The student perspective of a staff– student partnership scheme

Yuri Yin-Moe Aung

The Imperial College StudentShaper program is a student partnership scheme created to encourage staff–student collaboration on educational research.1 Its core tenet is for staff and students to be equally valued and mutually benefit, with the overall aim of improving student experience. This approach aligns with the concept of ‘students as partners’, proposing that involving students in their own education processes improves their engagement, agency and enhances higher education programs.2 While similar schemes exist elsewhere,3,4 the StudentShaper program is to my knowledge unique in providing a dedicated platform for student partnership, supported by Imperial College strategy and a student bursary.

Over my penultimate 2 years of medical school, I have been employed twice as a StudentShaper in two year-long research projects concerning student motivations for international medical electives and the use of pre-performance routines in medicine respectively. Having initially applied for the program more for the longitudinal research experience than for the bursary or program itself, I received far more from it than I expected, and leave my position sincerely hoping more institutions create similar opportunities.

A key feature of the program is that students consider staff as partners rather than supervisors and share a more equal position within the research team.5 This was a stark adjustment from my previous experiences of research, from calling doctors by their first names to feeling comfortable interjecting with opinions and even critiquing others’ work. It has become increasingly commonplace for medical students to seek out research opportunities, whether to pursue a burgeoning academic interest or a particular specialty, especially as points can be awarded in their future applications for research presentations or publications.6 However, in my experience at least, the dynamic of StudentShaper projects has been vastly different and arguably improved from other academic relationships, and I posit several reasons for why this may be.

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Firstly, I appreciated the clarity of the StudentShaper application process, where staff can advertise upcoming projects, and students of any applicable year group and previous experience can apply. In comparison, students normally chance upon research supervisors more through prior connections or clinical placements rather than being fairly chosen from a pool of candidates. This can limit students who have not had similar placement experiences but may be no less interested in research, as well as those who are unaware that they can approach researchers directly as this was never something that was explicitly communicated to me during medical school.

Additionally, I believe the clear structure of the program also ensures continued accountability between both student and staff partners. Where students might otherwise join research projects halfway through and largely follow their supervisors’ instructions without

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defined goals at the outset. StudentShaper projects importantly value student opinion in crafting the direction and goals of the project together. This includes deciding on desired project outputs, key deadlines that both student and staff have to meet, and overall ensuring an equal delegation of work as opposed to staff predominantly assigning and supervising students’ work in a more didactic fashion.

Finally, as all StudentShaper projects pertain to education, involving students in shaping the research improves the chances of addressing students’ needs in the long run. Students are ideally positioned to reflect on their own experiences of the undergraduate experience that such research aims to improve. They are also uniquely situated to gather feedback and communicate openly with their peers. In my research projects as the sole interviewer, I was able to relate to the students as equals, reducing the likelihood of them catering to what they believed staff wanted to hear. Indeed, my staff partners later remarked how frank the students had been with me in recounting their experiences.

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Ultimately, being a StudentShaper has enlightened me to the agency that students do and should rightly have in shaping their own education processes. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, it has given me an alternative and more nuanced perspective into student involvement in research—the equality of opportunities provided, value afforded to students’ work and the student–supervisor relationship. Crucially, these issues in research involvement persist beyond medical school, and I believe this experience has clarified to me exactly what inclusive and fair research opportunities and relationships should be like as I graduate and evolve into navigating working relationships. Going forwards, I believe staff–student partnership offers many benefits in medical education, improving outcomes for students, staff and likely institutions overall through better student engagement and feedback. I therefore fully advocate for the introduction of similar programs at other universities.

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**Imperial College StudentShaper Program**

StudentShapers is a program launched in 2018 as part of Imperial College’s Learning and Teaching strategy to support partnership between staff and students. It supports projects related to all areas of educational development and educational research. In particular, it provides financial support for students to facilitate their involvement in partnership activities, and mandates that the partnership should equally value the expertise of staff and students, present equal opportunity for both, benefit both and have an appropriate distribution of power. Staff members are invited to submit proposals for any projects aligning with the program, with project durations, student requirements and time requirements varying depending on the specific proposal. All available opportunities are then listed on the Imperial College website and can be advertised within specific departments or faculties.

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