-led change and resource management (Doyle and Brady 2018). In contrast, from a more systemic perspective, change is seen as 'endless modifications of work processes and social practice' (Weick and Quinn 1999, 366) by a multiplicity of differently-positioned actors. From this perspective, universities can be seen as 'emergent entities in a continuous state of change arising from day-to-day interactions between organisational members' (Doyle and Brady 2018, 307). Thought about in this way, the university can be seen as a system that reproduces, but also changes and transforms itself through ongoing iterations and adaptation of institutional practices, of which student-staff partnerships is one.

This emergent or evolutionary conception of organisational change implies the necessity for ongoing experimentation to achieve organisational transformation. First, in complex organisations, causal relationships between our actions and outcomes cannot be fully determined. Therefore, systems change advocates argue that organisational change is more effectively created by devising a series of small-scale experiments aimed at learning about the system dynamics, rather than whole-of-institution masterplans (Beinhocker 2006; van der Bijl-Brouwer and Malcolm forthcoming). Student-staff partnerships can be seen as such experiments, that contribute to our understanding of the paths towards desirable system change within a particular

university context. By implementing student-staff partnerships in live contexts, we can gain valuable information about the dynamic system responses, even if some initiatives fail to achieve the intended goals. This learning can then be used to devise subsequent initiatives. Second, systems change perspective suggests that ongoing interactions and practices within an institution 'can cumulate and amplify to produce new organisational […] patterns' (Doyle and Brady 2018, 308). From this perspective, continued iterations of successful student-staff partnership initiatives can cumulatively create evolutionary change in university organisational cultures.

Overlaying a systems change perspective on the Partnership Outcome Spaces framework, we propose that these outcomes contribute to ongoing co-evolution of these spaces with university contexts (see Figure 2). For example, while formal education contexts shape the relationships between university staff members and students, these institutional roles are often re-defined for a specific partnership project. The evolved relationships arising from these projects are then folded back as 'inputs' into mainstream education or subsequent initiatives as part of ongoing institutional experimentation. Thus, rather than evaluating the outcomes of each student-staff partnership initiative separately, the systemic perspective encourages us to take a longer-term view and explore how these types of initiatives might cumulatively shape university contexts.
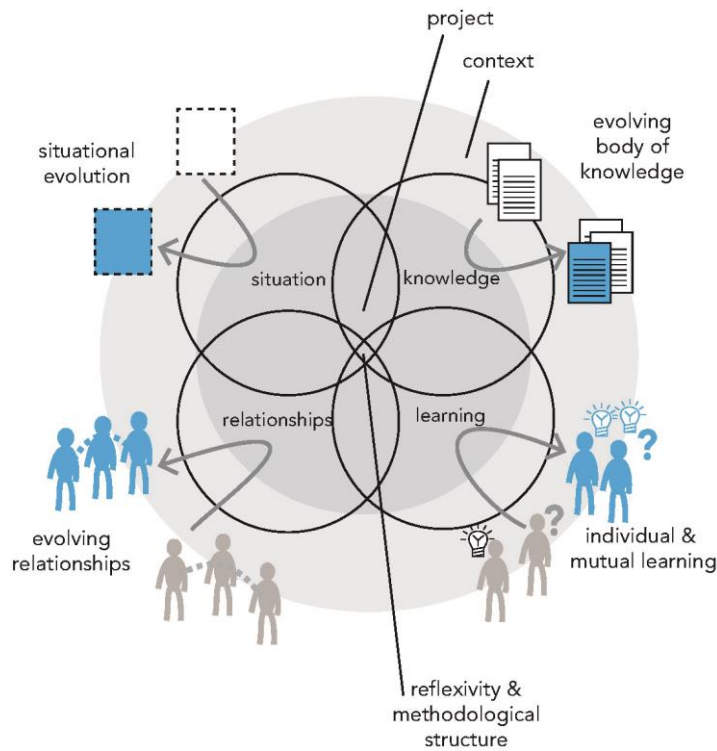
Figure 2. The co-evolution of Partnership Outcome Spaces with a university system.

