

Creating Open Online Courses with Learner Representative Partners to Widen Participation in Higher Education

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Abstract: Open online courses could provide stepping stones for audiences that are under-represented in higher education (HE). However, there are concerns that these instead proliferate forms of exclusion and do not address known difficulties for widening participation. We explore how organisations that represent the perspectives of particular underserved audiences for HE can act as ‘Learner Representative Partners’ to support the creation of appropriate courses and to highlight practices that exclude. Six course development processes where a university worked with different partners are analysed using interviews, documentation of resource use, and data on learner behaviour. The analysis utilises previously identified challenges to widening participation and collaborative course creation. Getting partners to directly engage in authoring the course was particularly beneficial but all partners prompted critical thought and greater understanding of the intended audiences. We suggest principles to support such partnerships effectively. These include adapting to a variable capacity of partners to contribute, to encourage reuse or creation of resources by partners, and to facilitate partners to feel confident in expressing their views.

Keywords: open educational resources, widening participation, non-formal education, higher education; collaboration, eLearning.

Introduction

Widening participation in higher education (HE) from under-represented groups, such as those with social or economic disadvantages, is a complex yet important challenge (Butcher, Corfield, & Rose-Adams, 2012). The nature and norms of higher education institutions (HEIs) lead to a lack of connections with, understanding of, or fit to, the needs of non-traditional audiences (Mampaey, 2017; Devas, 2011; Jones & Lau, 2010). In principle, open online courses provide a flexible route to study for all people and reduce financial and geographical constraints. There is, however, a lack of evidence that open courses or resources have delivered a substantial widening of participation in HE (Falconer, McGill, Littlejohn, Boursinou, & Punie, 2013). Without attention, they may instead proliferate existing barriers (Lane 2012; Cannell & Macintyre, 2017).

The development of partnerships with organisations that work with these audiences could provide a means to change this. Collaborations between HEIs and various types of organisations have been argued for in widening participation literature (Reed, King, & Whiteford, 2015; Hatt, Baxter, & Tate, 2008). Here, we focus on engaging organisations that have knowledge and connections with specific audiences in the creation of open online courses that relate HE study to the current employment or aspirations of these audiences, and therefore tackle known barriers to widening participation. The organisations that could fulfil this role as a ‘Learner Representative Partner’ (LRP) are broad, and could include sector bodies, charities, or trade unions.



In this paper, we analyse six course creation processes, each with different partners. The intended audiences for these courses include people in lower-paid roles in the healthcare, teaching, and voluntary sectors, and those wanting to understand how to run an enterprise with little to no background in business. The LRP organisations were selected for their connections with target audiences but also helped to shape the perceptions of these audiences. The courses combine practical career-relevant skills with academic elements, offer the opportunity to receive soft accreditation through badging, and suggest next steps into further study. We analyse these course production processes and related data to identify ways in which the LRP influenced the outcomes towards tackling known challenges for widening participation, and the challenges and benefits of collaboration. Through this, we provide principles for partnerships to create appropriate open online courses for under-represented audiences. As challenges to widening participation and collaborative course authoring appear to be common around the world, these recommendations are created with the intention that they will be relevant to all HEIs and potential partners.

Opportunities and Challenges in Using Open Education to Widen Participation

Widening participation in HE from under-represented groups is a focus for many HEIs and governments around the world. However, it is argued that there are common and persistent teaching and learning practices that are unsuitable for these audiences (Jones & Lau, 2010).

Mampaey (2017) argues that forms of ‘decoupling’ arise between public commitments by HEIs to widen participation, and the realities of their practices. By this they mean that while HEIs often create admirable objectives to be inclusive, these can be disconnected from their processes and their teaching due to a variety of reasons. One set of challenges exists around the expectations of students. In this regard, O’Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, and Harwood (2016) describe a ‘deficit mind-set’ amongst HEI staff, where students are expected to learn to overcome disadvantages that they have when compared to traditional students. While additional support could be beneficial in this development, staff often report that they did not have the time or awareness required to provide this. Devas (2011) argues that HE alienates working-class students in the UK by drawing implicitly on middle-class capital in language, pedagogy, and expectations for independent learning. At the same time, they are expected to take responsibility to develop towards becoming more like the traditional students with limited support.

