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TREATING STUDENTS AS PARTNERS – IS IT SO SIMPLE? AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF STUDENT PARTNERSHIP IN A BUSINESS EDUCATION CONTEXT

A HALLGATÓK MINT PARTNEREK A FELSŐOKTATÁSBAN – MIT IS JELENT EZ? A HALLGATÓI PARTNERSÉG EMPIRIKUS VIZSGÁLATA AZ ÜZLETI FELSŐOKTATÁSBAN

The challenges assigned by the 'student as partner' movement have redrawn the ways how students and academic staff actively collaborate for the sake of successful teaching and learning. To gain competitive advantage, higher education institutions should understand what student partnership means in their context and decide how to talk about and act upon it. The primary purpose of this paper is to reveal how student partnership is interpreted by our students and lecturers who took part in an online brainstorming session and in an online application of the Q organizing technique to rank the concepts resulting from the previous brainstorming session. The results have been utilized to identify the main similarities and differences between students' and lecturers' interpretations. Neither students, nor lecturers could be treated as homogeneous groups, which also raises challenges to find the right mix of institutional answers to the conceptualization of student partnership.

Keywords: **student partnership, business education, online brainstorming, Q organizing technique, academic staff involvement**

A felsőoktatásban hallgatókat partnerként kezelő mozgalom alapvetően átformálta a hallgatók és az oktatók közötti aktív együttműködések formáit és alkalmazott módszereit a tanítás és tanulás együttes sikere érdekében. Az intézmény által realizálható versenyelőny meghatározó eleme lehet, ha az intézmény tudatosan foglalkozik a hallgatói partnerség intézményi értelmezésével és azzal, hogy milyen erőfeszítésekre van szükség az e téren deklarált intézményi célok megvalósításához. A cikk célja egy ilyen intézményi gyakorlat bemutatása: hallgatóink és oktatóink egy-egy csoportját online ötletrohamra hívtuk a témában, majd a Q-módszertan online alkalmazásának segítségével rendszeztük az így összegyűjtött ötleteket annak felmérésére, hogy milyen hasonlóságok és különbségek azonosíthatók a hallgatók és az oktatók értelmezései között. A kapcsolódó faktoranalízis alapján megállapítottuk, hogy sem a hallgatókat, sem az oktatókat nem lehet homogén csoportként kezelni a hallgatói partnerség értelmezésekor, ami komoly kihívásokat támaszt akkor, amikor az intézmények a hallgatói partnerség kialakításához és fejlesztéséhez kapcsolódó intézményi reakciók megfelelő „vegyületét" szeretnék meghatározni.

Kulcsszavak: **hallgatói partnerség, üzleti felsőoktatás, online ötletroham, Q rendszerező technika, oktatók bevonása**

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Quality issues in higher education (HE) have been intensively and increasingly addressed in the last two decades as the growing marketization has forced institutions to face many competitive pressures (Bernhard, 2012). This has also given rise to a changing phenomenon, that is, the perception of students as primary customers (Elsharnouby, 2015; Sadeh & Garkaz, 2015) and partners (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Taylor & Wilding, 2009). With the spread of the Total Quality Management (TQM) concept, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been increasingly realizing that they are part of the service industry and putting greater emphasis on understanding students' needs and expectations has led to an increasing interest in student engagement and partnership (e.g. Little, 2010), which could be interpreted as an act of resistance to the traditional, hierarchical structure where academic staff has power over students (Matthews, 2017). Furthermore, the rise of service quality issues has also prompted the HE literature to view the perceived quality of HE services provided to students as a point of departure on the pathway towards understanding the drivers of student satisfaction. This trend has resulted in various HE service quality models specifically adapting to the 'pure service' mindset of HE (Oldfield & Baron, 2000) where the quality of personal contact is of utmost importance. Therefore, lecturers who directly deliver and provide the service at the operational level of the institutional hierarchy are of key importance both to the student-customer they serve and the employer, that is, the HEI they represent. The resulting concepts characterizing the new ways of working and learning together, such as co-creating, co-producing, co-learning, co-designing, co-developing, co-researching and co-inquiring, challenge the traditional models of HE relationships (Healey et al., 2014).

The need for enhancing the student as partner (SaP) concept is also underlined by the specific features of HE services, that is, students as customers often need to play an active role in the service provision process (Little & Williams, 2010) and their participation needs guidance and motivation (Kotze & Plessis, 2003). Furthermore, HE services bear special characteristics that also foster building long-term partnership between the service provider (lecturer) and the client (student). What is more, compared to traditional services, the length of the service encounter is usually longer (Hetesi & Kürtösi, 2008) and lasts for months and years, which also enforces putting greater emphasis on the significantly increasing role of students for the sake of successful learning and teaching (Bedzsula & Tóth, 2020).

Taking the service quality perspective, the success of the value co-creation strongly relies on the understanding of each other's roles and needs (Kashif & Ting, 2014). Lecturers have a direct impact on student expectations and perceptions of service quality (e.g. Voss, Gruber, & Szmigin, 2007; Pozo-Munoz, Rebolloso-Pacheco, & Fernandez-Ramirez, 2000), as students perceive HE service quality primarily through their lecturers. Providing lecturers with a facilitating role in establishing partnership could produce fruitful results from several aspects. Lecturers as 'course managers' are closer to the 'point of action' and the quality of interaction between students and lecturers provide prompt and direct feedback to understand the drivers of student expectations and satisfaction, which in turn could also support lecturers in the design and revision of teaching programs (Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coates, 2000, Voss et al., 2007).

Based upon the boost of the HE literature in these aspects, engaging students as partners in learning and teaching has received growing attention in HE in recent years. The relevant literature is also extending at a great pace as both practitioners and theorists are looking for solutions as to how the concept of student partnership could be interpreted and understood effectively. Even though there is a wide range of areas, tools and methods that can be utilized to build and implement partnership, there is no generally accepted institutional pathway or knowledge how it could be developed over time. At the same time, the role of students has also changed with the evolution of a more conscious approach toward the development of institutional mission and vision (Holen, Ashwin, Maassen, & Stensaker, 2020). Therefore, there is a need to identify how available practices can be implemented specifically on institutional level.

Our research is built upon the belief that HE is a service where students are the primary customers and lecturers act in several roles as directly interacting parties, internal customers, and facilitators in the relevant institutional processes. The primary goal is a more conscious understanding of how students and lecturers articulate the concept and drivers of student partnership, which could result in finding the right institutional answers. A former survey served as the background of this specific research, which was disseminated among our students and lecturers in order that a clearer picture of how they think about HE quality could be obtained. The results of this survey were to provide us with inputs for the revision of our institutional quality culture, among which student perceptions drew the attention to the concept of 'students as partners' from a specific perspective. Therefore, we decided to investigate this term more deeply in our institutional context. As a contribution to further research, an online brainstorming and subsequently, the Q organizing technique were applied both with student and lecturer involvement to reveal the differences between the viewpoints of the two directly interacting stakeholder groups and to enable researchers to draw managerial conclusions.