We now proceed to apply the Partnership Outcome Spaces framework and systems change perspective to examine a case of student-staff partnership in one Australian university.

Case study: Student Services Hub

The Student Services Hub project is a student-staff partnership initiative that involved students and other university stakeholders in an institution-wide participatory design process to create a shared vision for a university student services space. We begin by describing the starting point of the initiative. We then explain the research approach, including the project methodology and the reflexive approach enacted in this project. Finally, we discuss the project outcomes within the four outcome spaces: situation, learning, knowledge, and relationships.

Initial situation

With the construction of a new university building, a prominent space was allocated to connect students to university services such as housing, health and careers. There was no clear vision for this space, so a research and design process was initiated to generate possible uses and designs for the Hub. The overarching goal of the project was to support students and staff members to develop a sense of wellbeing and belonging, crucial to creating thriving communities. The dimensions of the space were set prior to the project, however, there was some flexibility in the spatial design and the operational model for the provided student services.

Existing learning and knowledge

The Student Services Hub project arose from the staff members' prior interest in wellbeing and a series of other institutional projects seeking to improve the wellbeing of university students and employees. Building on our experiences of the limitations of top-down wellbeing solutions in past projects, in the Student Services Hub project, we sought to integrate transdisciplinary approaches that build on and connect knowledge about wellbeing available within the community. Believing that good wellbeing is a foundation for high-quality teaching and learning (van der Bijl-Brouwer et al. 2020), in addition to building on disciplinary knowledge from the fields of wellbeing/positive psychology, education and transdisciplinarity, we also aimed to integrate the lived experiences of wellbeing in university by staff members and students.

Existing relationships

Students were envisioned to be the main users of the new Student Services Hub space, and the stakeholders from university student services were interested in student wants and needs for this space. The stakeholders had initially invited us to run a 'participatory

design' project, based on their positive experiences of working with two of the authors on similar types of initiatives in the past. While in the previous projects students had been involved as participants (see also van der Bijl-Brouwer et al. 2020), in this project, we decided to elaborate on a partnership approach, building on our more recent experiences with student-staff partnerships (see Baumber et al. 2020; Kligyte et al. 2019). Rather than inviting students to participatory design sessions led by staff members, we decided to share the leadership of the process with students, by hiring them as paid team members. A student-staff partnership team was formed to lead the research and design of the Student Services Hub project over a period of three months. The team comprised of three students and three academic staff from the Faculty of Transdisciplinary Innovation (the six co-authors of this paper), co-sponsored by university student services and the project management office overseeing the construction work.

Research approach

Building on a pragmatist research tradition we see research 'as a socially-mediated process of problem-solving based on experimentation, learning and context specificity' (Popa, Guillermin, and Dedeurwaerdere 2015, 48). In our work we sought to challenge the perceived 'dichotomies between *understanding* and *practice'* by collaboratively learning through 'concrete problem-solving', which also enabled us to 'question and jointly reframe [our] values and understandings' (Popa, Guillermin, and Dedeurwaerdere 2015, 48). From the outset, the Student Services Hub initiative was conceptualised as a transdisciplinary project, based on the principles of human-centred and participatory design and student-staff partnerships, underpinned by the construct of student and staff wellbeing (Pollard and Lee 2003). Specifically, we were interested in integrating holistic wellbeing principles and exploring the effect that the space would

have on a sense of connectedness and interpersonal relationships between staff members, students and the university. We also wanted to explore the nature of student-staff partnerships in these types of projects. Hence a two-pronged methodology was devised, comprising of participatory design and reflexivity.