There can also be resistance to the implementation of any approach developed to widen participation. Mampaey (2017) highlights that there are uncertainties about how HEIs can really widen participation due to a lack of knowledge and evidence for the right strategies to take. They also find that these strategies may be perceived by staff to be an imposition on academic freedoms.

A further challenge arises when targeting diverse groups. Terms such as ‘under-represented’ conflate people from different backgrounds (Crozier, Reay, & Clayton, 2009). Awareness of diversity within these populations could be achieved through student-centred strategies where learning reflects the interests and identities of the audience, and so becomes more relevant and meaningful to the learners (Hockings, Cooke, & Bowl, 2009).

Causes of under-representation, such as lower achievement in school, require provision for adults to re-engage with education later in life (Chowdry, Crawford, Dearden, Goodman, & Vignoles, 2013).

However, these adults often feel peripheral to HE, and have diverse situations when compared to recent school or college leavers (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Osborne, Marks, and Turner (2004) identify categories of persons who consider becoming a mature student, including 'Careerists' who seek qualifications to progress, and 'Escapees' wanting to leave their current area of employment. Student-centred strategies for adults could, therefore, draw links with current employment and career goals. Developing courses for particular career and life situations could reduce the conflation of diverse audiences.

Open Educational Resources (OER) could widen the availability of education by removing limits to the number of places, and improving affordability, but could also entrench existing divides if resources are not suited to audiences (Lane, 2012). Indeed, evidence of impact of OER on widening participation in adult education is limited (Falconer et al., 2013). Instead, OER and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), have mostly served well-educated audiences (Farrow, de los Arcos, Pitt, & Weller, 2015). Arguably, this could be caused by the decoupling Mampaey (2017) describes in HEIs, with MOOCs and OER embodying traditional norms of tuition.

While reuse of resources is fundamental to open educational practices (Coughlan, Pitt & McAndrew, 2013), it could be problematic if these resources retain traditional norms of teaching that exclude wider audiences. Alternatively, non-HEI resources could be particularly appropriate to wider audiences, and provide a counterpoint to decoupling.

The Potential and Challenges of Collaboration

Innovative forms of social partnership may support OER to reach wider audiences (Cannell, Macintyre, & Hewitt, 2015), and various partnerships have also been devised to widen participation in HE. For example, Hatt et al. (2008) describe partnerships between schools, colleges and HEIs in an initiative to raise confidence and aspirations. Collaboration supported the project to target college and school students with no family background in HE, who were considered to lack the cultural capital that supported others. Reed et al. (2015) describe university-industry mentorship programs as a key strategy for widening participation, but find challenges including the potential for misaligned expectations, and the need to establish a sustainable rationale for the collaboration and effective relationships with very different types of organisations.

Collaboration within HEIs is relatively commonplace when creating online courses, due to the differing technological and pedagogical demands of online course production when compared to face-to-face teaching (Xu & Morris, 2007). Teams may feature distinct roles such as instructional designer or subject expert. Again, challenges are reported: Hixon (2008) found that even with standardised roles, variable forms of collaboration occurred between production processes. A common language and vision needed to be developed and misunderstandings were problematic. Xu and Morris (2007) identified that collaboration caused an increase in workload but did help educators to rethink their practices.

Collaborations between educators to produce OER can realise efficiencies around a shared goal. Coughlan et al. (2013) describe a collaboration in which foundation-level courses from an HEI were released openly, adapted, and used in diverse ways across a range of colleges, universities, and charities. Collaborative development of OER has also emerged in Open Textbook initiatives where

authors from multiple HEIs produce course texts together (Ochôa, Silveira, & Sprock, 2011). This can reduce the costs of study and support customisation (Ozdemir & Hendricks 2017). However, a focus on massive scale in open online learning comes into tension with the need to engage and support diverse learners. New relationships between providers and other organisations could deliver this support (Cannell & Macintyre, 2017).

