The Audit of Student Representation and Voice Practice

Final Project Report for the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

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Executive Summary

The approach to information-gathering for this research project was varied, where our findings draw from an online sector questionnaire, detailed webinar conversations, a literature review and a set of interview-based case studies. In summary, these are some of the key findings from the UK Higher Education sector relating to student representation and voice practice:

- Student representation and voice practice continues to be a major priority for UK Higher Education, where out of 78 institutional respondents, 100% are practising Course Level Representation, 62.23% are practising School or Faculty Level Representation, and 82.05% are conducting course or module level feedback surveys.

- Appropriate resourcing and institutional/strategic embedding is being allocated to such activities, in Student Representation and Voice for compliance reasons and best practice in assurance and enhancement. The resource behind such activities (such as staffing) is reported as essential for success, where it is important that the student representation and voice is not performative and students are seen to have agency.

- Emphasis was placed on the need for training and 'teaching the University', that is, training for students and for staff involved with student voice and student engagement. Participants spoke of the need to support and empower student representatives and those who support them, as well as training staff to engage as much as students.

- Student representation practices vary considerably across the sector, where prior assumptions of all student representatives at course level being democratically elected and volunteers, is no longer sector norm. This study highlights sector inconsistency, with 54% of providers running elections, 26% practising self-nomination (without voting) and 12% processing applications with selection. Reward methods from payment to recognition schemes (such as certificates) vary considerably with no sector standard.

- Participants working in the Student Representation and Voice field spoke of the importance of authenticity and relationship-building. The motivations behind student voice practice matter for trust and long-term engagement. The research showed discussants value strong partnerships, community buy-in, collaborative culture, and meaningful staff-student relationships.

- Practitioners are taking flexible and creative approaches to feedback formats, meeting students 'where they are', making the most of informal feedback opportunities and maintaining dialogue, as well as supporting formal student voice mechanisms diligently.

- Respondents showed a real commitment to ensuring there is a diversity of voices and of approaches to gathering/representing diverse voices. Although practice to achieve such ambitions varied from provider to provider.

- Course level student voice surveys remain the norm, with 67.95% providers conducting module-based survey evaluations, and 43.58% providers conducting both module and course level survey evaluations.

Context and Project Outline

Student engagement in the development of education through student voice activities, such as student representation at course level is assumed as a sector norm in the UK. Since the professionalisation of students' unions in the 2000s and 2010s to develop student voice teams (Bols, 2020), all UK universities have followed the Quality Code's Student Engagement Theme (2018) (formerly Chapter B5, 2013) to embed student-staff engagement in voice activities across their provision (Bols, 2017). However, the often-assumed practice of democratically-elected and volunteers student representatives, which used to be assumed cross-sector practice, has evolved at institutions, creating an unknown spread of varied practice across UK HEIs. Beyond course-level representation schemes, many universities and students' unions are experimenting in student voice activities to create new ways of engaging students locally, in professional service areas, and strategically, across universities.

To respond to the above developments, in 2025, the University of Westminster supported by the RAISE Network lead a sector audit of student engagement in student voice, student survey and student representation activities across UK Higher Education, to temperature-check and share contemporary practice post-COVID-19. Following the Lowe and Lowe (2020) audit of students engaged in quality assurance panels, fielding responses from 40 UK Universities, this project aspires to gain responses from at least 100 students' unions and universities. The study aimed to gain a sector assessment of current questions relating to electing vs selecting, rewarding vs voluntary, and balance of organising student engagement in voice, surveys and representation activities across modern HE Institutions.

Project funding was secured from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as part of the 2025 Collaboration Enhancement Fund. The fund of £10,000 would support the research capacity to conduct the below phases of research, as well as disseminate the findings across the wider Higher Education sector.

This project focuses on two main areas of activity:

- **Phase 1:** An institutional survey-based audit which explored student engagement practice with course, school and faculty-level representatives, as well as gathering information on the use of course-level evaluations and university surveys.
- **Phase 2:** A qualitative follow-up series of interviews to identify innovative practice in the space of university-wide consultation committees.

Ethics for the project was confirmed by University of Westminster Business School Ethics Committee on 1st April 2025 (Reference: **ETH2425-1095**)

Literature Review

Section 1: Regulatory Framework and Student Representation

Student representation and engagement in quality assurance in UK higher education are shaped by evolving regulatory and advisory structures. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has served as the designated body for quality assurance for the four nations where there has been a particular focus on engaging students across committees and within review processes (including England until 2023, after which OfS assumed this role as sector regulator). The QAA offer influential advice on the topic, notably through the 2024 UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Principle 2 of the Code outlines six recommendations for effective student engagement, including embedded partnership practices, clear definitions and resources for student voice work, diversity among participants, responsiveness to student issues, recognition of student contributions, and involvement in governance and enhancement activities.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, student representation and engagement in quality assurance is reviewed on a tri-annual basis as part of wider quality assurance reviews facilitated by the QAA. These activities champion and challenge institutions regarding engaging students' voices at course level, providing training and structural support for student representation across higher committee levels, and innovating wider student-staff partnership initiatives. Additionally, these individual nations have provided sector-wide support for student engagement activities, through funded projects and bodies such as Sparqs in Scotland, whom recently released a sector-agreed resource *Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership*. Complementary policies on Tertiary Education in Scotland (in 2024) and Wales (in 2022) have also continued to support the need for student engagement and voice activities across post-secondary education.