Participatory design methodology

The key methodology in the project was participatory design (PD), aimed at investigating the needs and interests of a diverse group of stakeholders in response to design concepts for the Student Services Hub. PD is situated within the broader tradition of human-centred design placing the humans who will be using a product, service, or space at the centre of the design process (van der Bijl-Brouwer and Dorst 2017). The participatory approach adopted in this project, in particular, is based on the belief that participation of users in the design process can contribute importantly to successful design and high-quality products and systems (Ehn and Sjogren 1991; Muller and Druin 2002). PD utilises a range of different methods and practices for active stakeholder involvement in the innovation process.

Over the period of three months, the student-staff partnership team engaged in a participatory design process with a broad stakeholder group to create a shared vision for the space. The project was led by student members of the team. University stakeholders invited to participate in the project included representatives from a range of student services (from library to career and health services) and student groups (including typically underrepresented groups such as those with accessibility needs, Indigenous and International students). In order to understand stakeholder needs and interests, the team ran creative stakeholder ideation workshops, a student survey, and a concept-testing workshop. Data from workshop conversations were gathered through observation notes, photos and artifacts created during the sessions. Research

publications were anticipated and approval by the ethics committee was sought and granted to capture the images, audio and written data.

Reflexivity

In addition to participatory design work, the core project team undertook regular reflexive team dialogue sessions. Reflexivity was conceptualised as an open-ended process of collective inquiry – a creative process that generates new meanings, rather than being 'passive reflection on the assumptions and values implicit in one's own understanding' (Popa, Guillermin, and Dedeurwaerdere 2015, 48). The insights and discoveries arising from our reflexive sessions were integrated into our ongoing work, continually shaping our partnership approach. Positioned at the core of our partnership process, reflexivity helped us to surface and deliberate on our assumptions and values, including divergent perceptions of power dynamics within the partnership team. This ensured that our collaborative process was adaptive and aligned with partnership ideals.

The reflexive sessions entailed discussions of shared readings, reflection on ways that spatial design can promote wellbeing and analysis of our experiences of the student-staff partnership process itself. Key questions and ideas were documented on a whiteboard and transcribed by one of the team members to stimulate further conversations. Towards the end of the process, each member of the project team wrote a reflective statement about their learning through this project. The project was followed-up with two 30-minute interviews probing stakeholders' perceptions about the process, which were audio-recorded and transcribed. The team's written reflective responses and stakeholder interview transcripts were discussed in the last reflexive dialogue session, identifying the main themes arising from the project. These collective insights are the main data we draw upon in this paper.

Outcomes of the Student Services Hub project

Returning to the Partnership Outcome Spaces framework introduced earlier, the project team was assembled to design a concrete space supporting student wellbeing on university campus. The opportunity to improve the problem situation was also the primary reason for the university community participation, as well as the main rationale for funding allocation. However, as we demonstrate in the following sections, the design proposals for the space were not the main outcomes generated through the partnership process. The sections below include the descriptions of the outcomes, with reflexive statements by individual authors, highlighting the ways their practice has been influenced by the experience of this student-staff partnership.

Situation outcome space

The project sought to frame a shared understanding of wellbeing amongst a broad stakeholder group within the university. Six key themes were identified as relevant for this space through the iterative process of co-creation: communication, capacity, vibrancy, relaxation, celebration of diversity and community. These themes were synthesised by the team in a vision for the space framed by the metaphor of a beach:

> A public space, a part of Australian culture and inclusive of all. It is an open and inviting area where many people come to and where a variety of activities arise. People could come there to swim, to bond with family and friends and even to meet new people. A beach adapts to the ebb and flow of people who enter the space. It's a natural atmosphere where people can both relax and interact. Visitors to the beach have the freedom to explore and, with lifeguards on standby, help can be received when need be.