Questions and Key Concepts

We frame this paper with two questions, and use key concepts from the literature related to each of these to structure the analysis.

1) How can collaborations with LRPs support the creation of open online courses that are appropriate to widen participation in education?

We focus first on the ways in which collaborations with LRPs could lead to courses that effectively engage non-traditional audiences, drawing on concepts from widening participation literature:

- Student-centred strategies: Widening participation audiences are diverse but often conflated (Crozier et al., 2009). We identify how the LRPs' knowledge of audiences was used to make courses relevant to them (Hockings et al., 2009).
- Tackling decoupling: Practices of HEIs in areas such as pedagogy and language may be disconnected from their aims of widening participation (Devas 2011; O'Shea et al., 2016; Mampaey, 2017). We analysed whether LRPs could highlight these issues and advocate for audiences.
- Generating engagement with HE: The aim of widening participation is to engage non-traditional learners from diverse backgrounds with HE (Butcher et al., 2012). We explore if and how collaboration with LRPs could lead to engagement of these audiences.

2) What opportunities and challenges arise through collaboration with LRPs in course creation processes?

Processes of collaboration raise challenges and opportunities. We, therefore, include the following concepts in our analysis:

- Alignment of goals and expectations: Different types of organisations, such as an HEI and LRP, are likely to differ in the aims and expectations of a collaboration (Reed et al., 2015; Coughlan et al., 2013). We analyse identified tensions and the development of shared understanding.
- Work and benefits of collaborations: It is argued that collaboration creates overheads, but these efforts can be beneficial in supporting learning from each other (Xu & Morris 2007; Coughlan et al., 2013). We analyse perceptions of workload and benefits achieved.
- Structuring collaborations: Course production collaborations tend to be structured around particular roles (Xu & Morris 2007; Hixon, 2008) and relationship development is important to inter-organisational collaborations (Reed et al., 2015). We analyse how collaborations were planned and the varied practices that occurred (Hixon, 2008).

Course Creation Processes

This research analyses a National Networks for Collaborative Outreach project which collaboratively developed a set of six open online courses as pathways towards HE study (Open University, 2016). Partners for each course were drawn from the Social Partnership Network, which brings together organisations with a commitment to social inclusion (hereafter referred to as partners), and The Open University UK (hereafter referred to as the HEI). Decisions on partnerships were made based on relevance to the intended audience, and each course had a different partner.

Courses follow a standard structure with approximately 15 hours of learning split into three to five sections. Each section includes a quiz. Digital badges are awarded for successful completion of each section and its quiz. In this way, learners can focus on sections of relevance to them, or follow a whole course. The courses are self-paced to support flexible use, and do not require interaction with other learners, but could be taken in a social context.

Courses were designed to introduce HE-level material in the contexts of careers in sectors such as healthcare or teaching, or general skills such as entrepreneurship. To support active learning, activities in which learners create open text responses are interspersed with the material. To draw connections between HE study and the intended audience, activities commonly highlight links between the knowledge being learnt and the learner's own experiences.

The authoring process for each course took three to four months and was followed by a handover to production staff, and pilots with learners before public launch. As course creation was staggered, some lessons learnt from earlier processes were applied to those that followed. However, each course had a unique authoring team and mix of roles for partners.

Methodology

This research uses a mixed-methods approach as a pragmatic means to analyse the process and outcomes of a novel activity based in complex, real life settings. Interviews are used to provide multiple perspectives from the HEI and partner on the course creation processes and expectations of how the courses will be used. Data on the reuse of existing resources in these courses provides complementary insights into the construction of the courses. Data from learners provides initial insights into engagement.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted with an author from the HEI, the main individual from the partner organisation, and the project manager (PM) for each of the course creation processes. As three courses shared one PM, they were interviewed once, but were asked to talk through their experiences for each course. Therefore, a total of 16 interviews were performed. To support reflection on experiences, interviews were conducted at the end of the course authoring processes but before the courses were published.