The primary aim of this paper is to discuss how our students and lecturers interpret the concept of 'treating students as partners', primarily in a business education context. Following this train of thought, our paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a brief overview of the relevant literature addressing the increasingly up-to-date issue of treating students as partners. Section 3 presents the background of the research including the research purposes and the applied methodology. Section 4 serves as the backbone by introducing the results of the qualitative methodology, while Section 5 sums up the most important managerial conclusions and further research directions.

Literature review

According to the traditional approach embedded historically in the operation of the HE system and its institutions, the role of academics as the creators and transmitters of knowledge is traditionally viewed as an ivory tower, while students are the passive receivers of knowledge. The student-staff partnership movement promotes the interacting parties to take up new roles (Cook-Sather, 2001) and supports bi-directional relationships by placing students and staff into the position of co-creators and co-learners of knowledge (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014) and by diminishing the decisive role and power of lecturers. Matthews (2017) uses the 'Students as Partners' (SaP) phrase to challenge the traditional assumptions. In this transformation process there are no 'step-by-step instructions'. Rather it is based on the creativity of the people involved in translating the principles of SaP into practice. 'All SaP projects will look different and involve different actors' (Bovill, 2017).

The relevance of the topic is confirmed by the number of papers dealing with this issue (see e.g. the systematic literature review of Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), concluding that lecturers growingly accept that treating students as partners is of utmost importance. In the new era of HE facing many competitive pressures, the ways that students and academic staff collaborate for the sake of successful teaching and learning need to be rethought (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Healey et al., 2014; Flint, 2016).

What do we mean by treating students as partners? According to Cook-Sather et al. (2014, pp. 6-7) partnership is a 'reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis'. Healey et al. (2014, p. 12) describe partnership as 'a relationship in which all involved – students, academics, professional service staff, senior managers, students' unions, and so on – are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together.' Partnership may happen within or outside the curricula, between individuals, small groups, in courses or even in entire programs of study (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). The outcomes are beneficial for both parties, e.g. it results in positive learning impacts (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), an increased sense of responsibility for, and motivation around the learning process for students and increased engagement from academic staff (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016; Werder, Thibou, & Kaufer, 2012).

Matthews (2016) distinguishes student engagement and student partnership since the former concept emphasizes what students do at a university, while the latter one is focused on the collaboration of students and staff. Therefore, the significance of partnership is in the process. The model proposed by Healey et al. (2014) also represents the idea that partnership belongs to the broader concept of student engagement and distinguishes four overlapping areas in which students can be partners in learning and teaching, from some of which (e.g. curriculum design) students have traditionally been excluded. The four overlapping areas are (1) learning, teaching and assessment, (2) subject-based research and inquiry, (3) curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy, (4) scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Engaging students actively in their learning is the most common form of partnership used by many HEIs recognizing the growing importance of peer-learning and peer- and self-assessment (Healey et al., 2014). Students engaged in subject-based research can gain experience through co-inquiry. Students are also usually the objects of SoTL research, while curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy is the area where student engagement through partnership is least well developed. Consequently, there are few strategic institutional initiatives that can be mentioned as an example. Bovill et al. (2016) discuss the challenges arising with the treatment of students as partners, grouping them into three categories. First, the traditional assumptions of HE often make it difficult for both students and the academic staff to take on new roles and perspectives. Second, institutional structures, practices and norms generally serve as practical barriers for the successful collaboration. Third, an inclusive and proactive approach is required to involve already marginalized students and staff in this partnership building and strengthening process. Besides the positive outcomes, Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) also list the negative outcomes of partnership, which could make it difficult, impossible and in some cases even undesirable to involve all students, e.g. when work is within tight time constraints, lecturers have limited contact with students, professional bodies frame what is possible, the sizes of classes are large, students are resistant, student and staff are sceptic about partnership and the benefits of involvement (Bovill, 2017; Bovill et al., 2016, Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

Despite the extensive research efforts in this field, neither the language, nor the level of partnership has been explicit in the literature (e.g. Gardebo & Wiggberg, 2012). Students may be engaged through partnership in various ways including institutional governance, quality assurance, research strategies, community engagement, and extra-curricular activities (Healey et al., 2014). Partnership approaches that have been successful in small classes may not work in large-scale settings. Könings, Bovill, & Woolner (2017) propose a matrix to clarify the roles of students and other stakeholders at different stages in projects dealing with the establishment of student partnership.

What about lecturers? Mihans, Richard, Long, & Felten (2008, p. 9) claim that lecturers often do not pay sufficient attention to the most valuable resources in the classroom, namely, to their students. The academic staff should not only consult students but also explore ways to involve them in the design of teaching approaches, courses, and curricula (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011). Viewing students as peers providing valuable perspectives is a key to supporting collegial partnerships between faculty members and students with the aim of improving classroom experience (Cook-Sather, 2011; Cook-Sather & Motz-Storey, 2016). Dibb & Simkin (2004) highlight that

the university staff should acquire a new role as facilitators rather than providers. Pedagogic approaches that foster partnership lead to supportive learning relationships and employability benefits for students through the development of generic and subject-specific skills and attributes (Crawford, Horsley, Hagyard, & Derricot, 2015; Pauli, Raymond-Barker, & Worrell, 2016).

Understanding how actions and initiatives of partnership impact upon institutional cultures and how the concept of students as partners is conceptualized by institutional management is an important aspect (Gravett, Kinchin, & Winstone, 2019). Owing to the strategic importance of this concept, it is to be ensured that the values of the applied approaches under the umbrella of student partnership fit with the values of students and staff working within projects aiming at developing partnership.

education and how they participate in the education process (Petruzellis, d'Uggento, & Romanazzi, 2006; Tóth & Bedzsula, 2019).

Based upon the main trends demonstrated in the literature review, there are many levels of participation that could be viable in the institutional operation. In our research conducted at a Hungarian HEI, the focus is on engaging students as partners in learning and teaching (based upon the model proposed by Healey et al., 2014) as the first step HEIs take when climbing up the 'ladder of partnership' to emphasize a lecturer-based approach at course level. We wish to go beyond the simple listening to the voice of students by engaging students as co-learners, co-researchers, co-developers, and co-drivers in our courses, but the first step is to reveal how students and lecturers interpret the SaP concept.

Figure 1.