The final concept for the student space aimed to emulate the concept of a beach as an environment in which activity emerges according to the diversity of people who enter

the space (see Figure 3). The space was designed to be relaxed and flexible, with fixed

components of the space supporting and not precluding emergent activities (see Figure

4). The proposed operational model for the space included student guides acting as

hosts or on-call helpers, inspired by the presence of volunteer lifeguards on the beach,

with university staff available to attend to more detailed student requests. Pop-up

furniture was designed to establish the Student Services Hub as a bookable and

configurable space, seeking to encourage spontaneity and self-organisation by student
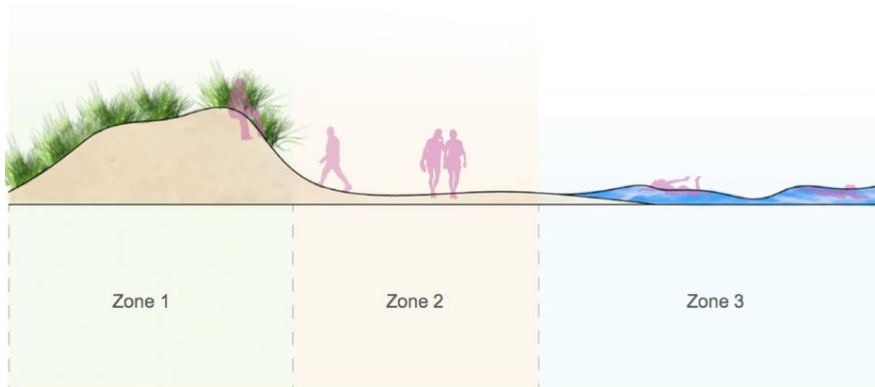
users.

Figure 3. Conceptual visualisation of the beach metaphor for the Student Services Hub
space.

Figure 4. Visualisation of one possible use scenario of the Student Services Hub space.

At the conclusion of the project we learnt that the architectural design proposed by the

team was not possible to implement in the first phase of the project, as the project management office had to progress with the construction of the joinery and architect-designed furniture to meet building construction deadlines. The decision to proceed with the existing plans was not communicated directly to the partnership team, and has led to some disappointment. Despite this, university stakeholders highlighted other valuable outcomes generated through the project. The shift away from a sterile-looking and office-like space to a more flexible and evolving design that might inspire curiosity and a sense of ownership by students was appreciated. The metaphor of a beach was adopted and circulated at the highest levels of university-decision making, informing the desired 'feel' of future student services. Similarly, there were continued conversations about the proposed operational model for Student Services Hub and aspects of this model were adopted by various stakeholders in the provision of their services.

Knowledge outcome space

The knowledge outcome space is the most outward-facing space of the four in the Partnership Outcome Spaces framework. Outcomes in this space were created by deliberately engaging with the literature and exploring how our practice connected to the work done elsewhere. Though the project had limited timeframe and scope, we anticipated the generating insights of interest to design and SaP (or higher education research) fields, and as a result, planned to produce research outcomes

> *Producing this journal article as a knowledge artifact was challenging. Our desire to articulate our learning as contribution to knowledge created new barriers within the team. While the student partners were able to expertly participate in the ongoing creative and reflexive work throughout the project, the 'writing up' of the manuscript was strongly driven by the academic staff. At one of our post-project meetings, one of the student-partners raised the need for a more open and inclusive space for less experienced participants to meaningfully write into our article. We decided to experiment with these 'voice-boxes' to enable all the participants to offer their perspective on different outcome spaces, enriching our scholarly contribution.*
>
> *(Team member)*

contributing to the understanding of value and impact in these types of projects. We could also see the project contributing to the evolving body of knowledge about student-staff partnerships and transdisciplinarity in relevant research communities (with some publications already circulating in conferences and being developed for publication in journals, for example, van der Bijl-Brouwer et al. 2019). In the process of writing this paper, we also developed the conceptual Partnership Outcomes Spaces framework, by extending an existing transdisciplinary outcomes spaces framework (Mitchell, Cordell, and Fam 2015), in dialogue with observations arising from our own practice (Krause 2016).