In England, the Office for Students (OfS) Conditions of Registration, introduced in 2018, have been pivotal in redefining how universities engage with students in England. These conditions require institutions to meet specific standards for students to qualify for fee loans, directly linking regulatory compliance to student representation practices. OfS Condition B2.4 emphasises the importance of student engagement, mandating that universities routinely provide opportunities for students to influence their academic experience. This includes student participation in committees, feedback surveys, and activities related to course development and enhancement. The guidance highlights the risks of poor practice, such as the absence of student membership on committees, and warns against excessive student influence that could undermine academic rigor.

Achieving national standard for student engagement is complex. Persistent challenges include insufficient recognition of diversity (and barriers to participation) among student representatives, the need for meaningful dialogue between staff and students, and navigating power dynamics within institutions. These issues are highlighted by Young and Jerome (2020), who critique the OfS for conflating 'student interest' with 'student voice' and for promoting a neoliberal approach that prioritises metrics over deliberation. They identify three discourses in student representation: neoliberal consumerism, partnership (often led by student unions), and rights-based approaches, each contributing to the complexity of student voice policy.

Lowe and Bols (2020) further explore these complexities, presenting a paradigm that categorises student voice relationships into four types: representative partnerships, cooperative partnerships, consumer rights champions, and individual agents. Each type has distinct advantages and challenges, particularly regarding power distribution, inclusiveness,

and student responsibility. This framework helps to understand the varied nature of student engagement and serves as a foundation for further analysis.

Recent literature, such as Bayless (2023), questions whether partnership and diversification of student voice can counterbalance consumer-focused views of education. Bayless argues that while partnership approaches are valuable, they are challenging to implement in feedback settings and may not necessarily improve intrinsic motivation or learning attitudes. There is concern that student engagement can be co-opted for performative, neoliberal agendas, a risk explicitly noted by the OfS.

Conversely, Gravett, Kinchin, and Winstone (2020) highlight the positive aspects of partnership working, such as shared responsibility, community building, strong communication, and the development of student agency. They advocate for a dialogic, values-based approach that moves beyond the customer model and fosters transformative, enjoyable learning experiences – with students and staff working together.

Matthews and Dollinger (2023) distinguish between students' union representation and partnership, noting that democratic representation is embedded in governance systems often located around committees, while partnership involves reciprocal learning and co-creation – often in a project space at service or course level. They argue that partnership can democratise engagement, allowing broader participation beyond elected representatives. The selection process for representatives and partners differs, with partnership offering opportunities for students from historically underserved communities to have a voice.

Overall, the literature underscores the need to understand the intricate relationships between students, staff, students' unions, representatives, and institutions. The intersection of policy, institutional history, and student action is critical, especially as students' unions face challenges to their legitimacy and the future of formalised student representation remains uncertain. Day (in Klemenčič, ed., 2024) summarises the current position of SUs as facing a challenge to their legitimacy: 'Currently, both NUS-UK and the government in Westminster have reached an ideological point where they see no value in talking to each other. The idea of formalised student representation is once again in the firing line. The next few years will prove to be a critical time of the UK student movement' (2024, p.586).

Section 2: Politics and Agency in Student Representation

A cluster of the publications after 2020 reflect on how much agency is genuinely accorded to students and their views within institutions and Alex Bols's doctoral thesis (2022) provides a historical overview, identifying persistent issues such as representativeness of the students acting as 'Student Representatives', power relations between student representatives and staff, and the role of staff in supporting student involvement at all levels when engaging students. Bols argues that the effectiveness of student voice depends on institutional commitment, including proper training (for both students and staff), time allocation, and valuing the role of student representatives. He emphasises that representatives need more influence in strategic groups and committees, including opportunities to chair meetings and submit agenda items. The shared purpose between representatives and institutions is crucial for success, and Bols calls for national standards and guidance on evaluating the impact of student representation.

The shift towards including both traditional democratic student representation and non-representative often appointed student co-design activities has introduced new tensions. While much literature presents partnership work positively, Patrick (2023) offers a critical perspective, warning that partnership approaches can sometimes embody corruption, patronage, tokenism, and ageism. Patrick contends that criticisms of students' union politics

as non-representative can also apply to non-elected partners, and that partnership work may be subject to discursive coercion, as students are often required to operate within established structures rather than enact radical change.