Interviews were semi-structured and followed a rubric with prompts on the background of the interviewee, their conceptions of the audience for the courses, the benefits for audiences, the benefits for the authors and their organisation, the process of collaboration and course authoring, and

expectations as to how the course would be used and promoted. Approval for this was received from the Human Research Ethics Committee of The Open University.

To complement the interviews, we drew on course production documentation. This includes an analysis of logs of the existing resources that were reused or adapted in each course, which allows us to identify the origin of resources and the extent of reuse achieved. We also reviewed 'challenge logs' in which PMs recorded issues that arose. These provide further evidence and understanding of issues discussed in the interviews. To provide an indication of the use of these courses, we include activity data from enrolled learners during an initial eight-month period and data from an optional survey.

Analysis

A thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) of the interviews was conducted by two researchers using a shared Nvivo file. An initial set of codes related to the project goals was used by both researchers. These covered themes related to the interviewee background, the target audience, the benefits that their course was expected to have, and plans for the future. This was supplemented by inductive coding according to emergent themes identified from the data. The coded data were summarised to describe key characteristics of each of the course production processes. Tables 1-6 present summaries based on this and further analysis for this paper relates the themes to the research questions and concepts from literature.

The process documentation and challenge logs were used to triangulate understanding gained from the interviews. This included comparing a quantified analysis of the provenance of reused resources (Table 7) to interview comments around reuse, checking that logged challenges were covered by the themes arising from the interview analysis, and reviewing elements of the courses and reused source materials that were discussed in the interviews, in order to check the validity of interviewee statements and to add further understanding of the outcomes produced.

Findings

In this section we provide summaries of each course creation process and describe the reuse of existing resources and learner activity data.

Summary of Course Creation Processes

To provide context to the findings, we summarise each of the six course creation processes in Tables 1-6.

Table 1: Caring for Adults (CFA)

Theme	Summary
Course Aim	Developing understanding of key issues that relate to being a carer, whether in a paid or unpaid role.
LRP	Disability charity that employs formal carers and works with informal carers. Main individual involved supervises a team that delivers training.
Course Creation and Uses	Simple language was argued to be appropriate. There was reuse of LRP training materials and a mix of case studies from HEI and LRP. Course promotion on the LRP's public website and staff intranet. Course to become part of staff induction and promoted to informal carers.
Collaboration	Partner involved in extensive authoring, input on direction and feedback. HEI and partner author's writing styles and pedagogical approach differed. Partner's style was considered very appropriate for the audience. Revisions made to balance this.

Table 2: Introducing Practical Healthcare (IPH)

Theme	Summary
Course Aim	Developing knowledge and skills for a deeper understanding of healthcare practice.
LRP	Trade union serving public sector workers including in healthcare. Main individual developed learning initiatives for members.
Course Creation and Uses	Audience included workers in any role in healthcare settings (including porters or administrators), but later focus on healthcare assistants. LRP pushed to focus on those with basic skills and no qualifications. Reused resources were adapted to achieve consistent language. LRP promotes the course to their 'Learning Reps' who work with the audiences and plan study groups to take the course together.
Collaboration	Partner did minor authoring, gave feedback on drafts, and provided case studies. Main individual had limited availability, other staff provided policy information and additional feedback.

Table 3: Planning a Better Future (PBF)

Theme	Summary
Course Aim	An introduction for anyone considering changing jobs, returning to work, or aspiring to better things.
LRP	Organisation providing educational support to trade union members. Main individual worked with data on member's learning activities and communicating routes into HE study, and so provided insights from these roles.
Course Creation and Uses	Specific audiences such as people in low-paid retail occupations were kept in mind. Creating confidence to change careers was emphasised. Partner pushed for a simplification of the language in reused HEI materials. LRP to promote the course through their events, publications and social media.
Collaboration	Content drafted by a HEI-based author, with suggestions and feedback given to them from the LRP.