Further, at the conclusion of the project, a report summarising the engagement with stakeholders, the detailed interior designs and the operational model for the use of the space were delivered to the project sponsors. This tangible and accessible knowledge artifact represents a subset of the university's collective knowledge of student wellbeing needs. The report is available to the university stakeholders to build upon, becoming an 'input' into subsequent wellbeing initiatives. The report and accompanying materials also capture aspects of our partnership methodology informing how university stakeholders can approach their future student-staff partnership work.

Engaging a diverse stakeholder group was a challenging yet empowering experience. From establishing formal lines of communication to devising ways to involve others in the creative process, I felt I grew personally and professionally. The confidence I developed in communicating with others paved a way for new opportunities. Liaising internally and externally with such a broad stakeholder group has pushed me to be more reflexive, receptive, and empathetic.

(Team member)

Learning outcome space

Similar to the outcomes widely reported in the SaP literature, substantial individual learning occurred in this project, from experience in designing and facilitating workshops, to new insights about the university as an institution.

For example, one of the student partners reflected on her 'interaction with vulnerable student groups, which highlighted their unique experiences of disconnection'. A staff partner spoke how she learnt 'about the University itself and the various services that it offers, and how, together, all the functions of the University make it what it is today'. This learning was achieved through collective engagement with readings, team interactions and structured reflexive dialogue, but also by simply carrying out project tasks. Students learnt about the work of academic staff members and decision-making in universities, whereas staff re-evaluated their assumptions about the capabilities that students can bring to these types of projects. In a truly transdisciplinary fashion, there was a growing mutual awareness that each of the project participants held only a partial view of the institution, requiring dialogue with differently-positioned stakeholders to grasp a more complete and complex picture of the university as a whole.

> *Experiencing a student-staff partnership was an initially strange and challenging but ultimately rewarding experience. At the beginning, the expectation that a relationship would immediately transform from one of tutors-students to that of co-workers felt naive. This shift in relationship was neither automatic, nor immediate. As the project tasks were completed, discussions were had and trust was built. A partnership that evolved offered an opportunity for students to develop relationships with staff members within the wider university context. Being immersed in this daily work environment, positively influenced my relationships with other academic staff.*

Relationship outcome space

Investigating and building relationships between students, academic staff, professional staff, service provision staff and other stakeholders played a key role in the project. The evolution of these relationships was one of the main themes in our ongoing reflexive conversations and the reflective statements produced by team members. The process of

student-staff partnership was initially tricky and did not start well. Individuals joined the project with different assumptions about what the project entailed. For example, staff members assumed that the project could be conducted in a relatively hands-off way, given their other time commitments. In their minds, the student partners were hired to complete the main creative tasks, including designing and running workshops to engage with the university community. In contrast, student members joined the core team expecting to be involved in an apprentice-like relationship with staff members. Moreover, the regular team meetings initially were structured around the student team reporting on their activities, whereas staff positioned themselves more as supervisors and instigators.

> *I was initially very pleased that we managed to arrange funding to pay the students as full team members, rather than just inviting them to take part in a participatory design process. I was disappointed to hear from one of the students that they did not feel like they were in a partnership relationship, mentioning that 'it felt like the tutors were supervisors over a student led project'. The reflexive dialogue sessions enabled us to discuss this challenge in a safe space, and develop strategies for more collaborative work, so that students did not feel that they were working for us. I learned how we tend to put each other in labelled boxes (eg. 'tutors') – these assumptions can trip you up if you only change the financial arrangements and not your behaviour.*
>
> *(Team member)*

By reading together and debating the concept of partnership in our reflexive sessions, we began questioning the relational configuration that was emerging within the core project team. Building on our discussion of partnership values as discussed in the literature, the students were able to articulate that our project didn't 'feel' like a partnership. This observation prompted us to think about alternative ways of collaborating that could foster more open and transparent relations between all

