Curtin University

Student as Partner – undergraduate pilot, School of Management and Marketing

Summary of the initiative

In Semester 1, 2021 we introduced the weekly 'Student as Partner' feedback model to our selected undergraduate classes after trials in postgraduate units.

These units were:
- MGMT3006 Business Ethics (a third year ethics unit)
- MGMT1003 Strategic Career Design (a first year, common core unit)

The approach was piloted in the tutorials run by the unit coordinators, and we invited our tutors to take part on a voluntary basis and provided a training session in the start of semester orientation for sessional tutors. 5 tutors volunteered to do so.

Our main aim is to get as much student input into our units as possible as a way to:
- Genuinely engage and involve students in decisions which facilitate positive change in real time rather than at the end of units
- Supercharge our pedagogy by having students provide their insights into what activities, assessments and projects worked well or required augmenting.
- Model collaboration and partnership between students and teachers, rather than only having passive students cast as only recipients of knowledge.

How are students engaged as partners?

In each tutorial, students are invited to volunteer as 'Student as Partner' representatives. Students are informed about what the program is and how it works with materials including FAQs and custom-recorded videos (https://youtu.be/Zhh6QtnTBZo) prominently placed on the Blackboard home page for the unit.

The final 5-10 minutes of each class is then given to the class to Student as Partner feedback time. This proceeds as follows:

- Tutor leaves the room and verbally hands over ownership of the room to the class, led by the Student as Partner representatives, closing the door and leaving the area to allow confidential discussion among the students.

- Student as Partner reps lead a discussion with the class, seeking input on what worked well that week, what could be improved, and any questions or concerns the class has.
- Once this is finished, the rest of the class leaves and the SAP reps advise the tutor the feedback session is complete and the tutor re-enters the room.
- SAP reps provide and explain the feedback to the tutor, including the chance for the tutor to clarify and ask for more information, propose solutions and ask the SAP reps' thoughts on them etc.
- A record is taken of the feedback (e.g. a smartphone photo of the feedback on the whiteboard)
- The whiteboard photo and outcomes in response to the feedback are added to the ongoing SAP tracker. One example of this format is a PowerPoint slideshow showing each week's feedback and actions.
- The updated tracker including the feedback items and the responses taken is then shared with the class on Blackboard and at the start of the next week's class.
- Where feedback is more urgent, responses are given in immediate Announcements and emails.

Inform – students are informed weekly of the outcomes and actions in response to the Student as Partner feedback.

Consult – the feedback session at the end of each class is the explicit, dedicated opportunity to consult with students. An important part of the this consultation is the discussion with the SAP reps about the feedback – rather than a passive receiving of feedback, at its best this part of the session includes open dialogue with the reps about what was meant by the feedback, and what the best response to the feedback might be.

Involve – students are all involved in the SAP process at the level they are comfortable. The reps are the most active but the rest of the class have the option to offer feedback and input each week should they wish to.

Collaborate – the open nature of the feedback means students are able to collaborate in building and improving the curriculum. As a recent example – in a postgraduate unit where this approach has been running for more than a year, in the final SAP session the students took the initiative to offer some proposals on how an upcoming pilot of an intensive version of the unit might be run successfully.

Empower – the SAP model piloted and described here especially empowers the SAP reps, handing over ownership of the physical space of the class to them at the end of each session and empowering them to decide how they will run that part of the session.

How are students recognised for their contribution?

Students who volunteer as SAP representatives in the Strategic Career Design unit receive credit towards their Career Passport. Students who volunteer in both units are offered educational and networking opportunities to help them develop their facilitation skills in a way that supports the program and also offers them tangible career and CV building skills – in collaboration with the Lead, Students as Partners, Kathryn Clements. All SAP reps also receive personalised testimonial letters at the end of the semester.

What cohorts of students are engaged as partners?

This pilot involves undergraduate students (first year and third year) at Bentley and offshore campuses, both face to face and online.

An earlier pilot involved postgraduate students at the Graduate School of Business in both weekly and intensive mode of delivery units.

What was the impact of engaging students as partners?

From our perspective as teachers and unit coordinators, the SAP approach has been terrific. It has built genuine rapport with students and allowed us to improve the student experience dramatically. It has also boosted in class engagement in discussions and activities though the social proof of the valuing of input and engagement.

For this section, though, we thought it best ask our SAP reps themselves what their own experiences and evaluations of the pilot have been. Below are answers kindly provided by from our SAP reps.