Patrick (2025) further argues against the tendency to treat student representation as merely a learning opportunity, advocating instead for models that grant students real power to effect change. He proposes two models: one that supports a student government with partnership elements while preserving democratic autonomy, and another that integrates direct participation to make partnerships more equitable and inclusive, giving students structural power in decision-making. Patrick is sceptical about student agency in the face of institutional power imbalances but supports initiatives that teach students how to navigate university governance.

In contrast, Stockwell, Smith, and Woods (2020) present an ethical framework for staff-student partnership work, grounded in the philosophical ideal that students should be supported in the pursuit of truth and reason. They argue that co-production with students should be based on ethical principles that disrupt and transform current perceptions of higher education, but caution that the 'partnership' label can also be used to advance neoliberal management agendas. Drawing on Aristotelian models of virtuous friendships, they suggest that true partnerships are built on mutual learning, shared activity, and the development of virtues, which can be transformative and enduring. The authors stress the importance of aligning goals and understanding the purpose of partnerships, advocating for students' responsibilities in policy and decision-making within their institutions.

The literature also highlights the need for critical discussion when establishing partnership arrangements, ensuring that goals are aligned and evaluation is purposeful. Stockwell et al. argue that universities should help students develop rational and ethical thinking, supporting them in making choices about the kind of life they wish to lead. Engaging students in policy-making and decision-making is seen as essential for fostering agency and ethical development.

Section 3: Training, Cultural Capital, and Effective Student Representation

A growing body of literature emphasises the importance of education and training in fostering effective student representation and partnership in higher education. Patrick (2023) argues that students and staff must develop a mature understanding of what student democracy can achieve, setting realistic expectations for inclusive student governments that empower a broader range of students and address power imbalances.

Researchers such as Peseta and Bell (2020) argue for the integration of the study of universities into the curriculum, enabling students to become active agents within their institutions. They caution against assuming students are 'experts in their own experience' without providing context about the purpose and function of universities. By encouraging students to 'see institutionally', they can better understand their agency and responsibilities within the academic community. Peseta and Bell's co-created projects demonstrate the value of students acting as self-reflexive researchers, contributing to institutional improvement and fostering a collective commitment to higher education.

Access to becoming student representative roles can be particularly challenging for students from minoritised groups, who may lack the tacit knowledge or cultural capital often assumed in these positions – such as running in class elections or registering interest in such positions. Tamea (2024) highlights the unique barriers faced by Muslim students in student unions, such

as the need to conform to secular norms or exclusion from social activities involving alcohol. Tamea recommends targeted training and support networks to help these students succeed, emphasising the need for staff and students to receive appropriate preparation to ensure equitable access to opportunities.

The effectiveness of student representation is also shaped by recruitment and training practices. Lowe and Lowe (2022) found that while most student representatives on quality review panels receive some training, the content and duration vary widely. Challenges include ensuring representativeness of students appointed, building student confidence in heavily bureaucratic formal settings, and managing the commitment required for high workloads. Rewards for participation range considerably from vouchers to formal recognition, but some students receive little or no compensation. The choice of panel chair is also critical, as skilled chairs can support and value student input, reinforcing the need for training for both staff and students.

Partnership building between staff and students is shown to foster a sense of belonging and agency, especially for underserved groups. Cook-Sather and Loh (2023) advocate for proactive, collaborative, and student-initiated contributions to learning, including co-creation by students not registered for the course under review. Their recommendations include scaffolded approaches that gradually empower students to take ownership, and they stress the importance of staff development to support these processes, where there should be an equal focus on supporting staff for such activities.

The relationship between student voice and learning is further complicated by the diversity of student identities. Bunce, Rathbone, and King (2023) found that students who identify as "consumers" may not achieve the highest grades or develop successful learner attitudes. They categorise students as "thinkers", "strivers", "consumers" or "undecided", noting that course representatives often exhibit "striver" behaviours—engaged in both their learning and their course. Workshops that explore these identities can help students develop strategies for academic success and agency within the institution.

Section 4: Ensuring Diversity of Student Representation and Voice Practices

The literature on student representation and student voice in UK higher education increasingly emphasises the importance and challenges of ensuring diversity in student voices and the mechanisms used to capture them. As student populations become more varied, traditional methods of representation—such as staff-student committees and surveys—are often insufficient for capturing the full range of experiences and perspectives. In response, institutions have adopted a broader array of strategies, including co-creation with students, digital feedback platforms, user experience forums, and informal or semi-formal feedback channels.

