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Empowering students in curriculum design and pedagogy: Perceptions of pharmacy students as partners; A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The concept of "Students as Partners" (SaP) in curriculum design and pedagogy marks a significant shift towards relational pedagogical approaches in higher education. This study explored pharmacy students' perceptions of the SaP approach, focusing on their involvement in curriculum design and the perceived benefits and challenges of such partnerships.
Methods: A qualitative research design was employed, utilising one-on-one interviews with pharmacy students at a university in Malaysia. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide and analysed using thematic analysis.
Results: Thematic analysis revealed five core themes: student involvement in curriculum design, perceived benefits in students as partners, challenges in active learning environments, suggestions to improve relational pedagogy, and empowerment through student involvement in curriculum design. Students mentioned that the relationship as partners with educators will be beneficial and mentioned challenges, such as hierarchical barriers and communication issues. They suggested increased training and support, more frequent feedback mechanisms, and clearer communication channels to foster effective partnerships.
Conclusion: Students perceived that their engagement could lead to significant changes in their academic journeys. This participatory approach aligns with outcome-based educational goals and enhances the overall learning experience by making the content more relevant to students' needs and aspirations. The SaP approach has transformative potential in higher education.

Introduction

The concept of "Students as Partners" (SaP) in curriculum design and pedagogy is a significant shift towards interactive pedagogical approaches in higher education.[1] This transformative approach emphasises fostering positive relationships between students and educators and advocating for shared decision-making and co-creation in curriculum design.[2] By actively involving students as co-creators of knowledge and encouraging collaboration with educators, a more engaging and effective learning environment can be provided.[3,4] Evidence suggests that this partnership enhances students' learning experience and equips them with essential skills for their future careers.[5]

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The SaP concept is gaining momentum in pharmacy education. Globally, pharmacy education aims to prepare students to positively influence healthcare services. The evolving role of pharmacists, driven by advancements in healthcare, requires graduates who are academically proficient and holistically prepared to provide patient-centred care. This evolution demands curricula that incorporate active learning and student-centred methodologies.[6] However, for curricula to align with professional standards effectively integrate scientific principles with clinical practice, substantial coordination between academics and students is required, given the unique complexities of course design and delivery.

Many pharmacy programmes still rely heavily on traditional, teacher-centred, and didactic methods, offering limited opportunities for students to take part in curriculum design and decision-making processes.[7,8] Critics argue that didactic lecturing is passive and does not promote self-directed learning.[9,10] To address these issues, pharmacy schools are increasingly implementing active learning strategies to enhance student engagement and learning efficiency.[11] The shift from traditional lecture-heavy approaches to more interactive and student-centred pedagogies reflects the evolving needs of the healthcare sector, which requires pharmacy graduates to adopt a more patient-centred approach.[12] Research has shown that student-centred pedagogies benefit both students and educators.[13] A co-creation approach to curriculum design promotes active learning and distributes decision-making power between students and teachers, leading to greater student responsibility for their learning and fostering meaningful relationships with educators.[14] However, the sustainability and success of these partnerships depend on various factors, including students' perceptions, organisational culture, and academics' readiness for change.[15]

Despite the potential benefits of student partnerships in curriculum design, practical challenges persist because of traditional educational structures.[16] There are varying perspectives on involving students as co-creators, with some emphasising the benefits and others highlighting implementation barriers.[17] A thorough understanding of students' perspectives on SaP is crucial for developing curricula and teaching methodologies that resonate with their learning needs and preferences. Although a growing body of research worldwide supports the benefits of the SaP approach,[18–21] empirical evidence from higher education institutions regarding student acceptance and engagement in active learning through partnerships with academics remains scarce.[8] Understanding the extent of student involvement in curriculum design and pedagogical decisions, along with their perceptions of its benefits and challenges, can assist academics and higher educational institutes in enhancing the learning experience. Hence, this study explored pharmacy students' perceptions of their involvement in curriculum design and pedagogy and evaluated the challenges and opportunities they perceived regarding the implementation of the SaP approach in pharmacy education.