Process of survey development and dissemination
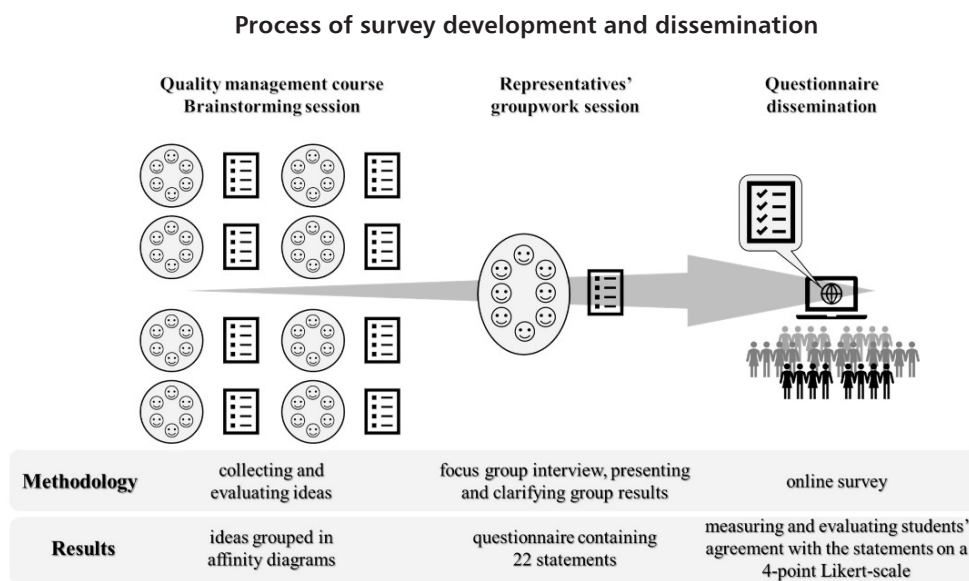
Source: own compilation

The primary role of students as customers in the HE context has become obvious in the Hungarian higher education system as well (Rekettye, 2000; Bedzsula & Tanács, 2019; Szabó & Surman, 2020; Berács, Derényi, Kádár-Csoboth, Kováts, Polónyi, & Temesi, 2016, Berényi & Deutsch, 2018; Bedzsula & Topár, 2014; 2017; Heidrich, 2010); so students are being paid growing attention, as institutions are required to provide a quality environment and education for their students. With the purpose of enhancing operation in HE and considering that students are growingly conscious about the services they receive, student expectations and satisfaction are dedicated a greater role in the improvement of HE processes. The attitude of the new generation of students provides a wealth of new opportunities; they expect to be treated as partners and are eager to play an active role in facilitating the HE issues that are important for them. They increasingly regard themselves as customers; they have become more selective and interactive in their choices with respect to their

Research background and research purposes

In the academic years of 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 some research was conducted in order to identify critical to quality attributes of core educational services, since the need had emerged in our institution, following a 'bottom-up' approach, to better understand the concept of teaching quality by involving the students in the classroom application of various quality management tools. The main motivation serving as the background of our research was the changing role of students and lecturers in the inseparable teaching and learning processes. The new generation of students increasingly regard themselves as customers; consequently, they have become more aware of how they are taught and how they participate in the learning process (see e.g. Voss & Gruber, 2006; Senior, Moores, & Burgess., 2017).

Figure 1 gives a brief overview of the process of our research. Students of quality management courses were invited to participate in a brainstorming session to collect

Figure 2.

The statements formulated by students

	STATEMENTS	strongly disagree	rarely disagree	rarely agree	strongly agree
S01	Student feedback has to be taken into account in the development and changes of higher education.	O	O	O	O
S02	Course contents that enable students to get a job has to be prioritized in the development of the curriculum, the course materials and the lectures.	O	O	O	O
S03	In the development of the curriculum, the course materials and the lectures, the focus has to be on relevant and up-to-date knowledge transfer.	O	O	O	O
S04	Practice has to be more dominant in education than theory.	O	O	O	O
S05	The opinions of the alumni, who are already in employment, have to be taken into account in the development of the curriculum and course materials.	O	O	O	O
S06	The main purpose of the course is to provide a general knowledge of areas instead of discussing certain topics in detail.	O	O	O	O
S07	It is the lecturer's responsibility to inspire and motivate student to learn.	O	O	O	O
S08	Course and group sizes have to be reduced as much as possible, and the personal relationships between lecturers and students have to be strengthened.	O	O	O	O
S09	Lectures need to be entertaining, and should include interactive elements to help students stay focused.	O	O	O	O
S10	The purpose of lectures is to discuss the course material in more detail than in the available notes provided in the course in a more concise, to the point manner.	O	O	O	O
S11	In the case of a university course students can rightly be expected to prepare for the classes individually previously at home.	O	O	O	O
S12	Course requirements (e.g. regarding the curriculum and the subject) have to be clear and implemented consistently during the course.	O	O	O	O
S13	Course requirements (e.g. regarding the curriculum and the subject) and regulations have to be the same for everyone, individual treatment is not acceptable.	O	O	O	O
S14	More step-by-step assignments during the course of the semester should be provided for students to fulfil a course instead of taking an exam at the end of the semester.	O	O	O	O
S15	A greater emphasis should be put on group work and project work for students during the semester.	O	O	O	O
S16	Lecturers should consider other factors besides learning outcomes when evaluating a student.	O	O	O	O
S17	Lecturers should give prompt, objective feedback to their students in every case.	O	O	O	O
S18	Assessments should test the students' ability to apply in practice what they have learned, rather than assessing their knowledge of theory.	O	O	O	O
S19	Student assessment conditions have to be just and fair, cheating has to be prevented.	O	O	O	O
S20	Every course should aim at minimizing the number of unsuccessful completions.	O	O	O	O
S21	Educational resources need to support the all-round understanding of the course even without students attending the lectures.	O	O	O	O
S22	Educational resources (slides, notes, web content, software...) are required to be up-to-date and the methods applied need to be as modern as possible.	O	O	O	O
S23	Students should be treated as partners and adults in the context of higher education services, the communication has to be bidirectional.	O	O	O	O

Source: own compilation

those attributes that had an impact on the perceived educational service quality. The compiled list of characteristics resulting in 23 statements (see Figure 2) was utilized as a 4-point Likert scale-based questionnaire. With around 360 responses, statistical analyses were executed, investigating whether there were any differences between the quality attributes perceived by the different segments of students and to evaluate the influence of factors, such as age, level of study, programme and grade point average in understanding student expectations. The results allow us to revise the relevant institutional processes to be able to adapt to our students' needs and at the same time to establish a framework that allows the continuous monitoring of students' needs and expectations. The results also enable us to identify critical to quality attributes which may be utilized in all platforms and interactions with students. In addition, institutionalizing this approach may contribute to the reshape of the organizational quality culture with an emphasis on student focus.

Table 1.

Response rates in the research aiming at the identification of students' expectations related to teaching quality.