> *Further opportunities to be involved with wellbeing initiatives at a strategic level in the university emerged through the relationships with university stakeholders developed in this project. For example, I was included on an advisory board for the Student Services Hub in its later stages of implementation.*
>
> *(Team member)*

team members. We decided to experiment with informal drop-ins by staff to the students' work space, rather than continuing with a formal meeting format. One of the student partners describes how after 'the imbalance was confronted, a more collaborative and informal environment began to develop'. The team's working structure shifted, becoming more flexible and fluid. Students continued performing the core project tasks, while the staff adapted their roles from a supervisor to a

> *Facilitation of workshops involving diverse stakeholders in this project furthered my ability to collaborate in my research, teaching and industry partnership work since. The opportunity to facilitate in a supervised environment was unique, enabling me to receive constructive feedback from participants and colleagues which gave me confidence and strengthened my delivery approach. Weaving relationships between diverse stakeholders now feels very instinctive to me and is often embedded naturally in my practice.*
>
> *(Team member)*

mentor, an active participant, a session leader or a guide, depending on requirements. The pressures that these types of projects impose on academic staff members (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017) became apparent as the project unfolded. As is often the case in student-staff partnerships, the time required to maintain the relationships with students and university stakeholders was not adequately planned or accounted for in academic workloads. Although our partnership work was not smooth and easy, by framing relationships as an explicit outcome of the project, we were able to work through our assumptions and evolve our initially fragile connections towards what felt like a genuine partnership.

The team's relationships with the university stakeholders, on the other hand, did not fully evolve into a genuine partnership. The positioning as sponsors of the project by several key university stakeholders meant that they adopted the role of a client. From initial interactions with the sponsors, students perceived that there was an expectation of frequent communication about the progress, leading students to feel that there were low

levels of trust in their ability to complete the project. At the conclusion of the project, the university stakeholders indicated that they wished to have been more involved, noting some errors arising from the lack of institutional knowledge by the project team. On the other hand, student partners identified 'numerous times it felt like [they] were not treated as equals, as [their] voice and communication efforts were bypassed'. For example, a student observed that often 'the emails sent from a student went unanswered, but when chased up by the staff were immediately responded to'. Although the language of partnerships helped us to loosen up the relationships within the core project team, in the final interviews with key stakeholders, it became apparent that there was no institutional language to talk about student-staff partnerships and their impact. Student contribution to the Student Services Hub project continued to be referred to by key university stakeholders as student 'consultation', although they acknowledged that this project far exceeded past student consultation attempts and cited difficulties typically faced in recruiting students to offer their 'voice' to shaping institutional projects. We note that the university stakeholders were not part of our reflexive sessions. There was a feeling within the group that these external relationships would have evolved more productively, if *all* stakeholders would have committed to this relational work, as is often the case in transdisciplinary projects.

The perception of the value of student contribution to these types of initiatives was transformed with the final deliverable, when student contribution to the project proved to be over and above stakeholders' expectations. In particular, university stakeholders mentioned the strengthening of interconnections within the student services community arising from the workshops as a key project outcome (see Figure 5). Finally, there was a strong recognition of the unique contribution made by the