A key concern is whether elected student representatives truly reflect the diversity of the student body. Aimee Cuthbert (2025) argues that data evaluation is essential to ensure elected officers are representative, and that comprehensive training is crucial for effective representation systems. The rise of data-driven approaches in higher education—such as teaching evaluations, satisfaction ratings, and impact measurements—has contributed to the "datafication" of students, sometimes reducing students to data subjects rather than active agents.

Research by Winter et al.2024 explores the experiences of student representatives, highlighting gaps in training, especially regarding communication, governance, and the use of

institutional data. While students report gaining transferable skills, the lack of a data-informed approach and disconnects between academic representatives and student unions remain challenging. The authors recommend revisiting recruitment and ensuring robust training to maximise the developmental and practical outcomes of student representation.

Beyond training, the literature points to the need for institutional interventions that diversify and evaluate student voice mechanisms. Kandiko-Howson and Matos (2021) compare engagement and satisfaction surveys, concluding that a combination of both yields more meaningful insights. They caution against narrowing curricula or stifling innovation in pursuit of improved metrics, and stress the importance of ongoing, meaningful engagement with students. Islam and colleagues (2021) echo this, advocating for active engagement to support widening participation and the co-creation of targeted guides for underrepresented groups. Their work highlights the barriers posed by diversity itself, such as outputs that may not align with university standards, and underscores the flexibility required from practitioners to support equality and diversity agendas.

Section 5: Student Voice beyond Representation

Beyond student engagement roles such as course representatives featuring on committees, students' voices through wider feedback methods are also gathered through a variety of mechanisms in universities (Adams, 2023). This study will explore the most dominant means of gathering students' voices, being course or module/unit-based surveys (and evaluations) (Stein et al. 2021; Young and Jerome, 2020). The ability to facilitate online surveys offers a highly efficient means of gaining student feedback, and a means to field wider perspectives beyond individual representatives. Beyond sector surveys operating in the UK such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and UK Engagement Survey (UKES), universities operate numerous surveys relating to courses of study or professional services.

The literature often draws upon such surveys to gain a wider field of student perspectives on higher education, where Likert scales are a dominant method deployed to quantitative measure emotions and experiences (Stein et al. 2021; Bols and Lowe, 2020). Issues are reported however, where lack of monitoring of number of student voice surveys within universities has led to so-called 'survey fatigue', potentially impacting participation (Fass-Holmes, 2022). In addition, despite surveys often offering input from greater student numbers for potential more representative studies across larger populations, scholars have argued that these studies lack the detail of qualitative data or student representatives to talk about students' experiences of education (Gravett and Winstone, 2021; Cook-Sather, 2020).

Beyond surveys and student representation, individual case studies and practice relating to other means of engaging students in the development of education are present in the literature. A major theme of practice where there is high variation is student-staff partnership, where often students are empowered to conduct projects of quality enhancement with staff (in partnership) (King, 2023), or take part in set events to co-design an output such as during curriculum redesign (Bovill, 2020). Beyond partnership, there is a vast array of individual practice present in the literature, such as student voice events, online engagement activities, and bespoke projects where students are engaged in giving their voice on education in a variety of means (Banks, 2026; Findon et al., 2026; Adams, 2023).

Summary

While student representation and voice practices offer opportunities for agency and influence, practice face challenges related to power dynamics, representativeness, and institutional structures. The literature calls for greater institutional commitment, ethical frameworks, and national standards to ensure that student voice is both effective and meaningful. The review

also emphasises the importance of training for both staff and students, and the need for ongoing evaluation of the impact of student representation and voice initiatives. Finally, there is a clear recommendation to review the accessibility of such student engagement opportunities. Addressing and being aware of factors such as cultural capital, representativeness, and a diversity of students' experiences, are essential for empowering all students to participate meaningfully in institutional enhancement and governance.

Webinars Report

Members of the Project Steering Group presented a series of RAISE community webinars in April, May and June 2025. These webinars raised awareness of the study and were used as a means to gather responses to the Phase 1 Survey. Full webinar reports are available in the Appendices.

RAISE Spring Webinar 1: To Pay or not To Pay?

Over one hundred participants joined us for the RAISE webinar on 9th April 2025, where the topic under discussion was titled 'To Pay or not to Pay?', and we explored the views of our participants on how student representation might be recognised or incentivised.

Sesson Presenters: Ashley Storer Smith (RAISE Students' Union Representative, Anglia Ruskin University); Faye Ap Geraint (RAISE Professional and Learning Services Representative, Aberystwyth University) and Daisy Bao (RAISE Student Committee member, University of Edinburgh)

RAISE Spring Webinar 2: Student Representation: To Elect or Select?

Session Presenters: Saadah Osman (University of Westminster Students' Union); Simon Varwell (University of Highlands and Islands Students' Association); Conor Naughton (University of Nottingham) and Lysandre de-la-Haye (Birmingham Newman University).