Level	Number of filled questionnaires	Number of questionnaires	Response rate
BSc/BA (full-time programs)	194	636	30.5%
MSc/MA (full-time programs)	61	173	36.4%
MBA (part-time program)	107	277	38.6%
Total	**362**	**1086**	**33.3%**

Source: own compilation

Students of different business courses invited to fulfil the questionnaire indicated the degree to which they agreed with the closed-ended questions on a 4-point Likert-scale, where 1 indicated the lowest level of agreement (agree the least) and 4 the highest level of agreement (agree the most). At the end of the questionnaire, more information was gathered including the level of study, financing form, grade point average and age. The hyperlink pointing to the electronic questionnaire was sent to the students via

Figure 3.

Graphical interpretation of the aggregate scores given separately by lecturers and students
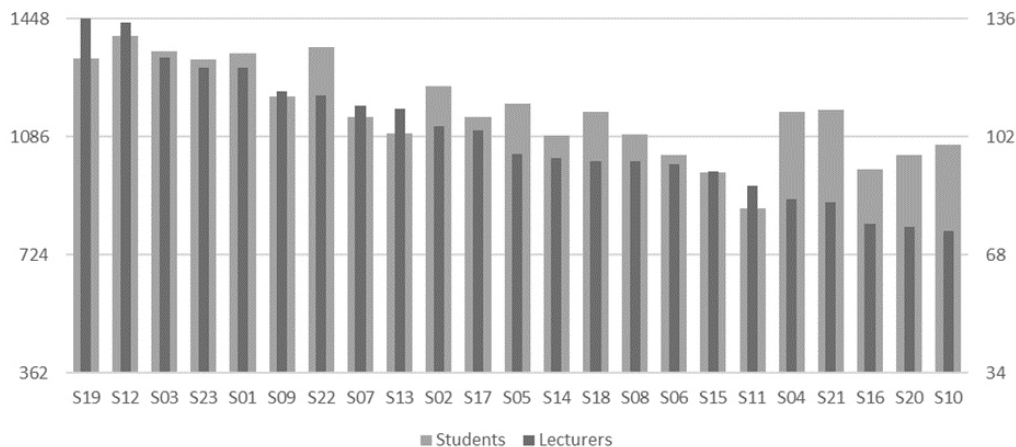
Source: own compilation

e-mail. They had one week to fill out the survey. An arbitrary sampling method was applied; bachelor and master level students who had already taken our quality management course were invited to fill out the online questionnaire anonymously (see Table I). At the same time a group of lecturers was also involved in filling the same questionnaire to contrast the viewpoints of the two directly interacting stakeholder groups in the core educational process.

for the classes individually at home. This conclusion puts S23 in a different light, since according to our results, students interpret 'partnership' differently from the way lecturers would define this term. Therefore, we became very curious to understand how our students and lecturers define the partnership role of students in higher education and what kind of concepts come to their mind associated with the term 'student partnership'.

Figure 4.

Process of investigating 'partnership'
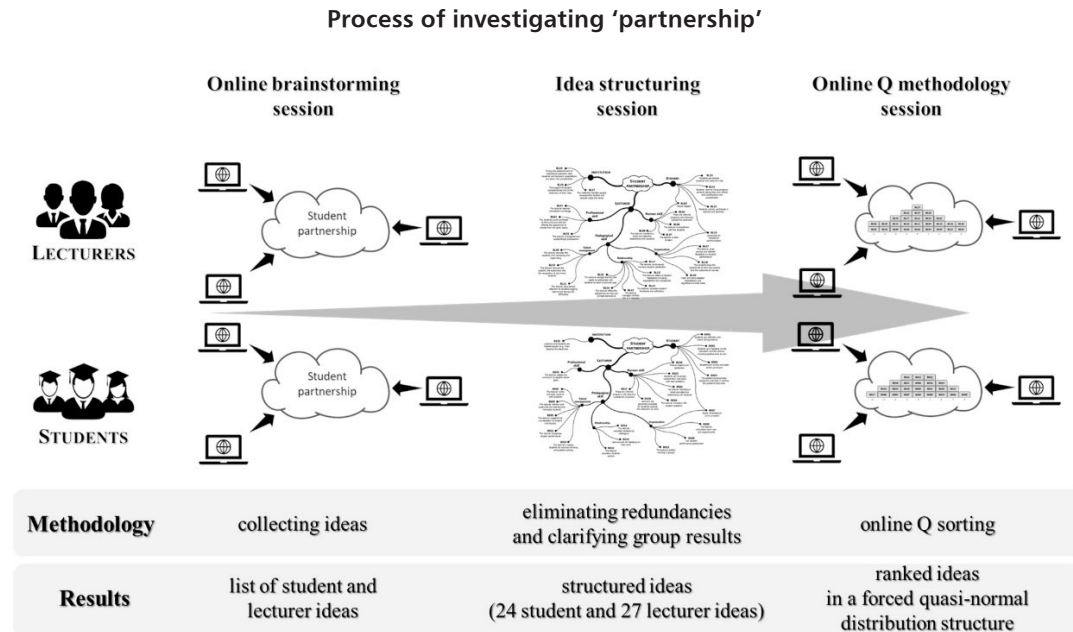
Source: own compilation

Altogether 36 lecturers were invited, from whom 34 filled in the form, which resulted in a response rate of 94.4%.

Figure 3 illustrates lecturer aggregate scores (dark grey columns) with reflection to students' aggregate scores (light grey columns).

Kruskal Wallis and Mann-Whitney U tests with a significance level of 0.05 were conducted on the responses as judgements gained both from students and lecturers. Here we would like to highlight the presence of S23 on the 'top 5 list' of the statements with which both students and lecturers agreed the most. This means that the two directly interacting parties confirmed that students should be treated as partners. Besides S8 and S15, S23 was the statement in the case of which all null hypotheses were accepted; that is, no significant differences were found between the distribution of responses based upon the different segmentations of students and between the distribution of responses of students and that of lecturers. This carries the message that independently of age, level of study, grade point average, being a student or an academic, our respondents strongly agreed with the 'student as partner' approach.

The conducted statistical analyses revealed some interesting issues, which can be detected in Figure 3 as well. S11 was scored differently by students. This means that students seem to be somehow neutral with the statement claiming that students may be required to prepare

Methodology and results

Next, the research was continued by an online brainstorming session involving both students and lecturers, each group separately. The brainstorming question was *What terms come to your mind when you define the 'students as partners' concept?*

10 students (5 BA and 5 MA level students) and 10 lecturers were invited separately to an online platform where the collection of ideas took place and was open for 48 hours so that each participant could find the most convenient that could be spent on this contribution. Students listed 48 ideas; however, lecturers were more active by providing 81 elements. With the redundancies eliminated and the collected ideas clarified in both groups, students and lecturers involved in the previous brainstorming session were invited again to take part in a Q organizing method in order that the concepts resulting from the brainstorming ideas could be prioritized with the employment of a factor analytic procedure (see Figure 4).

