

Are you ready to partner for widening participation? A self-assessment benchmarking tool for Students' Unions and Higher Education Providers.

Bournemouth University (BU) and the Students' Union at BU (SUBU)

Introduction

There is a growing recognition that a strong partnership between students' unions and institutions can bring great opportunities for widening participation research and practice. It is, however, sometimes difficult to agree where to start, or what needs to be developed in order for a strong productive relationship to thrive. This tool has been developed as a guide to some of the key elements that we have learned on our journey through working in close partnership. The tool is by no means complete. It would be useful if others could review their own partnership development, feedback and contribute to the ongoing development this tool in the future.

How we thought it might work

We have identified **three critical elements**, with three sub-elements, that have been **important for us in developing our work together** on widening participation research and developing practice. These are:

1. Our commitment to working in partnership – **developing trust; agreeing shared objectives; and building positive working relationships.**
2. Our commitment to resource our work – **committing people to the work; building time into our work plans; and finding funds and facilities for our work together to be successful.**
3. Our commitment to get things done – **agreeing appropriate working practices between us; developing outputs and recording them within an agreed structure and system; and evaluating our impact to build a better student journey for all.**

We have developed this benchmarking matrix to help us reflect on and agree the stage we believe we are at, and so help us plan the next actions and objectives to take. This self-assessment benchmarking matrix could be used by both Students' Unions and institutions to mutually agree where the partnership is for each of these elements and therefore to agree a way forward. Users of the tool could then share their stories of why they have self-assessed at various stages and also their thoughts on how they will move forward to the next stage. This would build an incredibly valuable resource for those looking for support during the journey of working together on WP research and developing practice. As others use the tool, it can be updated with better descriptors for each stage to reflect the developing experiences of different institutions and Students' Union

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1. Our commitment to partnership – what stage are you at?

	1. Early stages	2. Developing	3. Developed	4. Refining	5. Best practice
a. Developing trust	Both the SU and the institution work separately on their own agendas. There is little or no trust in the other's work or motives.	Early steps have been taken to understand each other's motivations and agendas. There may still be some surprises or nervousness around working together but trust is developing. A commitment to keep working together is there. Data sharing agreements are being developed and mutually agreed.	A mutual understanding and respect has been established between the SU and institution. Surprises or breakdowns in understanding of intent are rare, and are quickly resolved and moved forwards.	Openness and honesty is a given in the relationship. Both SU and institution have developed a mutual respect and good humour when working together that means partnered work develops easily. A trusting partnered approach to research projects is 'business as usual'.	Both SU and institution have complete trust in their working relationships. There are no hidden agendas, and the integrity and intent of all are known, and respected. Research evidence presented from all sides is respected and trusted absolutely. There is never any question of trust at all.
b. Positive working partnerships	There is no mutual understanding or agreement between the SU or the institution on how to proceed together on any research or WP activity.	Both the SU and the institution agree that they should work more closely on WP research and activities, but how and what this looks like is unclear.	An agreement has been reached between the SU and institution on working together on WP research. Although this has been agreed at one level, it is not yet felt across both organisations fully.	The agreed positive working relationships on WP are shared and disseminated across the SU and institution to show a mutual commitment to WP activities in the future.	Students, student officers, SU staff, and institution staff share a mutual understanding and agreement of the ambitions of all WP research and practice. All partners are respected fairly and equally within ongoing work. There is real sharing of work between partners, for e.g. co-authorship and links with external organisations to share work and approaches.
c. Shared objectives	Very little if any collaborative work happens on WP. Each side has little understanding or knowledge of the other's work.	Objectives for working together on WP have been discussed and some agreement reached on some objectives. The SU is actively consulted more when developing objectives for the institution, for e.g. during the access agreement writing process.	Both SU and institution share a common understanding of what they are trying to achieve and agree how they will work together on it. The institution take on board SU suggestions for developing work on WP	Objectives for WP research and developing practice are fully discussed together before mutually agreeing common shared objectives.	All objectives for WP research and practice are shared and jointly agreed through appropriate partnership bodies/meetings within the institution. Both SU and Institution are happy to represent each other on WP externally as a partnership.