For Strategic Career Design:

> "For the students involved (e.g. skills developed): personally, I have been extremely busy, so haven't been able to go to (so far) any of the SAP meetings, but in terms of skills developed, I have become more invested in building the skill of initiative and confidence, In the way that I have had to approach students to ask them for feedback.
>
> For the project overall: really good idea, similar to Student Representatives in school environments, this project is effective and necessary. This unit (Strategic Career Design) is the only unit that I am aware of the SAP project, and in turn, have noticed, is very tailored to us and very student driven."

Mikaela Zuiderduyn

For Business Ethics:

"It engaged the class as a whole unit, rather than just getting feedback from the most vocal of students, it created a very student/class centred atmosphere where the tutor could change or alter small things to aid in bringing the best out of everyone in the class. It helped also bring the class together, as a more cohesive unit rather than a hobnob group of students, which is definitely needed in a business ethics class. Being a representative is a good leadership opportunity, to be a SAP one must get feedback from everyone in the class, and SAP gets to experience in connecting with and forming a 'professional relationship with many different individuals. And also gives a greater understanding as to how each class works differently, the different expectations that each student wants for the class, and how to meet them, which is all good practice for the workplace. Being a SAP formed a stronger relationship with the tutor, allowing for more time and conversation to understand how the class works, why certain teaching strategies were implemented; it is like the tutor and SAPs are working together to bring the most out of each class, which I believe to be incredible."

Jake Liebregts

What United Nations Sustainable Development Goals have been addressed through this initiative?

Broadly, the pilot supports:

- Goal 4 (Quality Education) including our engagement of offshore and diverse students to apply as SAP reps
- Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) through empowering the voice of all students.

What are the next steps for this initiative?

- We hope to work with student groups representing diverse and equity groups to encourage participation from such groups as SAP reps and increase the inclusivity of our curriculum.
- We have joined the Student as Partner Community of Practice and are looking forward to working with members such as the Student Guild Equity Committee to encourage and empower participation from diverse students groups.
- Work has begun on an anonymous, de-identifying email link as another channel for students to submit their Student as Partner feedback to us.
- Explain the scope of the SAP program to include collaboration on assessment materials and readings for the units.
- We have begun working with the FBL Student Experience team to offer skills development and formal recognition to our SAP representatives and to ensure there are tangible benefits to those students who have committed their time to be involved. Further, this is a positive gateway to other student engagement roles and activities.

Here too, we have invited students to contribute their own suggestions.

For Strategic Career Design:

"Possibly to have a Blackboard page / group discussion page where all the SAP information can be collated, and all the requests can be viewed in the one place. maybe also to have a designated 5 mins at the end of a tutorial where students can submit feedback, as most choose to not if it means having to go out of their way."

Mikaela Zuiderduyn

For Business Ethics:

"I believe the next steps would be to identify the benefits further for each group (the individual SAP students, the classroom, and the tutor). I see this potentially being able to further work together as a unit to aid teaching the class, it could further give more experience (potentially being recognised towards something) for the students as an incentive to be a SAP, and I think for the classroom it really helps set the scene for how the students would get the most out of the teaching experience. I would like to see further discussions between students, tutor and the individuals creating/running the program (maybe a coffee), to help discuss, give input and design the program, as it has incredible potential."

Jake Liebregts

Conclusion

We are very grateful to those students who have volunteered to be Student as Partner representatives, to the students who all offer thoughtful and constructive feedback each week to improve the curriculum, and to those sessional tutors who have voluntarily adopted the program in their own classes. These include Adam Andreotta, Rohini Balapumi, Carla Martella, and Jane Bushby. All of these key players have shown initiative and courage (given the vulnerability that inviting such feedback requires) and we are grateful for these efforts that have significantly improved the student experience and the curriculum.

For Business Ethics:

"I think, regardless of the direction that the SAP program takes, it has already been beneficial for the class, tutor and SAP students. Each student I've talked to all wanted this implemented into ALL the classes that they are in. I don't know how it would work with tutors who have different teaching styles or outlooks, where it's more of a "I teach in this way, and this is how this class is going to run" way of teaching. Not saying one method is right or wrong, but more there would be difficulties in implementing SAP if other tutors are not as open to the feedback. I think the style of system is incredibly beneficial but also incredibly difficult for different tutors, and am unsure how to approach the situation where tutors are not as open, however opening up the SAP program to other classes is definitely a way many students would like to see the program go. Feedback and communication between students, tutors and SAP representatives is essential."

Jake Liebregts

Michael Baldwin
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Jacqueline Boaks
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