Figure 5 demonstrates the grouped ideas of students (altogether 24 items), while Figure 6 depicts those of lecturers (altogether 27 items). Figure 5 and Figure 6 also denote the abbreviations that are going to be used coherently in the rest of the paper: 'B' stands for brainstorming, 'S' for students, 'L' for lecturers, and the ideas are numbered for the sake of distinctness (expressing a nominal scale).
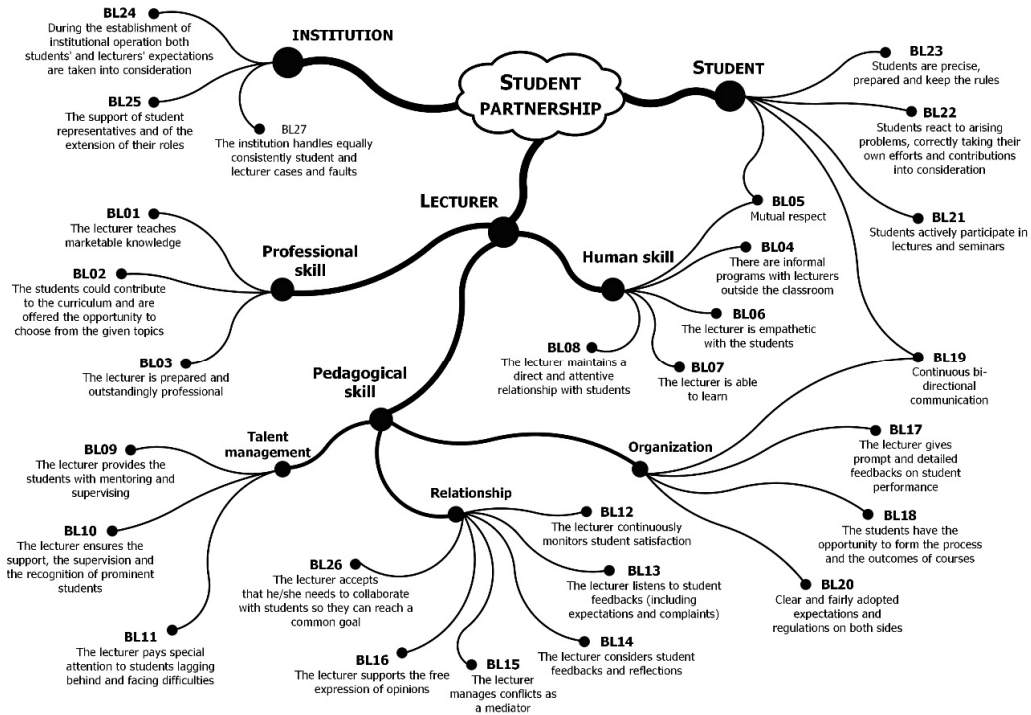
Figure 5.

Structured ideas of student brainstorming
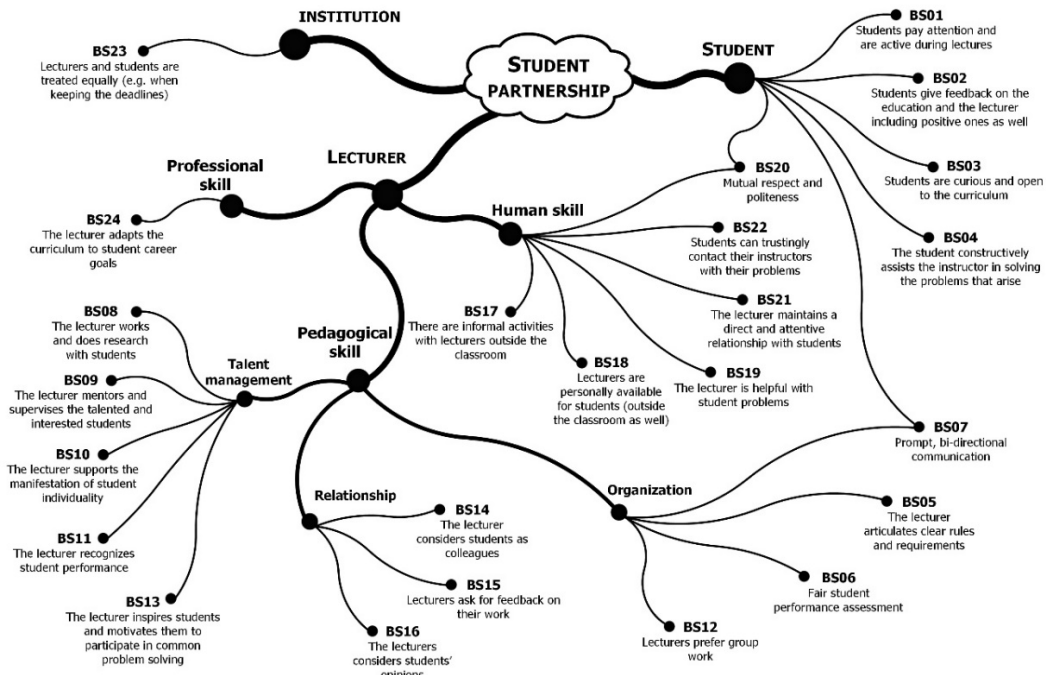
Source: own compilation

Figure 6.

## Structured ideas of lecturer brainstorming

Source: own compilation

Both figures represent the categorization of ideas according to the main contributors in the service provision process, namely, institution, student, and lecturer. Furthermore, the ideas associated with the lecturer are grouped into human, pedagogical and professional skills. It is eye-catching in both figures that both interested parties significantly consider the role of lecturers in the service provision process on course level for the sake of successful learning and teaching. Even though the ideas were collected separately, many similar phrases can be caught when the brainstorming results are compared, e.g. mutual respect and politeness, bi-directional communication, informal activities outside the classroom.

To come to an interpretable conclusion and to be able to draw managerial conclusions, we invited 21 students and 23 lecturers to take part in an online Q organizing method applied as an exploratory technique. The Q methodology was originally established via a simple adaptation of the quantitative technique of factor analysis with the extension that in this case the 'variables' are the various persons who take part in the study (Stephenson, 1936). Therefore, with the utilization of the Q methodology our aim was to gain a better knowledge of the brainstorming ideas, prioritize them and compare these results with our empirical ones gained from the previous survey (based upon the statistical analyses of statements demonstrated in Figure 2). The factor analysis provided on this basis also allowed us to reveal a group of determinative opinions both from the students' and the lecturers' perspectives.

Figure 7.