Methods

Study design

This qualitative study was conducted between April and May 2024 and employed a purposive and snowball sampling approach to recruit participants. Only students enrolled in the pharmacy programme were approached during breaks or evenings after class. The eligibility was confirmed according to predefined inclusion/exclusion criteria; only eligible individuals were invited to participate and purpose of the study was introduced to them. Participants were provided with an outline of the study objectives and informed of the time needed. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Sampling method

Purposive sampling was initially employed to select pharmacy students to ensure heterogeneity in gender and nationality. Recognising the relatively limited academic and professional exposure of participants, efforts were made to ensure that their perspectives were contextualised during recruitment and data collection. The interview guide and approach were tailored to their level of experience to elicit authentic and relevant responses, addressing their perceptions without assuming advanced knowledge of partnership roles. After the initial participants were recruited, snowball sampling was used, whereby participants referred to other eligible students who has similar experience and background. This approach capitalised on the existing relationships and trust within the student community, allowing the inclusion of a broader and more representative sample.

Efforts were made to ensure that both male and female participants were represented proportionately, reflecting the gender distribution of the pharmacy student population. A total of 12 participants, with characteristics such as gender and year of study documented to ensure the transferability of the findings.

Sampling continued until the saturation point was reached. The saturation point was determined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews.[22] Saturation was achieved by the 10th interview, as no new themes or codes emerged at this point. To ensure data saturation, we continuously reviewed and analysed the data throughout the collection phase. Although saturation appeared likely after the 10th interview, we conducted two additional interviews to confirm consistency in the findings. This decision to conclude data collection was based on observing stable patterns during coding and analysis. At this point, no new themes emerged, and each additional interview produced repetitive information, indicating that the data were sufficiently comprehensive to address the research questions. Therefore, no further interviews were planned or conducted.

Participants' requirements and Ethical considerations

The participants were informed of the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the time commitment required. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement. The researchers ensured that

participants understood their role in the research, with explanations tailored to their academic level. Participants were assured that their participation would not affect their academic progress and that they were deidentified in the transcripts to maintain confidentiality. Audio recordings of the interviews were securely stored and accessed only by the researchers. The study was conducted following the Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics (2023) and received ethical approval from the School of Education's Ethics Committee.

Interview guide

A semi-structured interview guide was created by reviewing the literature on student-as-partner, student engagement in curriculum design, active learning, pedagogical approaches to using students, and andragogy in higher education.[1,19,23,24] The guide was reviewed and refined with input from experts in qualitative research, ensuring that the questions were open-ended and appropriate for participants' academic level to obtaining in-depth responses. A pilot interview was conducted with two pharmacy students to test the interview guide, resulting in minor adjustments to the wording of questions. Data from pilot interviews were excluded from the final analysis. Data from the pilot interviews were excluded from the results. From the pilot interviews were excluded from the results.

Data collection

One-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted, lasting 30–45 min. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers. The transcripts were checked for accuracy by two researchers and returned to the participants for their comments and corrections. The finalised transcripts were then returned to the participants for review and any necessary comments or corrections. The final transcripts were stored in password-protected files.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke.[25] Inductive thematic analysis was conducted in steps: familiarising with data, generating initial codes, searching for, reviewing, defining, and naming themes. Coding was conducted iteratively by two researchers to ensure reliability and validity. Discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved by consensus. Thematic analysis was used to identify and explore the patterns and themes that emerged from the data.

Data trustworthiness

Rigour in the study was evaluated using the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) guidelines were followed. Credibility was established by employing open-ended questions to capture participants' authentic experiences. The research team reached a consensus on data coding through iterative discussions, and the thematic findings were validated by participants to ensure that they accurately represented their experiences. Dependability was confirmed by aligning the results with existing literature and theories, reinforcing the study's accuracy. Transparency and traceability were ensured by meticulously documenting the entire research process, including data collection, analysis, and decision-making. This included keeping detailed records, logs of significant decisions, and researcher reflections, as well as safely storing raw data and documenting participant feedback and peer reviews. The research team, comprised of pharmacy professionals familiar with the participants' backgrounds, worked under the guidance of a senior researcher to ensure scientific rigour. Transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of participant characteristics, data analysis methods, and original dialogue excerpts.