Table 4: Supporting Children’s Development (SCD)

Theme	Summary
Course Aim	Developing understanding of children’s development for teaching assistants, support staff and parents.
LRP	Trade union. Main individual involved is a teaching assistant, so part of the target audience, but relatively advanced. Their experiences became a focus.
Course Creation and Uses	Learners could have different levels of experience and authors agreed to assume no experience. LRP resources were mainly used for inspiration and to understand the existing landscape. Recent policy changes restricted reuse of older resources, but case studies were reused. LRP will promote it widely to members. Individual involved will promote it in their own school.
Collaboration	The main individual from the LRP worked in an advisory role with two HEI-based authors. A section on professional development included interviews with them.

Table 5: Starting Your Small Business (SYSB)

Theme	Summary
Course Aim	An introduction for anyone who has set up a business recently, is thinking about doing so, or is self-employed.
LRP	A charity offering skills-based adult education classes. Main individual has a chair role in the LRP and runs a small business.
Course Creation and Uses	Course considered to have a very broad potential audience. Partners pushed to lower the language level and reduce jargon. Many existing resources included in the first draft but feedback led to significant changes to these. LRPs expected to use their various social enterprise and business-related networks to promote the course.
Collaboration	Challenging to identify available partner capacity. Main partner was supplemented with two individuals from other partners to provide feedback on drafts. HEI-based author appreciated the multiple perspectives at different stages but these were not always compatible.

Table 6: Taking Part in the Voluntary Sector (TPVS)

Theme	Summary
Course Aim	Introducing the sector for people supporting or managing aspects of voluntary organisations, or considering volunteering.
LRP	National umbrella organisation for the voluntary sector. The main individual involved runs training programmes on course-related topics.
Course Creation and Uses	Wide potential audience from those thinking of volunteering to those running a charity. LRP provided resources which were felt to make the course distinctive. The course will also complement their existing face-to-face training programme.
Collaboration	Co-authored with partner and HEI taking responsibility for specific units, then providing feedback to each other. HEI authored more overall. Some underestimation of workload and different work practices.

To summarise, partners engaged in substantial amounts of course authoring in the TPVS and CFA courses, and a smaller amount of authoring in IPH. Further partner roles across the courses included activities to define the audience and course structure, suggesting resources for reuse, and providing feedback on drafts.

Reuse of Existing Resources

Reusing and adapting existing resources into the courses was encouraged, including sources from LRPs, such as videos originally produced for staff training and infographics from their websites. One example is an image from the partners' training materials on different ways of promoting independence, which was incorporated into course materials on 'Promoting Independence' (Open University / Social Partnership Network, 2016a). This was incorporated into the CFA course and reflects the style of communication that the partner considered appropriate to the audience. In another example, text explaining the ways in which charities involve volunteers was adapted from LRP training material into the TPVS course. Resources from existing HEI courses and from third parties were also used.

Lists of reused resources produced during course production were analysed to assess sources (Table 7), giving another perspective on the influence of partners. This analysis shows that the courses in which LRPs engaged most substantially as authors (TPVS and CFA) also had the highest proportions and counts of reused resources attributed to the partner. While this does not capture the importance of these resources or the way it was adapted for the course, it suggests that where partners were engaged as authors, more partner content was included. But even where partners did not directly author, resources were adapted from partners in all but one course, and LRPs were prompted to suggest resources for consideration.

Table 7: Existing Resources Reused in Each Course and their Attribution (proportions in brackets)

Course	Total Resources Reused	Resources Attributed to the HEI	Resources Attributed to the Partner	Resources Attributed to Other Parties
CFA	40	5 (13%)	7 (18%)	28 (70%)
IPH	35	21 (60%)	2 (6%)	12 (34%)
PBF	16	5 (31%)	2 (13%)	9 (56%)
SYSB	18	3 (17%)	0 (0%)	15 (83%)
TPVS	31	8 (26%)	10 (32%)	13 (42%)
SCD	23	8 (35%)	1 (4%)	14 (61%)

Learner Demographics

To minimise barriers to engagement, learners were not required to complete surveys to enrol but an optional survey provides some demographics: 76% of respondents were over the age of 25 (n = 37), 70% were currently employed (n = 33), and 72% were not currently HE students (n = 32). Fifty-three percent of respondents to this had not achieved an HE qualification (n = 34). For comparison, 46% of respondents had not achieved an HE qualification in responses to the same previous qualification question across all courses on the same platform in 2015 (n = 1362) (Law & Perryman, 2017). This provides some indication that the courses are mainly reaching an adult audience that is working and has often not engaged with HE previously.

