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**Abstract**

Engaging students as partners (SaP) in teaching and learning is an emerging yet contested topic in higher education. This study interviewed 16 students and staff working in partnership across 11 Australian universities to understand how they conceptualised SaP and the opportunities they believed SaP afforded their universities. Thematic analysis revealed three overlapping conceptions of partnership: SaP as counter-narrative, SaP as values-based practice, and SaP as cultural change. The findings are first interpreted through the lens of liminality and an ethic of care. This is followed by a discussion of inclusivity of involvement, resistance, and reinforcement of neoliberal agendas despite good intentions. Finally, implications for cautious enactment of both practice and research are offered.

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