Consideration of sex/gender in study design

Although sex/gender-specific analyses were not the primary focus of this study, efforts were made to ensure a balanced representation of male and female participants. The sex/gender distribution of the participants was monitored throughout the recruitment process to reflect the demographic composition of the pharmacy student population. While the findings are not stratified by sex/gender, the inclusion of both male and female perspectives is intended to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the study's research questions.

Results

This study had 12 participants, representing a diverse group in terms of sex/gender and year of study. All participants were aged between 18 and 21 years. The group was composed of four males and eight females, indicating a female majority in pharmacy undergraduate programs. All respondents were first-year students in their programme of study. During the study duration, Year 2 students were busy with exam preparation. Of these 12 participants, nine were local students and three were international students. The details of the participants are listed in Table 1.

The participants were actively engaged throughout the research process, contributing to the interviews and discussions that provided rich qualitative data. Their involvement was crucial in exploring the themes and insights relevant to the study's objectives.

Participant characteristics, such as their academic background and personal experience, were considered to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the data. The level of participation was consistent across groups, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the research questions.

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed several key themes that encapsulate the experiences and perspectives of pharmacy students. Each theme was based on several subthemes, as shown in Tables 2 and 3. These themes included student involvement in curriculum design and perceived benefits of partnership, where participants expressed a strong desire for greater involvement in shaping their learning experiences; challenges in active learning environments, highlighting difficulties faced by students in adapting to new pedagogical approaches; and suggestions to improve relational pedagogy and the impact of andragogy on professional development, where students discussed how adult learning principles influenced their growth and preparedness for their future careers. These themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the students' views on the educational strategies employed in their programme.

Theme

Student involvement in curriculum design

Students reported that their involvement often started with providing feedback through module evaluation surveys or learning community forum meetings and suggesting some changes in the pedagogical approach, indicating a level of engagement that allows them to indirectly influence the curriculum. However, they also mentioned a desire for more substantial decision-making power, suggesting that their input could be more impactful if they were allowed to participate directly in curriculum design.

> *"I often provide feedback on the modules, especially those I find too theoretical."* (P5).

> *"We use surveys to communicate our suggestions about the teaching schedules and complexity of the content delivered."* (P3).

> *"We sometimes ask to change the method of delivery whether it should be a pre-recorded or in-person mode of delivery and also suggest to have more briefing on assessment."* (P1).

Theme

Perceived benefits in students as partners

Students believed that their involvement in curriculum design would enhance their understanding of and engagement with the course content.

> *"Being involved will help me understand the course content better."* (P4).

Students believed that their partnership would improve their relationships with teachers, making them more approachable and fostering mutual respect.

> *"Our teachers will be approachable if we start working together on curriculum design"* (P8).

> *"I think this kind of staff-student involvement will improve my leadership skills"* (P5).

Theme

Challenges in active learning environments

While the students acknowledged the benefits of the SaP approach, they also identified significant challenges that could hinder effective collaboration. Students identified hierarchical barriers as a significant challenge, with perceived power imbalance affecting

Table 1
Demographic data of the respondents.

Characteristics	Number of respondents
Age (Years)	
18–20	12
Gender	
Male	04
Female	08
Year of study	
Year 1	12
Student status	
Local	09
International	03

Table 2
Initial coding based on Participants response.