Around 70 participants joined us for our discussion on May 15th 2025 when we discussed different institutional approaches to recruiting student representatives.

RAISE Spring Webinar 3: Should we evaluate everything?

Session presenters: Dr Stuart Sims (Greenwich University); Dr Nathaniel Pickering (Greenwich University) and Dr Jill LeBihan (University of Westminster)

Over two hundred participants joined us for the final of our trio of webinars discussing student voice on June 5th 2025, where we looked at the complex relationship between student engagement, student voice and the evaluation of student experience.

Phase 1: Sector Audit Student Representation and Voice Practices

Respondents to the Audit - Providers

Phase 1 of the project collected data via a sector questionnaire, with a stretch target of 100 higher education providers responding. The survey was open to anyone to complete, where often multiple responses per provider were received, as well as separate responses from the university or college, and the respective students' union. In total, there were 98 responses to the survey, where following combining duplicated responses, there were 78 individual providers represented from UK Higher Education. The majority of these providers (74) represented educational institutions with university status, where the remaining 4 were smaller higher education focused college providers.

Respondents to the Audit – Job Titles

The individual filling out the questionnaire gave their role title. There are a range of roles who took responsibility for sharing information on behalf of their institution. This gives a picture of the spread of responsibility for student voice in universities and student unions. Most common labels include student voice or student representation, but a substantial section include engagement or community, and less commonly, partnership. The connection between student voice, student engagement and community indicate the efforts institutions are making to make student representation and voice strategies more meaningful.

Levels of Representation

The majority of institutions have more than one level of representation. 69.23% (54) of the providers reported that they had more than one level of student representation including course level, whereas the remaining 30.77% (24) reported only had one level of representation – being course level. In addition to course and higher school or college representatives, there are a different combinations of full-time and part-time officers in paid roles as part of the wider students' union structures. These were elected part-time faculty representatives or even full time paid sabbatical officers.

Number of Representatives

It is important to stress that the numbers of representatives offered what Tim Harford would call 'messy' data. For example, some universities distinguish between faculty representatives, school representatives, department representatives, course representatives and other kinds of student role: one response lists "35 Faculty Reps and 110 School Reps," while another mentions "4 Faculty Reps / 28 School Reps / 40 Student Councillors." So, any of the following counts are approximate, as it was not always counting comparable roles, and there are gaps in the responses, where different respondents had different expertise and familiarity with the student voice system.

Course Representatives:

100% of providers reported practising student representation at course level. For total course level representative numbers per provider, most responses fall between 400 and 1,500 representatives across the sample of respondents. The most common single value is 500, with many universities reporting numbers close to this figure or within the 400–600 range. There are some outliers, both very low (under 50) and very high (over 2,000). Responses in

some cases are approximate, uncertain, or context-dependent (e.g., "Depends on the number of courses we're running!"). The below points were also observed in the data:

- The minimum representation approach is commonly at least course representative per course.
- The typical range of representatives per course is typically 2-5, and often 2 per year group.
- The maximum number of representatives allowed by some providers was up 10-45 per course.
- The ratio of number of course representatives to students was indicated as being anywhere between 1:20 up to 1:50.

Faculty/School/Institute Representatives

62.23% of providers reported practising student representation at high level educational levels such as Faculty, School and/or Institute Representatives. The most common range for higher level student representatives was between 10–40 reps per university, but with significant variation. There were significant Zero replies, indicating that this is not a universal level of representation.

Institutional Representatives and Student Councils

53.85% of providers reported practising some form of higher institutional level representative body (such as a Student Council often associated with the Students' Union). Not all respondents indicated operating a system working with institution-level representatives (such as Student Council or Education Council members) and numbers vary widely across institutions, ranging from 0 student representatives to approximately 170. Figures include 18, 40, 50, 55, and 60–70 of students engaged as representatives at university level in some cases. Some institutions report only 1–3 reps, while 17 respondents indicated they have none, and others gave a not applicable response, or are uncertain. Some replied that there were annual fluctuations in numbers at these sorts of committees. It was also not clear in the data on whether these roles were students' union sabbatical officers or part-time student representatives engaging alongside their studies.

Part-time, SU-Elected representatives

The information on part-time SU representatives was particularly patchy, with the number range from 0 to 90. 18 respondents indicated they have none; a similar number indicated 3-10; and another similar number indicated 11-22. Numbers given were approximate or expressed as a range, so it is difficult to be exact. There were some big outliers, with one institution having 70-80 part time reps. The numbers suggested it is just as common to have zero as it is to have half a dozen as it is to have 11-20.

Sabbatical Officers

A small number of respondents (5) have no sabbatical officers, but the remainder of respondents indicated numbers between 1-6 sabbatical officers as most common. There was one outlier of 17 officers.