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student partners in mobilising the student community to contribute to the project – a task that university stakeholders typically struggled with.
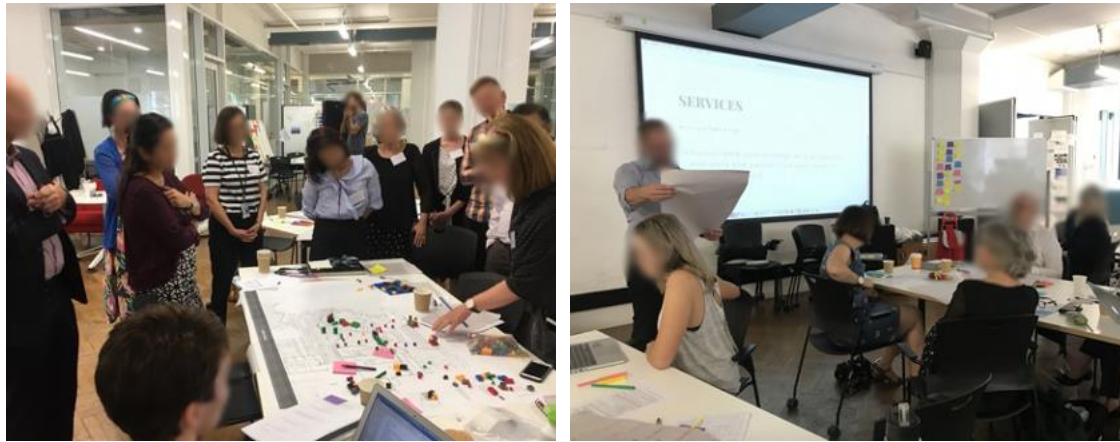

Figure 5. A stakeholder workshop.

The role of student-staff partnerships in changing institutional cultures

Our experience with the Student Service Hub initiative demonstrates that the institutional relational patterns and perceptions of responsibilities tend to be inflexible and reproduce organisational conventions: existing patterns of relations, categories and structures. The incongruousness between the more rigid understandings of institutional roles and responsibilities and the openness and fluidity of student-staff partnership processes illustrates that a change in our mental models of institutional roles and relationships is required if we are to change university cultures. Systems thinkers argue that to change relationships which reside in a symbolic domain, an 'inner world of concepts, ideas, and symbols that arises with human thought, consciousness and language' (Capra 1997, 206), we need to change the way we think about these relationships. Thus, deliberate relational work between various university constituents is central to enabling a change towards a partnership ethos. Although these transformations cannot be forced, the various strategies we employed in the Student Services Hub project can be seen as supporting this change.

First, as described earlier, the reflexive dialogue sessions within the core project team enabled us to change how we saw each other; and the language of partnership helped us reframe our relationships within the team. In the Student Services Hub project, we discovered that, as de Bie (2020, 9) puts it 'dissent does not mean failure, and empathy is not the epitome of success'. Rather than seeing relational tensions arising in the project as barriers, blockages or resistance to change, we utilised the deliberate reflexive processes we had established to interpret a discord in our partnership as productive engagement and dialogue. We argue that establishing deliberate mechanisms for structured reflexive conversation about the 'feel' of student-staff partnerships, is vital to these types of projects.

Second, we learnt that how student-staff partnerships interface with the rest of the institution is a key boundary that such initiatives need to engage with. The possibility for the idea of a partnership to destabilise the existing relational configurations in universities was evident in our reflective statements and stakeholder interviews. The core project team reflected how the lack of a full understanding of a partnership concept by the university stakeholders might have diminished the potential of the project. Having said that, although the 'sticky' language of 'student consultation' labeling certain partnership participants as 'student users' persisted until the end of the project, there were shifts in stakeholder perceptions of students' capabilities, illustrating how our rigid expectations about institutional roles can be challenged through partnership work. The main vehicle for this change was collaborative learning by the university community through assembling around concrete project tasks. The specific focus on developing a shared vision allowed us to jointly question the responsibilities of the various university stakeholders and reframe our understandings of wellbeing. Further, through student-led participatory workshops, university stakeholders

reconsidered their view of student roles and capabilities, as reflected by their positively surprised comments about the high-quality of the project outcomes. Student partners' success in mobilising the student community to contribute to the Student Services Hub project through surveys and participatory design workshops was recognised as an exceptional achievement and there was a desire to include similar student involvement in all new large-scale institutional initiatives. Engaging university stakeholders with the language of partnership more fully via participation in reflexive dialogue or similar approaches, might be the necessary next step to realise the transformative potential of student-staff partnerships. By doing so, we can move towards understanding student-staff partnership practices as purposeful relational work that brings the university community together differently from their typical patterns of interaction.