Participant	Initial Codes
1	Involvement in decision making, Types of feedback, Discussion topics, Feedback on teaching methods, Addressing lecturer issues, Feedback provision process
2	Student leadership role, Feedback provision, Active involvement, Suggestions for improvement, Issues with implementation, Lack of implementation
3	Benefits of partnership, Formal feedback process, Fear of speaking up, Preference for informal partnership, Increased student participation, Timing of feedback
4	Learning benefits, Approachability, Previous experience, Differences between school and university, Formality in university teaching, Barrier to approachability
5	Potential benefits of partnership, Closeness in partnerships, Ease of feedback, Direct feedback provision, Benefits of partnership, Challenges of partnership
6	Support needed for partnerships, Lack of awareness, Need for education and boundaries, Educating lecturers, Institutional support, Structured meetings
7	Frequent meetings, Need for training, Increased responsibility, Student desire to improve curriculum, Active student participation, Representation
8	New perspectives, Mutual respect, Education on partnerships, Support systems, Feedback mechanisms, Principles for effective partnership
9	Respect in partnership, Importance of boundaries, Setting principles, Consent in partnerships, Responsibility in partnership, Mutual sharing
10	Support and feedback, Peer support, Team support, Institutional support, Structured meetings, Frequent meetings
11	Need for training, Training and briefings, Previous experience in student leadership, Differences between school and university, New perspectives, Educating lecturers, communication
12	Challenges in establishing partnerships, Issues with implementation, Lack of follow-through, Fear of speaking up, Risk of rudeness, Potential risk of informality

Table 3
: Details of initial codes, sub-themes, and themes derived from the interviews.

Codes	Sub-Theme	Theme
Providing feedback on modules Participating in curriculum meetings Suggesting new topics or modules	Types of Involvement	Student Involvement in Curriculum Design
Influencing teaching methods Deciding on assessment types	Decision-Making Power	
Using surveys for suggestions Formal and informal discussions	Communication Channels	
Enhanced understanding of course content Deeper engagement with studies	Enhanced Learning	Perceived Benefits in Students as Partners
More approachable teachers Mutual respect	Improved Teacher-Student Relationships	
Development of leadership skills Increased responsibility Critical thinking skills	Personal Development	
Perceived power imbalance Final decision made by teachers	Hierarchical Barriers	Challenges in active learning environments
Misunderstandings Infrequent opportunities for dialogue	Communication Issues	
Balancing academic workload Participating in meetings	Time Constraints	
Need for workshops and training Support for both students and academics	Increased Training and Support	
Regular feedback sessions Continuous feedback	More Frequent Meetings	Suggestions to Improve relational pedagogy
Establishing clear guidelines Effective dialogue	Clearer Communication Channels	
Improved grades Better understanding of material	Enhanced Academic Outcomes	
Increased interest in education Feeling valued	Increased Motivation	Empowerment through student involvement in curriculum design
Development of practice skills	Practical/Professional Skill Development	

their staff-student partnership.

> *"Sometimes it feels like our opinions don't really matter because the final decision is always made by the teachers. Then how can we be involved in staff-student partnership"* (P12).

Students perceived that any disagreement by the staff would be a barrier to effective collaboration.

> *"There are often misunderstandings about what we want and what the staff want"* (P2).

The additional time the students need to spend for their involvement in curriculum design, in addition to their academic workload, was also mentioned as a challenge.

"Balancing my studies and participating in these staff-student partnership activities will be really challenging." (P6).

Theme

Suggestions to improve relational pedagogy

The students suggested that training and support for both students and staff members could enhance the effectiveness of the SaP approach.

"Workshops on how to effectively participate would be really helpful." (P11).

Students suggested that regular meetings would ensure a mutual understanding of expectations from this partnership. *"Regular feedback sessions would keep everyone on the same page."* (P7).

Students suggested that staff provide guidelines on the role of students in partnerships.

"We need clearer guidelines on dos and don'ts as a partner" (P11).

Theme

Empowerment through student involvement in curriculum design

Students mentioned that their involvement in curriculum design may increase their motivation and interest in courses.

"I will feel more motivated to study now that I know my opinions are valued." (P6).

The students mentioned that their involvement may improve their sense of belonging to an institution.