Learner Activity

Data on learners who enrolled in the courses in an initial eight-month period provides initial insights into the response to the courses. This includes the proportions receiving badges for completing sections or whole courses, and click-through actions by enrolled learners that suggest further engagement.

A total of 1,729 learners enrolled in the courses in this period. Across courses, a median of 24.1% of enrolled learners have received one or more badges, and 14.9% completed the whole course to date. As learners might be interested in specific sections or the whole course, both measures are important. Comparison between courses is of interest, and completion rates vary from 26.6% (IPH) to 4.3% (SYSB). Badging rates vary from 44% (IPH), to 19.1% (SYSB). SYSB has the lowest completion and badging rates but the largest enrolment. The courses with the highest completion and badging rates, IPH, CFA and TPVS, are those that featured directing authoring from partners.

A further measure of engagement with HE is click through from the course web pages to information about further courses. Across all courses, a median of 6.8% of learners clicked through to information about courses offered by the HEI, and 15.9% clicked through to further free courses. PBF and SCD performed well in these measures, perhaps reflecting topics that link well to further engagement in education.

Table 8: Data from Learners Enrolled in the Courses after Eight Months of Publication

Course	# Enrolled in Period	% Completing all Badges	% Receiving 1+ Badges	% Click through to HEI Courses Information
CFA	197	20.3%	20.3%	6.9%
IPH	109	26.6%	44.0%	3.9%
PBF	99	13.1%	21.2%	11.9%
SCD	203	11.8%	27.1%	12.0%
SYSB	1085	4.3%	19.2%	6.5%
TPVS	36	16.7%	41.7%	6.6%

Interview Analysis and Discussion

This presentation of the interview analysis is structured according to the research questions. For each quote the interviewee is stated with the course acronym and role, where -PM is project manager, -HEI is the HEI-based author, and -LRP is the partner.

How can collaborations with LRPs support the creation of open online courses that are appropriate to widen participation in education?

Student-centred Strategies

A key theme was the role of partners to contribute understanding of the audience, including challenges they may face. For example, one noted that:

We meet people who are very disadvantaged, so I suggested that we should also think about people who are running businesses but who have absolutely no qualifications ... people in prison, ... people who would never see themselves as traditional entrepreneurs (SYSB-LRP).

This emphasis on considering non-traditional audiences was a consistent theme. For example, one noted that the use of reflective activities would be really useful in the workplace, but needed support as “it might be the first time they have asked to be reflective on their practice” (CFA-LRP). Another theme was the working lives of the audience members. LRPs supported understanding of “dealing with people with different experiences in work. How they work, where they work... It is a look at... other parts of the world.” (PBF-PM).

Engagement in authoring supported partners to add topics that were felt to be important for the audience but weren't on the agenda of HEI authors. For example, positive risk-taking was raised as important to care workers by the LRP:

The one section that came in later was on ... positive risk-taking ... that was quite an interesting section ... it came out of fairly early discussions amongst the authors, but I think it was CFA-LRP that suggested that, and then CFA-HEI agreed (CFA-PM).

A further benefit was the ability to draw on partner experiences and contexts in making new resources. For example, SCD included a video in which the partner discusses their own career and education (Open University / Social Partnership Network, 2016b), followed by activities that ask the learner to reflect on their motivations, experiences and career route. IPH used audio pieces made with

the partner on themes such as the day-to-day tasks that a job entails, and what motivated their career choices. These resources were grounded in situations familiar to intended audiences and would have been difficult for the HEI to produce independently.

Tackling Decoupling

As observers to the collaborative authoring process, PMs were well placed to assess the value of LRPs to tackle decoupling. One noted that:

What we suffer a lot from (at the HEI) is a kind of groupthink ... Especially if you are thinking about all these different audience members, that you can serve all these audiences with just an academic (SCD, TPVS & SYSB-PM).