Other Officer Roles

Alongside sabbatical officers, there are other student union official positions and respondents indicated a lot of variation in the names of these roles. Most roles could be categorised as:

Academic and Faculty Representatives;

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Officers (including disabled students; officers representing Race Equality and Inclusion for Minoritised Ethnic Groups; and Social Class and Mobility)

- LGBTQ+ and Gender Equality
- International and Cultural Representatives
- Student Wellbeing and Support
- Activities, Societies and Sports
- Sustainability, Ethics and Environment
- Other (e.g. housing; democracy; alumni; engagement)

Reward and Recognition

Course Representatives

The majority of Course Representatives (84.61% n66) do their role on a voluntary basis, with no financial reward (payment, vouchers or bursary). Certification of the representative role was very common, which was often used alongside other recognition schemes. 28 providers provided certificate only, whereas a further 12 provided additional incentives and rewards such as a bursary (1), academic credit (2), vouchers (7). The responses regarding other incentives such as financial reward through vouchers did vary on occasions of multiple responses per provider.

School/Faculty/Institute Representatives

The majority of School/Faculty/Institute Representatives (57.69% n45) do their role on a voluntary basis, with no financial reward (payment, vouchers or bursary). Certification of the representative role was common, which was often used alongside other recognition schemes. 8 providers provided certificate only, whereas a further 9 provided additional incentives and rewards.

The picture for School/Faculty/Institute representatives was less consistent. The most common way of rewarding these representatives was on an hourly-paid basis (n16) although a good proportion of these reps still acted in a voluntary capacity (n12) or as volunteers with a certificate (n7). But it is a very mixed economy, including vouchers, bursaries, academic credit and a wide variety of other sorts of rewards such as merchandise, references and endorsements, points for recognition awards, training and exclusive social/VIP opportunities, discounts, prizes or lucky dips, in different combinations.

Where Faculty/School representatives do receive payment, the levels are not completely consistent. Wage levels included minimum wage; national living wage; annual stipends; termly/semesterly/trimesterly stipends; fixed fee (from between £20-£50 per meeting). The ceiling figure that students could earn in this sort of role was in the region of £1800 although it is difficult to be precise because of the variation in hours and ways the information was reported.

Additional roles, such as part-time SU Officers and/or University Council Representatives, were rewarded in similar ways to course representatives, with most roles being voluntary, with recognition such as certification or small tokens rather than regular payment.

Time Commitment

Course representatives most frequently give between 10-20 hours per academic year (n23); with next most common was 20-30 hours (or 1 hour per week) (n15); under 10 hours (n10); over 50 hours (n4); and a few in the 40 hour range (n3). There were some overlaps of numbers

and some level of imprecision, but 1-2 hours per week during term time is the most common expectation.

Course representatives do many activities, and time in meetings is only part of what they do, but it is something that is easily quantified, and the data suggest that institutions try not to exploit students who are volunteering their time. Meetings for course representatives, who are mostly volunteers, are kept below 10 in most cases, with one or two meetings per semester being the most common expectation. Where students attend meetings outside a representation system, as part of a council or other occasional University-level panel, the demand is more moderate, as these sorts of meetings are scheduled less frequently: most replies were in the 2-4 hour range, and the remainder were nearly all under 8 hours per year.

Recruitment and Selection

There is a mixed approach to the recruitment and selection of Course Representatives, with 26% of institutions practising self-nominating, and 54% undergoing some sort of election process; and 12% undertake some sort of application or selection process. In contrast, 48% of School/Faculty/Institute representatives reported undergoing an application or selection process; 35% institutions facilitating elections into role; and only 4% practising self-nominations.

Qualitative comments and case study interviews note that the bar to entry for course representatives is kept as low as possible, whereas the greater level of responsibility of lead representatives, and the paid nature of the role, requires a more selective entry process.

Training and Support

100% (n78) providers reported that students' unions provided training of Course Representatives with 57.69% (n45) offering further and training and support after. Training is most commonly offered in both online and in-person variants, with 1-2 hours being the most frequent duration. Longer training (6-8 hours) was usually for School/Faculty/Institute Representatives. Additional, often non-compulsory, training was offered by some institutions, and some more extended sessions (a full day, for example, or 10-20 hours for some School/Faculty/Institute Representatives) was offered in a few institutions. It is difficult to generalise from varied data, but training appeared to make up about 10% of the overall commitment to representative roles.