2. Our commitment to resourcing – what stage are you at?

	1. Early stages	2. Developing	3. Developed	4. Refining	5. Best practice
a. People	No SU staff have any responsibility for developing WP research or activity. Student officers do not have any focus on WP, or interest in finding out what works for engaging WP students. Institution staff deliver their WP agenda without reference to SU.	WP students become an issue of concern for people in the SU. Staff and officers begin to decide responsibilities for taking research on the issue forward. Institution staff recognise the importance of engaging with SU staff and officers in WP research activity and explore ways to work together effectively	The SU has committed staff time to WP research with the institution staff. Research is conducted together in a partnered way with each respecting the different values that they bring to each project. Student officers engage with the results of the research and work with institution staff to consider how to apply the findings to the student experience.	Staff time is committed by both the institution and the SU to ensure that research happens and that findings inform strategy. Informed by research, people resources for improving delivery of the student experience for WP students is committed by the institution and the SU.	The SU has dedicated research staff and student officers committed and working on new research and activity for WP. Institution staff work together with the SU on an almost daily basis to develop informed WP practice. There are recognised people in both the SU and institution to act on the outcomes of the partnered research to deliver real impact for WP students.
b. Time	The institution commits minimum time to WP research and activity for the purposes of basic compliance. The SU shows no sign of prioritising WP research or activity within their work plan.	Both the institution and SU recognise that time needs to be set aside to consider issues impacting on WP students, but working together within the same timeframes is not yet business as usual.	An agreed framework of meetings and approaches to projects is agreed by both the SU and institution. Time is prioritised appropriately by both to allow effective partnership working.	Time given to consider improving the students experience for WP students is a part of normal business for both the SU and institution. Opportunities are explored to build a greater level of priority for research work on WP student issues.	Priority is given within the institution to meetings and work which highlights WP work and aims to improve practice. The SU commits significant time within its work plan to working with the institution on WP research and activity.
c. Funding and facilities	The institution commits funds to WP activity but little or no funds to research. The SU has little or no activity on WP and does not work with the institution to agree funding or facilities for WP research or activity.	The SU begins to fund some WP research on a one off basis. The institution agrees to work with the SU on a trial basis to explore ways to fund research activity together and create facilities for WP research to happen.	Both the SU and the institution commit some funds to supporting WP research and work together to ensure that resources are allocated fairly to maximise impact. Concern to development facilities appropriate for WP work and activities is agreed by both parties.	Facilities for WP research and activity are in place and established. The SU has WP research commitment as part of its long term planning and budgeting. Both the SU and institution agree their approach to future projects together before agreeing appropriate funds and facilities from both.	Both the institution and SU have agreed ongoing funding to support WP research and activity. Some facilities within the institution and those under SU control are committed to supporting WP work. External funding is regularly sought to boost WP research work together.

3. Our commitment to getting stuff done – what stage are you at?

	1. Early stages	2. Developing	3. Developed	4. Refining	5. Best practice
a. Working practices	The SU and institution have separate and different approaches to their working practices which make working together almost impossible. Little or no collaborative work is even attempted.	An exploration of approaches to working practices begins to happen. The SU and the institution discuss and consider how they might work appropriately together to get things done on WP research.	Partnership working on WP research is underway. Different practices still exist in the SU and institution but a working relationship has been established and work is being done together under a mutual understanding of practices on both sides.	Planning for WP research activity is a part of the normal planning cycle for both SU and institution. A joint approach to the planning process is working well and most working practices on WP research complement each other well.	The work plan for WP research and appropriate partnered activities are mutually agreed by both the SU and institution, and the working practices of both support the achievement of these plans to a high quality standard.
b. Outputs and reporting	Any WP research or activity from either the SU or the institution are seen and treated as stand-alone events. There is no co-ordination in any reporting of this activity into any formal structures in either the SU or institution.	The SU and institution begin to work together on reporting their activity, but outputs tend to still be done independently of one another. First stage of co-ordinating work and reporting outcomes together begins to happen.	Shared responsibility for outputs is agreed, and reporting together on the outcomes of WP research begins to be the norm. Independent work still happens, but does so within a mutually agreed framework of reporting.	There is an established and effective mechanism for recording and reporting outputs from WP research and activity which involves both the SU and the institution. The reporting routes are mutually agreed, part of the structure of the institution, and inform both the work of the SU and the institution.	Outputs and reporting is considered in a partnered way beyond the institution. Presenting and reporting work to national agencies and external conferences becomes a normal part of working practice. Both SU and institution take responsibility for sharing all outputs as widely as possible within the sector.
c. Impact and evaluation	There is little or no evaluation by either the SU or the Institution of any of the WP activity or research that is carried out. Impact on the student journey is unknown, and future plans are not based on any significant research.	Some evaluation of WP activity or research begins to happen by one or both parties. Some consideration of how research findings might impact on the WP student experience is talked about together.	The SU and Institution work together to understand and evaluate WP research work and the impact of WP activity across the institution. Research implications are agreed through partnership discussion and both parties try to ensure impact on the student experience.	WP research and activity is evaluated effectively by both the SU and institution. In partnership, all sides reflect and agree the impact on the student journey, and agree new objectives together based on this evaluation.	Both the SU and institution seek to share the evaluation of their WP research across the sector and encourage others to work with them to improve WP research work. Outputs from WP research aims to impact on sector practices, not just the institution.