Aggregate result of the Q organizing technique with student participation ('B' stands for brainstorming, 'S' stands for student, while numbers indicate a specific brainstorming idea relating to Figure 5)
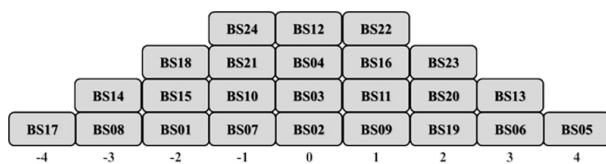
Source: own compilation

The Q procedure involves a sample of items, namely, brainstorming ideas scaled along a standardized ranking distribution by a group of participants. They are to do this according to their own likes and dislikes and hence as a function of the personal value they assigned to each item. The primary aim of the Q methodology is to ask participants to decide what is meaningful and hence what has value and significance from their perspective (Watts & Stenner, 2005).

The clarified brainstorming ideas served as a so-called Q set, offering a general overview of the relevant viewpoints on the subject. Participants were asked to assign each item a ranking position in a fixed quasi-normal distribution (for the organization of ideas see Figure 7 and 8 as examples). In our case a 9-point scale was employed, pos-
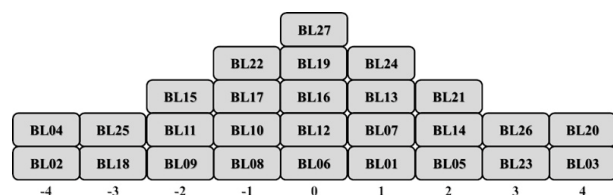
sible ranking values ranging from +4 for items respondents agree the most with and to -4 for items that participants agree the least with. In expressing their individual perceptions via the Q sorting procedure, a participant is required to allocate all the Q set items, namely clarified brainstorming ideas to an appropriate ranking position in the distribution provided. By summarizing the rankings of all participants, the Q methodology aims to reveal some of the main viewpoints that are favoured by a particular group of participants, namely, students and lecturers.

Figure 7 demonstrates the aggregate ranking of students by indicating that they agree the least with the idea *There are informal activities with lecturers outside the classroom* (BS17, total score: -70). They also tend to agree the least with the following ideas of the Q set: *The lecturer works and does research together with students* (BS08, total score: -46), *The lecturer considers students as colleagues* (BS14, total score: -31) and *The student pays attention and actively participates in lectures* (total score: -24).

The most agreeable idea when discussing treating students as partners is *The lecturer articulates clear rules and requirements* (BS05, total score: +57). Students tend to agree strongly with the following: *The lecturer inspires students and motivates them to participate in common problem solving* (BS13, total score: +42), *Fair assessment of student performance* (BS06, total score: +38), *Lecturers and students are treated equally* (e.g. when keeping the deadlines) (BS23, total score: +33), *Mutual respect and politeness* (BS20, total score: +33), while ideas of the Q set, such as *The lecturer prefers working in groups* (BS12, total score: -6), *The student constructively assists the instructor in solving the problems that arise* (BS04, total score: +1), S*tudents are curious and open-minded to the curriculum* (BS03, total score: -2),*Students give feedback on the education and the lecturer including positive ones as well* (BS02, total score: -7) are in the neutral zone.

If we compare the ranking originating from the Q methodology with our previous empirical results, the following conclusions can be drawn. Taking the results demonstrated by Figure 3 (see the light grey columns reflecting student aggregate scores), S12 embodies the statement that was given the highest aggregate score by students. The Q organizing methodology also confirms the issue addressed by this statement, namely, the importance of articulating clear requirements and rules by the instructor. The same opinion appears as in BS05. Although students rated S23 (*Treating students as partners*) high, they seem to agree the least with the ideas titled as *The lecturer considers students as colleagues* (BS14) and *The student pays attention and actively participates in lectures* (BS08). The latter one is also in accordance with the empirical results belonging to S11, which was given the lowest total score when measuring agreement with this issue in the first part of the empirical analysis. S19 was in the top five statements (see again Figure 3), emphasizing fair conditions when assessing student performance. This issue was also highlighted in the Q methodology as BS06 was one of the most agreeable ideas.

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
				BL27				
			BL22	BL19	BL24			
		BL15	BL17	BL16	BL13	BL21		
BL04	BL25	BL11	BL10	BL12	BL07	BL14	BL26	BL20
BL02	BL18	BL09	BL08	BL06	BL01	BL05	BL23	BL03

Source: own compilation

Figure 8 implies the aggregate results originating from the Q methodology when lecturers participated. The ideas they most agree with are the following: *Clear and fairly adopted expectations and regulations on both sides* (BL20, total score: +53), *The lecturer is prepared and outstandingly professional* (BL03, total score: +41), *The lecturer accepts that he /she needs to collaborate with students to reach a common goal* (BL26, total score: +37), *Students are precise, prepared and keep the rules* (BL23, total score: +33). Comparing students' and lecturers' results (Figure 7), BL20 can be viewed as an equivalent of BS05, both putting clear rules and expectations into the forefront, considered as the most agreeable idea both by students and lecturers.

If we take a look at the other tail of the forced normal distribution, we can conclude that lecturers agree least with the following: *There are informal activities with lecturers outside the classroom* (BL04, total score: -63), *The students could contribute to the curriculum and are offered the opportunity to choose from the given topics* (BL02, total score: -53), *The students have the opportunity to form the process and the outcomes of courses* (BL18; total score: -43) and *The support of student representatives and of the extension of their roles* (BL18, total score: -32). Similarly, BL04 is equivalent with BS17, that is, neither lecturers nor students agree with the idea embodying partnership as having informal activities together outside the classroom.

What is interesting when comparing the content of Figure 7 and Figure 8 is the fact that the idea articulating students' active participation during lectures (see BS01 in Figure 7 and BL21 in Figure 8) is situated on the opposite sides of the two distributions. However, students tend to agree with the idea stating that lecturers should inspire them to participate in mutual problem solving (BS13 in Figure 7).

Should we compare lecturer results given in Figure 8 with the results of the previous empirical investigation illustrated in Figure 3 (also based on lecturer responses reflected by dark grey columns), the following patterns can be exemplified. The total score of S12 (see Figure 7) is confirmed by the results of the Q organizing technique, as one of the most agreeable ideas was BL20, highlighting the importance of clear requirements and rules for both groups of participants directly interacting in the service provision process. This is also in line with S19, articulat-

ing fair circumstances for student performance assessment. BL03 (*The lecturer is prepared and outstandingly professional*) also strengthens the result belonging to S02 (*Contents that enable student to be successful in the labour market*) by focusing on the professionalism and up-to-datedness of the lecturer. S23 (*Treating students as partners*) was in the top 5 statements (see in Figure 3), which tends to be reflective to BL14, BL23 and BL26, embodying ideas that emphasize the contribution of both parties in successful learning and teaching. S01 was also given a high total score previously. This statement is reflected as an agreeable idea titled as BL14, focusing on the lecturer's role in the consideration of student feedbacks and opinions.