"I will feel my views, opinions and experiences matter to the institution, so that I can say I belongs to the university." (P9)

Discussion

The exploration of student involvement in curriculum design through the view of the Students as Partners (SaP) framework revealed both the benefits and challenges associated with relation pedagogy. The study findings demonstrated that while students recognised the potential benefits of involvement, they currently experience their role in curriculum design as reactive, responding to content rather than actively shaping it. This positioning aligns with the broader literature on student-centred learning and inclusive educational design, where students are envisioned as co-creators with academics rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

The study findings suggest that institutions may benefit from implementing inclusive approaches to educational design that embrace students as equal contributors. Inclusive design emphasises the creation of equitable and accessible learning experiences that reflect students' diverse needs, backgrounds, and preferences. Such frameworks, including Fielding's Patterns of Partnership model, advocate for shifting from hierarchical power structures towards a shared decision-making approach.[26] The notion of partnership in curriculum design not only fosters a sense of ownership among students but also enhances their learning outcomes by integrating diverse perspectives and experiences into the education. Active participation in curriculum development can lead to a more profound understanding of professional identity and roles within the healthcare system.[27] The ability to influence certain aspects of delivery, such as the type of delivery method, demonstrated a promising yet limited scope of student participation.

The findings suggest that students' involvement in curriculum delivery often remains limited to minor adjustments rather than substantial, foundational changes. This limited scope restricts students to influencing only surface-level elements, potentially diminishing the depth and impact of their contributions. As a result, their input may not reach the transformative level necessary for meaningful curriculum innovation. The desire for more substantial decision-making power expressed by students revealed a critical gap between current practices and the potential for meaningful student involvement in the future. Students felt that their suggestions could lead to more significant and impactful changes if they were involved in deciding the content and assessment with a more substantial role. This aligns with the broader discourse on student-centred learning and emphasises the value of inclusive approaches to educational design, where students are viewed as co-creators rather than passive recipients of the curriculum. Inclusive educational design aims to create equitable and accessible learning experiences by addressing diverse student needs, backgrounds, and learning preferences. When students are involved in designing curriculum elements, they contribute perspectives that foster relevance and inclusivity, and a sense of ownership among students.[28] This participatory approach leads to content that reflects varied experiences and viewpoints. Kennedy and Datnow highlight that such participatory approaches significantly enhance students' goal achievement and foster a sense of ownership over their learning.[29] When students actively participate in decision-making, they not only feel empowered but also bring unique insights that can make institutional practices more responsive and effective. Collins et al., (2019) highlighted how student involvement in curriculum decisions can lead to more inclusive and effective teaching strategies.[30] This collaborative model also promotes flexibility in assessment and instruction, accommodating different learning styles and preferences to create a supportive, inclusive learning environment. Involving students in this manner not only enhances curriculum relevance but also establishes a learning environment grounded in equity and respect, ultimately benefiting both students and educators by creating

meaningful and inclusive educational experiences.

The perceived benefits of student involvement in curriculum design are complex and extend beyond academic enhancement to foster interpersonal and professional growth. Students believe that they deepen their engagement with the course, along with their understanding of the course content. This finding aligned with the constructivist educational paradigm, which recommends that active involvement in learning processes leads to better comprehension and retention of information.[31,32] When students are engaged in designing the curriculum, they are more likely to see the relevance of the content and the learning outcomes of the programme. This collaboration fostered a sense of ownership and engagement in the learning process. The active involvement of students in their educational processes leads them to exhibit higher levels of engagement and commitment to their studies[33] and leads to a more profound understanding of professional identity and roles within the healthcare system.[34] This will help academics achieve outcome-based education.

The partnership model contributes to the continuous improvement of educational practices. By involving students in the evaluation and redesign of curricula, institutions can ensure that their educational offerings are relevant and effective. Enhanced rapport between students and academics in higher education can create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. By involving students in decision-making, institutions can better address the diverse needs of their student populations, thereby enhancing overall satisfaction and retention rates. Inclusive pedagogical practices that involve students in their learning processes help cultivate essential competencies such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving.[35] These skills are increasingly important in today's job market, where employers seek graduates who can collaborate effectively and adapt to changing environments.

