Developing the Total Student: Model for Learners as Partners in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract
In addition to influencing students’ knowledge base, thinking abilities and skills; university education offers the opportunity to promote other aspects of students’ growth as people. University education has an important role in shaping our future society because today’s university students will be tomorrow’s doctors, engineers, business managers, teachers, faith leaders, politicians, citizens, activists, parents and neighbours. While they need to be able to demonstrate key skills and knowledge to enact those roles effectively, they must also demonstrate personal and social responsibility in carrying them out. While much of the current political discourse about higher education is instrumental and economic, this paper aims to lay the foundation for a discourse based on student development. Data was collected through focus group discussions with students in the various colleges in Evangel University, Akaeze - Nigeria, in-depth interviews with lecturers, administrative staff and document analyses of conference papers and journal articles. Findings reveal that the quality of tertiary education is influenced by socio-cultural, academic, economic, policy, political and administrative factors all of which are inextricably interwoven. In this case, the argument is for leadership of teaching and learning for the purpose of promoting students’ holistic development. The discussion of the findings is based on the findings on a wide range of related literature on learners’ challenges in other universities in Nigeria. The paper concludes that the quality of higher education in tertiary institutions is influenced by factors that have their roots in commercialization, general funding, and human population growth. It was recommended that appropriate policies and indigenous professionals (both academic and administrative) are necessary for improving the quality of higher education in tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Leadership, University education, Students’ holistic development, Tertiary Institutions, Assessment of the quality.

1.0 INTRODUCTION
Engaging students and staff effectively as partners in learning and teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century. Students as partners is a concept which interweaves through many other debates, including assessment and feedback, employability, flexible pedagogies, internationalisation, linking teaching and research, and
retention and success. Interest in the idea has proliferated in policy and practice in the UK and internationally, particularly in the last few years, and it has been difficult to go to a higher education conference in the last two to three years where there has not been a discussion about engaging students in partnership.

The notion of holistic student development encompasses not only learning academic knowledge and skills, such as problem-solving and analysis, but also other aspects of students as people who are growing and maturing affectively (emotionally) and morally. Across a variety of related literature, a few common themes emerge:

- Going beyond knowledge and skills to include other aspects of being a person in society (such as emotion, spirituality, moral judgment, and embodiment).
- An integrative view of learning and development that emphasises the connections and relationships between thinking, feeling and action, rather than separating cognitive dimensions of education from affective or moral dimensions.

While several different studies are referenced that offer language around character, virtues and personal and social responsibility, a unyielding definition of total development might be counterproductive to opening a conversation about alternative ways of conceptualising higher education’s role in relation to its students [1]. Different aspects of development may be more important in different contexts. There is a rich tradition of research in student development in Universities in the USA, although there is very little in the UK or other anglophone countries. In American university education, students’ attitudes and values change in many ways, including greater cultural, aesthetic and intellectual sophistication; greater openness and ‘other-person’ orientation; greater humanitarian and altruistic values; greater likelihood of civic involvement and more positive attitudes toward racial equality and tolerance; greater understanding of other cultures and more egalitarian sex-roles. Students also make significant gains during the university years in their level of principled moral reasoning [2]. Additional research is needed in the UK to determine the extent to which the UK’s educational systems foster these kinds of effects on students.

The same kinds of educational activities that are known to support traditional dimensions of academic understanding are even more important in helping students to develop their values, sense of self, identity and purpose [3]. A key ingredient is the use of active pedagogies such as service learning, problem-based learning and discussion of moral dilemmas in the discipline. Interaction with diverse peers is also a vital aspect of the higher education experience. Exposing students to new experiences and perspectives – whether in the classroom, community, halls of residence, field trips, study abroad – and providing opportunities to reflect on those in dialogue with others offer powerful learning experiences that shape people’s development [4]. Specialised curricula such as women’s studies and ethnic studies courses also influence students’ attitudes and awareness of self-in-society.

2.0 Conceptual Model for Partnership in Learning and Teaching

A new conceptual model distinguishes four broad areas in which students can act as partners in learning and teaching:

- learning, teaching and assessment;
- subject-based research and inquiry;
- scholarship of teaching and learning;
- curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy.
Visually the model is represented as four overlapping circles to emphasise that distinctions between the areas are blurred and inter-relationships are complex and diverse when put into practice. At the centre of the model is the notion of partnership learning communities, which draws attention to the processes by which partnership operates in the four different areas.

2.1 Partnership learning communities
Embedding sustainable partnership beyond discrete projects and initiatives requires that working and learning in partnership becomes part of the culture and ethos of an institution. Partnership is more likely to be sustained where there is a strong sense of community among staff and students. The key to achieving this is the development of partnership learning communities, and certain features are seen to encourage their development:
- working and learning arrangements that support partnership;
- shared values;
- attitudes and behaviours that each member of the community signs up to and embodies in practice.