The other tail of the distribution conveys the message that BL02 and BL18 are the ideas that lecturers agree the least with; therefore, it puts the consideration of 'treating students as partners' in a different light. Students also seem to agree the least with the idea of being treated as colleagues (BS14 in Figure 7). What is even more surprising, the ideas that consider the contribution of students on course level belong to the least agreeable ideas, see BS01 (*Students pay attention and are active during lectures*) and BS14 (*Students are treated as colleagues*) in Figure 7. With respect to the lecturer results, the lecturers agree the least with involving students in the formulation of the curriculum and in the schedule planning of the semester. The fact that lecturers put BL02 and BL18 on the left tail of the distribution suggests that they do not want to be deprived of their course managerial role. This is somehow confirmed by students' results as well; that is, it is the lecturer who is the main catalyst of building partnership.

Table II.
Rankings assigned to each idea within each of the student and lecturer factor exemplifying Q sort configurations

	Students			Lecturers		
	A	B		C	D	E
BS01	1	-3	BL01	4	-3	-1
BS02	0	-1	BL02	-3	-4	-2
BS03	1	0	BL03	4	-1	2
BS04	0	1	BL04	-4	0	-3
BS05	3	3	BL05	3	1	0
BS06	0	4	BL06	-1	-1	4
BS07	-2	1	BL07	1	-2	2
BS08	-3	-2	BL08	-4	1	0
BS09	-1	2	BL09	2	-2	-3
BS10	-1	-1	BL10	2	-3	-2
BS11	2	0	BL11	-2	-1	0
BS12	0	-1	BL12	0	2	-4
BS13	2	1	BL13	3	1	-1
BS14	-4	0	BL14	0	2	3
BS15	-1	-2	BL15	-2	0	0
BS16	3	-2	BL16	-1	2	1
BS17	-3	-3	BL17	0	-2	0
BS18	-2	1	BL18	-3	-4	1
BS19	1	2	BL19	-1	0	1
BS20	1	2	BL20	1	3	3
BS21	-1	0	BL21	1	3	-1
BS22	-2	3	BL22	0	1	-2
BS23	4	-1	BL23	1	4	1
BS24	2	-4	BL24	-2	-1	4
			BL25	-1	0	-4
			BL26	2	4	-1
			BL27	0	0	2

Source: own compilation

Figure 9.

Differences between Factor Student_A and Factor Student_B related to student partnership

Student A — 👍
- ✓ Lecturers and students are treated equally (BS23)
- ✓ The lecturer articulates clear rules and requirements (BS05)
- ✓ The lecturer considers students' opinion (BS16)
- ✓ The lecturers inspires students for common thinking and problem solving (BS13)
- ✓ The lecturer adapts the curriculum to student carrier goals (BS24)

Student A — 👎
- ✓ The lecturer considers students as colleagues (BS14)
- ✓ The lecturer works and does research with students (BS08)
- ✓ There are informal programs with lecturers outside the classroom (BS17)
- ✓ Students can trustingly contact their instructors with their problems (BS22)

Student B — 👍
- ✓ Fair student performance assessment (BS06)
- ✓ The lecturer articulates clear rules and requirements (BS05)
- ✓ Students can trustingly contact their instructors with their problems (BS22)
- ✓ The lecturer mentors and supervises the talented and interested students (BS09)

Student B — 👎
- ✓ The lecturer adapts the curriculum to student career goals (BS24)
- ✓ Students pay attention and are active during lectures (BS01)
- ✓ There are informal activities with lecturers outside the classroom (BS17)
- ✓ The lecturer considers students' opinion (BS16)

Source: own compilation

Figure 10.

Differences between Factor Lecturer_C, Lecturer_D and Lecturer_E related to student partnership

Lecturer C — 👍
- ✓ The lecturer teaches marketable knowledge (BL01)
- ✓ The lecturer is prepared and outstandingly professional (BL03)
- ✓ Mutual respect (BL05)
- ✓ The lecturer listens to student feedbacks (including expectations and complaints) (BL13)

Lecturer C — 👎
- ✓ There are informal programs with lecturers outside the classroom (BL04)
- ✓ The lecturer maintains a direct and attentive relationship with students (BL08)
- ✓ The students could contribute to the curriculum and are offered the opportunity to choose from the given topics (BL02)
- ✓ The students have the opportunity to form the process and the outcomes of courses (BL18)

Lecturer D — 👍
- ✓ Students are precise, prepared and keep the rules (BL23)
- ✓ The lecturer accepts that he/she needs to collaborate with students to reach a common goal (BL26)
- ✓ Students actively participate in lectures and seminars (BL21)
- ✓ Clear and fairly adopted expectations and regulations on both sides (BL20)

Lecturer D — 👎
- ✓ The students could contribute to the curriculum and are offered the opportunity to choose from the given topics (BL02)
- ✓ The students have the opportunity to form the process and the outcomes of courses (BL18)
- ✓ The lecturer ensures the support, the supervision and the recognition of prominent students (BL10)
- ✓ The lecturer teaches marketable knowledge (BL01)

Lecturer E — 👍
- ✓ The lecturer is empathetic with the students (BL06)
- ✓ During the establishment of institutional operation both students' and lecturers' expectations are taken into consideration (BL24)
- ✓ The lecturer considers student feedbacks and reflections (BL14)
- ✓ Clear and fairly adopted expectations and regulations on both sides (BL20)

Lecturer E — 👎
- ✓ The lecturer continuously monitors student satisfaction (BL12)
- ✓ The support of student representatives and of the extension of their roles (BL25)
- ✓ There are informal programs with lecturers outside the classroom (BL04)
- ✓ The lecturer provides the students with mentoring and supervising (BL09)

Source: own compilation

The Q methodology could apply a by-person correlation and factor analytic procedure as well. The result is a set of factors onto which the participants load based on the item configurations they have created. This means that two participants that load onto the same factor have created very similar item configurations. Each factor captures a different item configuration which is shared by the participants that load onto the same factor (Watts & Stenner, 2005). The factor analysis carried out with varimax rotation resulted in Table II (all factors' eigenvalues exceed 1.00, total variance explained is 63% in the case of students and 60% in the case of lecturers). Reading these tables by column reveals the configuration or comparative ranking of items, which characterizes a particular factor. Reading the table by row reveals the comparative ranking of a particular item across all the factors (Watts & Stenner, 2005).