Despite these benefits, transitioning to a successful SaP model is challenging. Addressing these challenges is critical for realising the potential of SaPs in creating meaningful and equitable educational experiences. Hierarchical barriers highlighted by students are commonly noted in the literature on active learning and student involvement in higher education. This perception of inequitable advantage needs to be addressed to ensure that student contributions are valued and that they have an equal say in decision-making processes.[36,37] These misalignments can create varying expectations, leading to disengagement. Studies indicate that although SaP models are intended to foster equity, traditional educational hierarchies often persist, affecting students' perceptions of their agency within the partnership.[26,38–40] A true partnership requires a shift from viewing students as passive recipients of knowledge to recognising them as equal contributors, which demands a restructuring of authority within the classroom.[41] It is essential to establish transparent bidirectional communication that has been recommended in the literature to address these concerns. Students mentioned that the additional time required for their involvement in curriculum design was another significant challenge regarding the feasibility of their active participation. This aligns with findings from studies on student participation in co-curricular activities, which show that balancing academic responsibilities with engagement in collaborative projects can be particularly challenging for students with demanding schedules.[38] Co-creating learning experiences often encounters resistance from both academics and institutional norms, which can hinder the effectiveness of student partnerships.[42] To address these logistical challenges, there is a need for flexible involvement models that accommodate students' varying levels of availability.[14,42]

To enhance the effectiveness of the SaP approach, students suggested several practical solutions. The findings highlight that students value structured support and clear communication to optimise relational pedagogy within SaP initiatives. The call for workshops and training for both students and faculty members highlight a broader need to build skills that facilitate partnership and collaboration. A basic understanding of collaborative roles, including communication skills and negotiation tactics, is essential for students.[43] Cook-Sather et al. (2014) advocated for relational pedagogy as it requires a shift from traditional hierarchical teaching to a more egalitarian, co-creative dynamic, and academic staff will benefit from training to support equitable partnerships.[39] The suggestion for regular feedback sessions to align expectations reflects the importance of ongoing, open communication in SaP models. Feedback mechanisms help maintain trust and transparency, which are critical components of effective partnerships.[4] Students expectation for explicit guidelines on their roles within SaP, including boundaries and expectations are in line with the earlier reports.[14,37]

The potential impact of student involvement on curriculum design is thoughtful. The students mentioned that their participation significantly increased their motivation and interest in their courses. Chen et al. emphasise that the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, which prioritise student involvement in the learning process, can lead to more inclusive educational environments that support diverse learners.[44] Keddie discusses the complexities of student voice initiatives, noting that while they aim to enhance teacher accountability and improve pedagogical practices, they can also lead to misunderstandings and misalignments between student expectations and faculty responses.[45] This indicates that students' suggestions for improving relational pedagogy may not always translate into effective practices, as the dynamics of power and accountability can complicate the partnership process. Knowing that their opinions are valued and that they have a say in shaping their educational experiences can lead to a greater sense of belonging. This increased sense of belonging can improve overall student satisfaction, as students feel that their views to support this, recent studies suggests that while challenges exist, the potential for positive outcomes remains if institutions can effectively navigate the complexities of partnership dynamics.[46,47]

The Patterns of Partnership Fielding's Model emphasises the collaborative engagement of students and faculty in higher education, promoting a shared responsibility for learning and teaching.[26] However, there are competing perspectives regarding the effectiveness and implementation of this model, which can be explored through various studies. McConnell argues that while the principles of social pedagogy advocate for the redistribution of power to traditionally subordinate positions, reality often reflects entrenched hierarchies that can inhibit genuine collaboration.[40] This suggests that even when institutions aim to implement partnership models, existing power structures may dilute the effectiveness of these initiatives, leading to superficial engagement rather than meaningful collaboration. This is also reflected in the results of the study.