The LRPs prompted HEI authors to examine ways in which they might unintentionally exclude the audience. Learners were engaged with the course production at the piloting stage, but LRPs offered broader understanding of the audience, and expert suggestions. Partners advocated for and suggested appropriate language for the audience across all processes. One noted that they “spent a lot of time commenting on terms, (saying) ‘this looks too difficult, try and simplify it’ and getting rid of jargon and acronyms” (SYSB-LRP). The TPVS partner highlighted sector terminology that would require careful introduction.

By authoring or suggesting resources for reuse, partners prompted comparison with resources from the HEI and further discussions of appropriate language:

What we found was that (CFA-LRPs) content, because it was coming from fairly basic training material, was pitched very much at the level. But (the content authored by the HEI) was coming from a more academic standpoint ... (and) read as more challenging (CFA-PM).

If existing HEI resources dominate it raises concerns that practices unsuited to the audiences are maintained. LRP authoring was associated with greater reuse of LRP resources in Table 7. Where LRP authoring was not practicable, their feedback provided on drafts written by the HEI author could provide important perspectives on language use. For example, in the PBF course, it was noted that the academic author had previously “written courses to a higher level... (but the LRP) was very good at marking us down on that” (PBF-PM).

Generating Engagement with HE

Partners identified various pathways to promote the courses, including events, public-facing websites, intranets, and social media, inductions or other staff training. The initial quantitative findings suggest that the courses have had some impact in generating engagement amongst the intended populations. A broad challenge to the effectiveness of open online courses for widening participation is the lack of personal tutoring or peer support (Falconer et al., 2013; Cannell & Macintyre, 2017). While the courses themselves were designed for independent study, there are a variety of ways in which LRPs could provide personal support:

I know we’ve got ‘next steps’ (information in the course) but... (learners) will probably have different kinds of questions or different routes in mind...Our aim with it would be to get our Learning Reps supporting people with it...to help them or signpost them, and maybe getting study groups together (IPH-LRP)

LRPs had strong connections with sub-groups of the intended audience (their members or clients), and were most capable of serving these. The extent of these connections was important to review. For example, the CFA partner employed professional carers but also identified staff working with informal carers as a link to another important audience.

What opportunities and challenges arise through collaboration with LRPs in course creation processes?

Alignment of Goals and Expectations

A key theme for alignment between team members were their conceptions of the audience. This was discussed in initial meetings, but evolved over time. For example, the IPH course intended to include all those working in healthcare settings but later agreed that healthcare assistants were the core focus.

Where parts of the course were authored separately, or drew on sources of different provenance, inconsistencies required remedial action. In CFA where authoring was shared, the partner's style — drawn from delivering work-based training — was in contrast to that of the HEI author, leading to:

... work around taking some activities out of the (partner-led) section and building in ... activities in the more academic sections to bring them in line ... you wouldn't get that challenge so much obviously if it is one author, coming from a particular standpoint (CFA-PM).

Achieving a consistent style added work. However, the visible inconsistencies in drafts could be seen as a positive indication that both LRP and HEI perspectives were included.

Work and Benefits of Collaborations

A key reflection was a need to understand and plan for achievable contributions from each LRP. Authoring partners could "share the load" (CFA-PM) to reduce pressure on academics. However, creating an open online course was not business as usual for LRPs, so they had to identify staff and capacity for unfamiliar work. For some courses, particularly SYSB, there were difficulties in finding partner capacity in the available time. A PM noted that with hindsight it was important: "...to recognise the different types of buy-in from different social partner organisations. It won't be consistent" (CFA-PM).

Partners stated that a key benefit was learning from the process of creating a course with the HEI. This fed into their own capacity to teach and produce materials. These organisations are often involved in training and education, but rarely to the extent of a HEI, so collaborations were an attractive learning opportunity:

It was good experience to see how a course develops from that initial idea, all the way through ... (Now) I would definitely feel more confident at how to get my ideas out there ... To start with it is quite a daunting task (SCD-LRP).