Access and Inclusion for Student Voice

76.92% (n60) respondents indicated strategies for making student representation opportunities accessible for underrepresented groups, and for more distanced students, such as apprentices, those with placements, and those undertaking online-only study. These strategies focus on:

- Flexible access to training and meetings (online or asynchronous)
- Application processes designed to be simple and low-barrier
- Removing in-class spontaneous elections or removing elections altogether
- Training of Students' Union staff in equality, diversity and inclusion
- Data collection of student demographics to inform engagement strategies
- Varied and ongoing communication regarding opportunities

For apprentices and placement students, dedicated support (by link tutors or peer supporters) is recommended. Respondents differentiated between professional courses (nursing, teaching) and those on 'sandwich' style placements. Those on a year-out style placement

have less presence than vocational courses, who had specialised representatives. Respondents noted that where distance learning is not part of an institution's mainstream provision, student voices may be more marginalised.

Module Evaluations and Course Level Surveys

Respondents indicated that module level or course level evaluation surveys are used commonly with 82.05% (n64) as a means to gain student voice. A single survey per module is most common (53.85%), but there is mixed practice, with different combinations of both one and two module evaluation surveys plus course-wide surveys, informal feedback and other kinds of evaluation strategies. The additional approaches used alongside (or instead of) standard module evaluation surveys included: a University-wide "checking in" survey and other health and wellbeing checks; a mixed economy of mid-module and end of module surveys combined with more informal dialogue. For some institutions, the course evaluation process is less transparent (at least to students' unions) where evaluation has been devolved to academic units, so the practice is institutionally inconsistent. There were many 'don't know' or blank responses possibly due to the respondents responsible for student representation not being responsible for module and course student voice surveys. The headlines from this part of the audit are below:

Area of Activity	No.	%
Providers using Individual Module Evaluations / Surveys (one per module)	42	53.85%
Providers using Individual Module Evaluations / Surveys (two per module)	11	14.10%
Providers using Individual Module Evaluations / Surveys (one per module) with Course Wide Survey	6	7.69%
Providers using Individual Module Evaluations / Surveys (two per module) with Course Wide Survey	8	8.97%
Providers using Course Wide Surveys	21	26.92%
Single Area of Activity Responses		
Providers Only Individual Module Evaluations / Surveys (one per module)	29	37.18%
Providers Only Individual Module Evaluations / Surveys (two per module)	9	11.54%
Providers Only Course Wide Surveys	6	7.69%
Providers Informal Methods only with no Surveys or Evaluations	3	3.84%
Providers Informal Methods at Module Level but with Course Wide Survey	1	1.28%
Providers that did not know or no response	13	16.66%

Phase 2: Case Study 1

University of Manchester Students' Union

Emma Bramwell, Education Manager

Identification of good practice

Change of student representative structures in 2022, coinciding with the establishment of a new team.

Context

Falling student engagement with representation activities, difficulty in recruiting and retaining reps; and lack of staff confidence in the process.

Strategy

The strategy is to focus the representation role on creating a positive working environment, focused on communities, enjoyment of working together, and creating a sense of psychological safety, so that views can be shared openly. Belief in being part of a community and all the student voice work is built on that foundation.

Representation in practice

School Reps are paid student staff, employed and managed by the Student Union and selected through application and interview. They need to have prior experience as Course Reps. They are paid for 15 hours per month, with their role being to represent student voice and also to act as community leaders. There is a close connection between student societies and the work of the representatives.

The Student Union employs eight sabbatical officers, and four of these are education officers attached to each of three Faculties, plus a post-graduate research officer. Underneath the Faculty Officers, each School has a number of paid representatives (from 2-4, depending on School size).

There are around 1500+ academic (course) representatives recruited: they are not elected, and have no Student Union endorsement. There is the lowest barrier to participation in place, but every representative has to complete training (offered in-person or online); if they do not complete training, they are removed from the list. There are some notable challenges of scale, which are met by employing student staff and as a result of the SU academic representation staff building deep and wide relationships across the University (with interns, academics and professional services colleagues).

Impact

Measures of success include: increase in voter numbers, improvement in NSS results generally improved engagement metrics (for example, a very high proportion of academic reps respond to calls for feedback – which was not the case before the new system was introduced). A concrete example is of the students wanting to run a Ball for the student representatives. Despite the hesitations (Balls can be expensive mistakes), the event was run by the representatives with gusto, and they sold every ticket for the event.

Sustainability

Understanding the importance of student representatives from senior leaders is important (and where leaders themselves have been representatives in the past, this understanding is deeply rooted). Support from professional services teams enables administration of the system at scale. The Student Union provides induction for new academic staff on the representation system to maintain consistency and continuity. The Student Union has been able to support representatives to bid for additional University funds to support activities.

Key takeaways

The Manchester Student Union has found that prioritising the enjoyment of representatives and the building of a strong social community provides the foundation for their success.

Case Study 2

University of Southampton: Student Co-Design Panels

Jo Holmes, Student Co-Design and Insights Lead, University of Southampton

Intervention/Practice:

The University of Southampton's Student Co-Design Panels, established in 2021, are managed by a central professional services team, and facilitate student input into university enhancement projects. Panels recruit approximately 150 students annually from diverse academic levels: foundation, undergraduate, postgraduate and research. Panel members collaborate with staff and project teams to shape early-stage university initiatives, ensuring student perspectives influence project outcomes.