Additionally, Wilson and Jesson highlight the complexities involved in research partnerships, noting that while the SaP can be successful in various contexts, it also presents challenges that can impede progress.[48] The recursive process of collective enquiry can

sometimes lead to confusion or misalignment of goals among partners, which may detract from the intended outcomes of the partnership. This indicates that, although the model has potential benefits, its practical application can be fraught with difficulties that need to be addressed for successful implementation.

Evidence from a systematic review of students as partners in higher education highlights the importance of reciprocity in partnerships, suggesting that when students and faculty engage in genuine collaboration, the outcomes can be significantly positive.[43] This reinforces the idea that while challenges exist, the potential benefits of implementing partnership models in higher education are substantial when approached thoughtfully. Although challenges related to power dynamics, time limitation, and practical complexities can hinder the effectiveness of partnerships when these challenges are addressed, the potential for meaningful collaboration and improved educational outcomes remains significant.

This study offers valuable insights into pharmacy students' perceptions of the "Students as Partners" (SaP) approach within a higher education context. By employing qualitative methods, this research captures nuanced perspectives on student involvement in curriculum design, providing depth and richness to our understanding of relational pedagogy. Through thematic analysis, the study identified specific areas where student involvement is appreciated, as well as potential improvements, contributing to the discourse on student-centred learning in pharmacy education. The qualitative nature of this study also allows for a closer examination of individual experiences and suggestions, adding authenticity and relevance to the findings. Focusing on first-year pharmacy students provided a unique opportunity to explore how early engagement in SaP initiatives shapes their perceptions. Tailored interview questions and probing techniques supported participants in articulating their experiences effectively, offering valuable insights into how such initiatives can be designed to foster meaningful involvement from the start of their academic journey. However, this study has some limitations. With a small sample drawn from a single university in Malaysia, the findings may not be fully representative of the broader population of pharmacy students, both in Malaysia and internationally. Purposive and snowball sampling methods could introduce selection bias, as students with a vested interest in SaPs may have been more likely to participate. While insightful, thematic analysis involves subjective judgment, which may impact the interpretation and categorisation of themes. The focus on student perceptions, without input from educators or administrators, provides only one perspective on the SaP approach, potentially omitting factors such as faculty readiness and institutional support. Finally, this study reflects a single point in time; longitudinal research would be valuable to track changes in perceptions as students gain further experience with SaP and as the approach itself evolves. These limitations indicate that while the study offers meaningful insights, further research with larger, more diverse samples and perspectives from multiple stakeholders is needed to confirm and expand these findings.

Conclusions

Students' perceptions highlight the significant potential of the Students as Partners (SaP) approach to positively transform their learning experiences. Students perceived that their engagement could bring meaningful changes to their academic journeys. The benefits of SaP extend beyond academic gains, fostering essential interpersonal and professional skills, such as leadership, collaboration, and negotiation. This participatory approach enhances the overall learning experience by making the content more relevant to students' needs and aspirations. Moreover, the SaP has the potential to strengthen the rapport between students and academic staff, creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. Although challenges such as perceived power imbalances and the need for additional time and effort were noted, effective solutions were provided by the students. Providing training and support to both students and staff, along with clear guidelines on their roles and responsibilities, may equip all parties for successful collaboration. Higher educational institutions can integrate SaP practice into ways that complement students' academic obligations, ensuring that participation is enhanced rather than competing with their studies. The SaP approach has transformative potential in higher education. By empowering students to play an active role in curriculum design, a dynamic, responsive and engaging educational environment can be created that prepares them academically, professionally, and personally for their future careers.

Author statement

Mari Kannan Maharajan: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Software, Data Curation, Original Draft Preparation; conducted all interviews, contributed to initial data coding, and led manuscript drafting.

Subarna Sivapalan: Visualisation, Investigation, Supervision; provided expertise in educational theory, contributed to study conceptualisation, and advised on the data collection approach to align with student-centred pedagogical standards.

Kingston Rajiah: Study Design, Validation, Data Analysis and Coding, Reviewing and Editing; ensured methodological rigour, enhancing consistency and reliability.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. The research was conducted independently, and no parties have influenced the results or the manuscript's content.

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