Building partnership learning communities requires critical reflection on and consideration of key issues within specific contexts of practice:
- inclusivity and scale;
- power relationships;
- reward and recognition;
- transition and sustainability;
- identity.

Partnership learning communities invite critical reflection on existing relationships, identities, processes and structures, and can potentially lead to the transformation of learning experiences. Given that partnership is both a working and learning relationship, these new communities
should acknowledge the dual role of staff and students as both scholars and colleagues engaged in a process of learning and inquiry. Partnership implies an equal relationship between two or more bodies working together towards a common purpose, respecting the different skills, knowledge, experience and capability that each party brings to the table. Decisions are taken jointly between those organisations, and they co-operate to varying degrees in implementing the consequences of those decisions … it is an effective working relationship between an institution and its students, as individuals and through its collective representative body, working towards an educational institution of the highest quality possible [5].

The conceptual model proposed in this document is underpinned by the following values, which have been drawn from scholarly literature and practice around partnership and student engagement:

- **authenticity** – all parties have a meaningful rationale for investing in partnership, and are honest about what they can contribute and the parameters of partnership;
- **inclusivity** – partnership embraces the different talents, perspectives and experiences that all parties bring, and there are no barriers (structural or cultural) that prevent potential partners getting involved;
- **reciprocity** – all parties have an interest in, and stand to benefit from, working and/or learning in partnership.
- **empowerment** – power is distributed appropriately and all parties are encouraged to constructively challenge ways of working and learning that may reinforce existing inequalities;
- **trust** – all parties take time to get to know each other, engage in open and honest dialogue and are confident they will be treated with respect and fairness;
- **challenge** – all parties are encouraged to constructively critique and challenge practices, structures and approaches that undermine partnership, and are enabled to take risks to develop new ways of working and learning;
- **community** – all parties feel a sense of belonging and are valued fully for the unique contribution they make;
- **responsibility** – all parties share collective responsibility for the aims of the partnership, and individual responsibility for the contribution they make [6].

In exploring and unpicking the nature of partnership in learning and teaching when put into practice and policy, it is necessary to make the distinction between partnership and other student engagement processes. As a concept, ‘student engagement’ is ambiguous and contested. Within learning and teaching it can be divided into two broad areas:

(i) student engagement as the way in which students invest time and energy in their own learning, and

(ii) the ways in which students are involved and empowered by institutions to shape their learning experiences. Kahu [7], argues that problems in the definition of engagement stem partly from the conflation of the state of engagement, its antecedents, and its consequences.

### 2.2 Towards a model for students as partners

A simple distinction may be made between a focus of students as partners on:

a) student engagement in learning, teaching and research;
b) student engagement in the quality enhancement of learning and teaching practice and policy.

Although there is common ground, these two strands are distinct areas, each with its own strategic implications, scholarly underpinning and different impact on the student learning experience. These two areas of potential partnership are not poles of a continuum and they reinforce each other. Hence they are shown as two overlapping circles. This point is also made by Dunne and Owen [8]. As with student engagement, partnership is multi-faceted and has a number of different meanings and purposes dependent on context. Although the two main areas discussed here are partners in learning, and partners in development and change, even these are not always simple to separate. This simple model may be developed by recognising that each of the two ways of engaging students as partners may, in turn, be divided in two:

- student engagement in learning, teaching and research through –
  - learning, teaching and assessment;
  - subject-based research and inquiry;
- enhancement of learning and teaching practice and policy through –
  - scholarship of teaching and learning;
  - curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy.

Fig.2: Ways of engaging students as partners in higher education [8]

The model, as so far constructed, focuses on four interrelated ways of engaging students in partnership. In chapter four, each of these four activity areas is discussed in turn, conceptual frameworks which have been developed for each area are identified, and case studies of initiatives which have applied the ideas are presented. To this must be added at the centre of the model the partnership learning communities, which emphasises the processes by which the four different kinds of partnership operate. These are discussed in detail in the following chapter. Our model of students as partners is contained within a larger circle representing the wider topic of student engagement to emphasise the point made earlier that engagement through partnership is a form of student engagement, but not all forms of student engagement are forms of partnership.
3.0 Conclusion
In short, each of the aspects of partnership highlighted present possible gains to the success of leadership of learning for total development. First, academic leaders need to influence the organisational processes, shaping the socio-cultural environment of the campus. Secondly, they need to be willing to examine their own inner lives and put themselves as people (not just a role) into the process. Thirdly, even as they are promoting communities and dialogue, they must focus not just on the process, but on the content of that dialogue (learning) and its purpose (holistic student development). Finally, as emphasised in this section, they need to do so with consideration for the broader socio-cultural, political environments within which their universities operate. Our students, as people in transition making their way in the world, deserve to be treated as whole people.

Reference


