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## Student and Academic Co-chairs in Subject Committees – Help or Hindrance?

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# Background

- Students as consultants lack agency & voice (Klemencic, 2014)
- Students assisting beyond consultation (Bovill et al., 2011)
- Bishop et al., (2012) - recommended use of student co-chairs to work in partnership with academic staff.
- UoL adoption as standard practice in 2015

Aim - Explore the benefits, challenges and tensions of co-chairing subject committees.

# Research Design

Qualitative approach - focus groups

- Staff Co-chairs
- Student Co-chairs

Supplementary questionnaires

Data Analysis- transcription and thematic analysis.

Four main themes - **Purpose, Value, Challenges & Future**

## Findings - Purpose / Role of Co-chairing

- Staff co-chair takes a de facto lead whereby the student is there for guidance. This is the view held by the staff co-chairs:

*“the student is therefore always going to be in a position of apprentice... it isn’t an equal relationship”*

- Each co-chair has a respective responsibility. The staff co-chair handles the staff issues and the student co-chair coordinates the student issues

*“the staff co-chair, he’ll take the staff issues and then it’ll be my [student co-chair] responsibility to sort of organise the student course rep opinions”*

## Findings - Purpose / Role of Co-chairing

- Purpose of the student co-chair in the subject committee meeting is questioned:

*“I found they [student co-chairs] actually often just look to me to do most of the talking anyway so...what’s the point of having two chairs...”*

- Student co-chairs see their role as pivotal as they help voice student views and act as a link between the staff and the students:

*“so I try to bring in the students because the lecturers or tutors and staff do tend to take over sometimes”*

## Findings - Purpose / Role of Co-chairing

- Staff and Student co-chairs saw the benefit in a pre-meeting, whereby students and staff are able to openly discuss issues without the pressures of the the formality of the subject committee meeting

*“it’s a good formula [pre-meeting] and it works cos...it’s easier for the chair to be neutral...you can at least guide the course reps to be able to deliver [the points and issues raised] in the most effective way possible”*

# Value of Co-chairing

## Students

*"For me I've found that I've just really enjoyed interacting with the staff in a kind of more personal way because for a lot, for the majority of students they turn up to lectures and they turn up to seminars, maybe, and that's it, but being in meetings and talking/chatting and getting to know the staff, it just adds like another level to the student experience."*

# Value of Co-chairing

## Academics

*”Seriously, what is the purpose of co-chairing? If it is to give the school rep experience of chairing then that is one thing. If it is to bring to student led issues then there are other ways to do this”*

# Value of Co-chairing

## Programme/School

*"I'm not sure if there's any benefit of having a co-chair at the actual subject committee as such because I'm not sure it brings that much to the running of the committee or what the students say in the committee whether there's a student co-chairing or not in my opinion."*

*"It helps the other student reps put forward their thoughts or ideas if they know there will be someone else there who will listen."*

# Challenges of Co-chairing

- Staff believe the students lack the confidence and knowledge of when to speak up within committee meetings.

*“I think the other vital part was that student reps were not – how can I say – ready if you like and questioned their own ability and desire to step up to this other role from a rep”*

- The frequent change of reps in the system does not allow them to settle into their role and gain the vital training needed.

*“The late appointment of the student reps meant that we couldn’t do as much coaching as we liked but coaching, certainly in my division, happened but it wasn’t rolled out for various...because there were missing student reps”*

# Challenges of Co-chairing

- Engagement and effectiveness are challenges faced by the student co-chair and impact the way they present issues.

*“I’d say, you know to some level it can be stuff like engagement and of course for it to be a effective you need effective reps, you need them involved with the process and if not many get involved and say you are the co-chair, it limits how effective I think you can be as a chair in that sense because you maybe have to pick up the slack...”*

- Some meetings incorporate multiple programmes resulting in lower engagement from some student reps for topics not directly relevant to them.

# Future

- Training for Co-chairs and administrators (online?) must be timely.
- Communication and Dissemination (closing the loop).
- Consideration of increasing demands on students.
- Importance of pre-meetings and development of a rapport between co-chairs and formulation of the agenda.

*“I almost find the pre-meeting more productive than the actual subject committee just because it’s more informal, students are much more happy to talk to you and there’s literally more students than staff”*

# Application of Theory

## Jurgan Habermas' Theory of Knowing

Habermas' Theory of Knowing	Application to Staff-Student Committee Meetings
Empirical/analytical (technical) knowing	Non-Participatory
Historical/hermeneutic (communicative) knowing	Participatory
Critical (self-reflective) knowing	True partnership

Lovat et al., 2005; Lovat, 2013

# Summary

- There exists a difference in opinion over the efficacy of the student co-chair in the subject committee
  - It is agreed by all parties that co-chairing should be a partnership however:
  - Staff view the student co-chair as not contributing much to the running of the subject committee
  - Students view the student co-chair as key in being able to encourage discussion from students within the formalised setting

## Summary Continued

- Pre-meetings are key
  - This is where the student co-chair role is seen as most vital in helping to set the platform for what will be further discussed in the subject committee
- Staff and student equality
  - Student and staff views should be given equal value
- Having a co-chair will not necessarily lead to partnership

# References

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