We have the resources and we have the knowledge. But, actually, the processes... to turn that into something that would be good for online learning – I learnt a lot (TPVS-LRP).

The sections on student-centred strategies and decoupling suggest ways that HEI staff learnt from these collaborations. Insights from partners could become knowledge used in future teaching, and HEI authors appreciated how the processes connected them to current practices on the ground. For

example, as a “refresher on health today... it’s a while since I’ve been working in actual hospitals and nursing homes. So it has brought me up to date on what is out there” (IPH-HEI)

Structuring Collaborations

In addition to capacity issues, collaborations needed to account for the limited experience of LRPs with open online courses and HEI processes. A PM noted that partner engagement “doesn’t just depend on their capacity, it will depend on how comfortable they feel.” (CFA-PM). There was a need to ensure that partners developed confidence in unfamiliar roles. Concern was expressed by CFA-PM that some partners felt their input to be “basic” when compared to HEI academics, and they needed to be confident enough to provide it.

While partners saw gaining experience of course production as a benefit, the PMs considered it desirable to shield them from the complexities of this to allow them to concentrate on direction and course content. However, this led to challenges when engagement in other areas was required. For example, processes to address rights to sources were raised as problematic by several partners who were not used to publishing, and the creation of quizzes to assess whether learners should receive badges was identified as a challenge in HCA and SCD.

Principles for Collaboration with Learner Representative Partners

This research has found that collaborating with partners who can represent and advocate for specific under-represented audiences can address fundamental issues raised in the literature on widening participation, and OER. Drawing on this and our findings, we suggest the following principles for developing open courses through these collaborations.

1. Aim to engage LRPs in authoring but be aware that capacity to engage will vary. Input could also be through guidance on the audience, ideas on direction, feedback on drafts, and resources for reuse.
2. Agree on a description of the audience and identify areas of uncertainty in understanding them.
3. Support the LRP to advocate for the learners where HEI staff follow practices that they consider inappropriate.
4. Emphasise the value of partner perspectives such that they feel comfortable challenging HEI staff.
5. Explore potential resources for reuse together to prompt dialogue around appropriate language and pedagogy. Plan for work to align this into a consistent style.
6. Support the LRP to evaluate the appropriateness of language in existing HEI content and to provide examples of how they communicate with the audience.
7. Employ the LRP to create authentic student-centred course content, such as case studies or reflective interviews, grounded in experiences similar to those of the intended audience.
8. Design courses for flexible use and to become a useful resource for the LRP in their work.
9. Develop reflective activities within the HEI on lessons learnt, to highlight areas of decoupling where practices create barriers.

10. Support the LRP to understand HEI practices, both to inform their contribution and so that they maximise learning from the experience of creating the course.

Conclusion

This paper has identified and explored the concept of Learner Representative Partners – collaborators who work together with HEIs to create open online courses in response to recognised challenges of engaging under-represented audiences. We find that LRPs provided beneficial input from alternative perspectives to that of the HEI. These can tackle decoupling of academic practices from aims to widen participation in areas such as language, and provide opportunities for student-centred strategies by providing appropriate topics and authentic course content. The introduction of diverse perspectives brings with it challenges, including in producing a consistent course. At the same time, our analysis suggests that greater involvement of the partner, through directly authoring the course, creates a basis for greater contribution and impact.

In considering the wider applicability of the LRP approach, it is important to note that these collaborations can be adapted towards making the process and outcomes most useful to the student audiences, HEI, and partners. In this study, the collaborations were adapted to fit the capacity of the LRPs to contribute, while the HEI managed the processes and led on the authoring and publishing. However, further models would be possible and should be explored where appropriate. For instance, a partner could lead the process of course creation, with the HEI taking a supporting role. Or HEIs at an earlier stage in developing their use of OER could partner with organisations who have valuable expertise and processes for communicating and training key audiences at scale. These findings and principles will hopefully encourage greater exploration of the possibilities to collaborate with partners in order to widen participation.

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