The two-factor structure resulting from the Q methodology with student involvement allows us to draw the following conclusions (Table II). Factor Student_A considers himself/herself as the direct customer of HE services and studying in HE is considered as an investment in his/her own future. Factor Student_B believes more in the traditional hierarchical structure. Figure 9 sums up the main features and highlights the inhomogeneity of students as well. There are three statements which are interpreted differently: *Students can trustingly contact their instructors with their problems* (BS22), *The lecturer considers students as colleagues* (BS14) *The lecturer adapts the curriculum to student career goals* (BS24).

The factor analysis carried out on lecturer inputs resulted in a three-factor structure. Factor Lecturer_C strongly feels that a lecturer should be outstandingly professional, transmitting the nuts and bolts of the given professional field. This group also seems to believe that it is important to listen to the voice of students. Factor Lecturer_D emphasizes the active participation of students to reach the common goals of the non-separable teaching and learning process during the lectures. Factor Lecturer_D also needs a well-structured framework for operation that categorizes the responsibilities of both parties. Factor Lecturer_E feels that students have their own rights and responsibilities, and equal and fair treatment is based on clear rules. This aim is also supported in the improvement process of institutional operation. Figure 10 illustrates the main features and underlines the inhomogeneity of lecturer attitudes as well.

Discussion and conclusion

Treating students as partners is given a rapidly growing interest in HE since the new generation of students, who increasingly regard themselves as customers, have become more selective and interactive in their education choices (Petruzellis et al., 2006). The many institutional examples of building partnership available in the literature provide evidence for crossing the boundaries between traditional student and staff roles and for inspiring both parties to contribute as co-learners, colleagues and co-in-

quiries, which is challenging for the existing identities and practices (Healey et al., 2014). As a result, the academic staff should acquire a new role as facilitators rather than providers (Dibb & Simkin, 2004).

As 'treating students as partners' has become a rising concept in the literature, we decided to reveal its understanding in our institutional context by listening to the voice of our students and lecturers. Therefore, an online brainstorming and Q sorting session took place that outlined the distinctive features through which this term could be characterized in separate groups of students and lecturers. Based on this, different student and lecturer attitudes took shape. What a common feature is the emphasis on the responsibility of the lecturer, although there are remarkable differences what lecturers should do in order to end up in a mutually successful outcome.

The results of the Q methodology highlight some important conclusions. Students express quite strong restraint with the following statements: *There are informal activities with lecturers outside the classroom*; *The lecturer works and does research together with students*; *The student pays attention and actively participates during lectures*. These opposing opinions clearly suggest that students' motivation to study and work hard may be lower than expected, which is a strong obstacle to building partnership. Based on these results, an important aim could be the increase in our students' engagement; therefore, the institution should contribute to their learning success and their preparedness for the increasing requirements of the labour market. Generation Z requires new pedagogical and educational methodologies as well as the review of the supporting processes including e.g. communication or study affairs in the case of which institutional awareness should be raised.

The factor analytic procedure also brings some remarkable conclusions. From the two groups of students, one seems to expect a professional service provision by paying attention to the tangibles (rules and requirements stated on course level) and to their future career, whereas the other group believes more in the traditional way. The picture seems to be more shaded in the case of lecturers, that is, one group of lecturers considers their responsibility in their professionalism, another group of lecturers expects conscious student participation in the classroom, but feels comfortable when he / she is in a superordinate position. The third group of lecturers relies on the institutional background, which exactly states students' and lecturers' roles in this process. The results clearly suggest that neither the students, nor the lecturers could be treated as a homogeneous group, since different attitudes could be outlined in the case of both parties, which makes the situation even more complex.

To serve strategic purposes, the following conclusions needing further investigation could be drawn for institutional management. There are several specific issues in the case of which students and lecturers think the same way. However, some important differences can be detected between students' and lecturers' viewpoints, which may have an impact on the successful collaboration of the two

parties in the classroom and when it comes to the establishment and implementation of institutional regulations and rules. These issues also address several questions associated with the organizational culture, since the means of understanding the drivers of student partnership are strongly influenced by the institutional quality culture. This internal culture could be viewed as a continuous improvement mechanism that acts at both institutional level and at individual/staff level. This mechanism requires both strong visionary and strategic leadership at the top of the institute and requires the bottom-up cooperation of the different stakeholders (Gvaramadze, 2008). The enhancement process at institutional level cannot be fruitful without any efforts on individual / staff level and vice versa. Therefore, it could be built on a bottom-up approach, which develops academic community through values, attitudes, and behaviours within an institution. This places the student as the central figure and requires complementing value-added measures of enhancement with empowerment mechanisms by giving power to participants to influence their transformation.

Our empirical results also imply that both the lecturers and the institution should take on a proactive role when establishing partnership. Proactive, strong communication and operation is needed to manage the improvement and change in this context. This situation means that students and lecturers need to collaborate, treating each other as partners. Even though they are interdependent, they are not in an equal position at this moment, so we need to answer the question of how we can manage student partnership and what the required role of instructors is. A viable way could be to ask the students at the beginning of each term to get acquainted with their expectations with respect to a given course. These expectations may cover not only the course content, but also the management of the course. This allows the lecturer to review the learning objectives of the course at the beginning of the semester and conclude how these goals are met at the end of the semester. Therefore, the exploration of expectations requires the methodological training of instructors via a manual that can guide instructor efforts. By these means, they can exert some control by correctly informing students about a course. This can also result in encouraging students to have accurate expectations, which could increase partnership.

Our results also highlight that students cannot be transformed from passive to active customers by magic from one day to the next; that is, institutions should take the first steps, since it is highlighted by our research that students need to be prepared for that role by being fostered in their 'metamorphosis'. The most recent set up of the institutional committee for quality affairs and the involvement of student representatives in the committee's work declares the clear engagement of institutional management to involve students in the discussion of student partnership development.

The limitations of our study stem primarily from the cultural characteristics of the Hungarian higher education system and from our specific sample. Institutions must face a status quo situation regarding the role of students, which is formally and legally conserved from several aspects. This is a passive and comfortable status for many stakeholders. But the new generation of students faced with the ever-increasing opportunities will not be satisfied with the status quo. The next level of development requires tremendous work in terms of fostering interrelated changes in the institutional strategy, operation, communication from all participants as this could be the key to successful HE in the short run. According to Matthews (2017), HEIs should fully understand what SaP means in their context and decide how to talk about and foster partnership as an important part of the cultural change process. That is the path that we must take and go through. More efforts should be invested in examining what works in which contexts and in establishing a framework that can bring together the diversified and sometimes isolated actions. Many of the existing approaches may be applicable to other forms of partnership in the operation. We all together should reveal the opportunities for engaging partnership and building on good practices and play a leading role in developing policies to spread partnership practice within our institution. We are serious about the benefits of partnership; therefore, it is our turn to explore how these opportunities could be made available to all.

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