

Scaling Student-Staff Partnership for Institutional Curriculum Transformation: The University of Leicester's Research-Inspired Education Project

Sarah Gretton, Academic Lead, Gosia Mobbs, RiE Project Manager, and Marieke Das, Data and Evaluation Analyst

Introduction

The Research-Inspired Education (RiE) project at the University of Leicester is a strategic, university-wide effort to embed research-led learning into all academic programmes. By involving students as genuine partners in curriculum development, RiE ensures each student recognises the role of research in their studies and actively engages with researchers.

Literature Review

- “*Revisiting the Research-Teaching Nexus Framework...*” (Gretton et al, 2022), provided a programmatic framework for us to integrate research into the curriculum as structured elements of the programmatic student journey, enabling the development of key graduate attributes.
- We were particularly mindful of the need for meaningful integration, in light of concerns raised in the Higher Education Policy report (Dandridge, 2023), which critiques the frequent yet often vague use of the term “research-informed teaching” and highlights the lack of consistent, effective implementation in practice.
- Bovill & Felten’s (2016) argue that partnership enhances engagement and strengthens students’ sense of agency. For our project we engaged 12 students in programme-level discussions with staff.

Approach

- We recruited 120 Research-inspired Education (RiE) Student Consultants with support from the Students’ Union academic rep system, and by sharing communications via schools and departments.
- We designed and delivered synchronous and asynchronous training to empower students to fully participate in student staff-consultations.
- Outputs from student training was shared with staff as a briefing, complemented with in person discussions - nine student-staff workshops across just over 200 programmes took place, allowing both students and staff to create a shared understanding of RiE.
- Programme teams revised and mapped their core curriculum to the RiE framework (with student input) and provided a narrative on the three key aspects of the framework as part of annual quality assurance (Curriculum Planning).

Findings and key takeaways

- Like many institutions, scaling approaches across diverse programmes with different needs is **challenging**. It requires balancing consistency to meet institutional objectives with flexibility for local interpretation within disciplines. Recruiting and sustaining meaningful student participation has also required significant effort and creativity.
- The RiE project has delivered notable **successes**, engaging more student consultants than any previous curriculum transformation initiative at Leicester. It has strengthened staff–student partnerships and fostered a stronger sense of shared ownership of curriculum design, embedding collaborative practice more widely across the institution.

- Sustaining an institutional **Students as Partners** model requires clear frameworks, structured support for both staff and students, and ongoing commitment to a shared vision. These elements enable consistent, scalable, and meaningful partnership working aligned with strategic priorities.

Project evaluation – findings from focus groups

What did the RiE Consultants say:

- Students engaged in the project because they valued contributing to the university and being active partners in their education; they also highlighted that integrating research into teaching makes learning more engaging and supports employability.
- Working with staff in an informal setting helped students build stronger relationships, humanising lecturers and creating a sense of connection similar to students' experiences in secondary education.
- Students reported developing transferable skills, particularly increased confidence and improved communication and conversational skills.

What did the staff say:

- Staff commented that Student-Staff Partnerships were a positive experience and through working in partnership with students, the staff stayed connected to the zeitgeist and received much wanted feedback.
- Staff noted that students developed transferable skills such as communication and respectfully challenging individuals with more experience. These observations overlapped significantly with student perceptions.
- Students were engaged partners, but staff noticed that the students who entered partnership projects, were often the engaged ones who volunteered for other projects as well. Staff did remark that not all students had a strong understanding of pedagogy, which sometimes led to requests and suggestions that might not be possible to implement.

References

Bovill, C. and Felten, P. (2016) *Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design, and curricula: Implications for academic developers*. International Journal for Academic Development, 21(1), pp. 15–25.

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Dandridge, N. (2023) *The relationship between teaching and research in UK universities: What is it and why does it matter?* Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI).

Gretton, S., Harvey, C. et al. (2022) *Revisiting the research–teaching nexus framework: Two case studies introducing research into programme-level undergraduate teaching*.