Taking a systems change view, through iterations of various types of student-staff partnership initiatives, an institutional trajectory towards shared goals and a partnership ethos can evolve. For example, at the conclusion of the Student Services Hub project, one key university stakeholder advocated for a wider adoption of student-staff partnerships to advance the less formal, iterative and emergent enhancement approaches within the institution:

> I think it's better to prototype this way of working and to have it spread by more people seeing the value of it. Because if we reify those things, the life can go out of them. […] If you try to change the [university] structure, it implies that you know what you're doing. You can change the way of working together, but you don't have to put a whole structure over the top of it.

This stakeholder's perspective suggests that the Student Services Hub project functioned as a variation of prior work in the wellbeing and student-staff partnership spaces, which enabled the university community to learn something new about itself as a system. We argue that the transformative potential of these types of initiatives is not

that they are 'effective' or that they can build a case for enshrining partnership approaches in institutional policy documents, but the fact that they nudge the university towards a more positive direction through ongoing and iterative enactment of partnership practices.

Concluding reflections

Viewed through the Partnership Outcome Spaces framework, the success of the Student Services Hub initiative is not conceptualised solely as a delivery of project outcomes, and its impact is not judged purely on the basis of proposed design implementation. In this project, significant shifts have been accomplished in the other outcome spaces, such as building institutional relationships and developing shared knowledge about wellbeing in the university. Through our exploration we signal that the less-tangible and distributed aspects of partnerships deserve attention and deliberate design. Indeed, from our experience, these outcomes are not simply serendipitous, but a result of careful planning and reflexive work, building on partnerships principles and values. The Partnership Outcome Spaces framework seeks to articulate the diversity of possible outcomes, encouraging student-staff partnership participants to negotiate collective and individual commitments and compromises from the outset.

As discussed earlier, short-term limited-scope partnership projects regularly take place in universities and often are the bread and butter of SaP initiatives. This paper explores how viewed through a transdisciplinary and systems change framing, the impact of such initiatives need not be thought about as a linear process, defined solely by inputs and outputs within the situation outcome space in stand-alone initiatives. By utilising the Partnership Outcome Spaces framework we demonstrate how changes across multiple outcome spaces can contribute to incremental evolution of knowledge, learning and relationships within the university. In particular, we emphasise the

importance of relational outcomes in advancing partnership ethos across the university and argue that student-staff partnerships can be thought of as experimental relational configurations that bring together university communities committed to advancement of shared goals differently. Thus, in addition to delivering tangible outcomes for the institution or its constituent communities, the objective of student-staff partnerships is to 'induc[e] self-organisation and creat[e] new models' (Doyle and Brady 2018, 308) of institutional arrangements that stimulate new responses and a gradual evolution of practices within the institution. Facing the need to re-imagine universities for the post-Covid-19 world, these types of projects might pave the way towards futures worth wanting, despite financial constraints and reduction in staff in universities.

We encourage SaP practitioners to collectively articulate the various possible outcomes of their initiatives as an integral part of the partnership process. Through a commitment to purposeful design of partnership methodologies we can move away from viewing the diverse outcomes as an afterthought or a by-product of partnership initiatives to realise the potential of student-staff partnerships more fully. Engaging with the Partnership Outcome Spaces framework is one way that student-staff partnership participants can ensure that there is a balance between project tasks (situation outcome space) and necessary relational work (relationship outcome space) in these types of initiatives. Specifically, we highlight the importance of deliberate reflexive processes focused on unpacking the nature of partnership engagement itself. In a reflexive dialogical space, assumptions and discontinuities can be surfaced and grappled with, enabling participants to move beyond 'friendly' and 'comfortable' interpersonal dialogue (de Bie 2020, 7) to resolve conflicts and diverging conceptions of partnership goals. By so doing, we move away from conceptualising student-staff partnerships as

being primarily about institutional enhancement, towards partnerships as context-specific iterative enactments of the university itself.

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