Panel Operations:

- Students are recruited at the beginning of each academic year. Membership is open to all students, with many choosing to participate across multiple years.
- Students are on payroll and earn the university's student ambassador rate.
- Project sponsors fund student participation through their project budgets.
- Main panels are scheduled throughout the academic year, with additional mini panels for targeted projects.
- Training is provided in person, with online options available for those unable to attend. Panel members have co-designed both the training and panel practices.

Project Engagement:

Panels have contributed to a range of university projects, including:

- Modernising Student Experience (e.g., development of the Student Hub)
- Policy development (e.g., Careers, Disability and Inclusion)
- Campus improvements (e.g., new residences, study spaces)
- Digital initiatives (e.g., student app)
- Assessment processes and orientation programs

Impact and Evaluation:

Annual evaluations are conducted with student panel members to assess enjoyment, impact, and areas for improvement. Feedback informs adjustments to panel operations, such as scheduling and communication practices. Students report meaningful professional development and value seeing their contributions reflected in university changes. 'One of the loveliest bits we had was a student walking in and saying, that's mine, I asked for that'. Success has been in students recognising the impact their work has had on finished designs.

Inclusivity and Flexibility:

The panels accommodate individual circumstances, allowing flexible participation and remote input when necessary. Engagement levels vary, and students are free to attend sessions as their schedules permit.

Collaboration and Sustainability:

Following a pilot year, the Panels are now embedded into budgets as standard. Support from senior staff has been vital to success, and project leads are encouraged by leaders to seek input from the student panels on new initiatives.

The panels maintain a strong partnership with the Students' Union, collaborating on student voice initiatives and resources. The Student Voice Toolkit, co-authored with the Students' Union, outlines various models of student engagement. The panels also work closely with specialized groups, such as the Widening Participation and Student Inclusion teams, to ensure representation from underrepresented backgrounds.

Lessons Learned:

Key success factors include making sure the student panel is brought on board early. After that, the approach has been flexible and student-centric. Working collaboratively and seeing the panels as enjoyable, positive occasions in their own right has enhanced the effectiveness and sustainability of this initiative. The team mantra is "Really, if we can make something work, we do try to".

Case Study 3

Liverpool John Moores University

Phil Carey and Liz Clifford, Teaching and Learning Academy,

Explanation of Good Practice

Over the past decade, Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) has operated a scheme designed to support curriculum enhancement projects through student internships. As the scheme has evolved, the importance of student voice and the relevance of the experiences of the student interns have grown in emphasis.

The scheme began as a broad call for staff-led projects aligned with curriculum enhancement. Over time, it became more structured, introducing annual themed calls to align with institutional priorities and improve dissemination. Recent themes have included Education for Well-being, Education for Sustainable Development, Decolonising the Curriculum, and, most recently, Intellectually Stimulating and Engaging Teaching. This thematic approach has enabled the University to create a record of interventions and good practice to support strategic objectives such as improving NSS scores and contributing to TEF submissions. The thematic approach also helps raise the profile of institutional priorities.

Initially, projects were confined to summer months, but this proved restrictive. Timing is now more flexible, allowing projects to run throughout the academic year. This change has improved access to staff and resources and accommodated variations in student availability.

Funding and Scale

Projects can receive funding for up to 200 hours of student work, costing around £3,800 per project. Typically,15–16 projects are funded each year. Funding can only be used to support students' activity. Each intern is paid the national living wage on an hourly basis. The budget does not cover staff time, travel, conference attendance or other sundries.

Operational Processes

Unitemps (an on-campus recruitment agency) manages payroll and compliance, including right-to-work checks and visa restrictions. Students submit weekly timesheets, reducing risks associated with retrospective claims and ensuring adherence to Home Office regulations. This system replaced earlier practices where students received lump-sum payments, which occasionally led to disengagement and administrative challenges.

Student Involvement and Impact

The scheme emphasises meaningful student engagement rather than using interns as additional administrative support. Applications for funding must demonstrate how a student's perspective will inform the outcomes and justify why tasks require student involvement. This principle distinguishes the scheme from simple resource provision and reinforces its role in enhancing student voice.

Evaluations indicate that students value the opportunity to gain insight into academic processes and experience authentic, collaborative work. Many report that these projects feel more "real" than standard group work, partly because they are paid and contribute to tangible outcomes. Benefits include skill development, employability enhancement, and exposure to interdisciplinary collaboration. Students also benefit from having an insight into some day-to-

day university practices. Notable examples include projects addressing inclusive journalism practices, maternal health disparities, and art curation in healthcare environments.

The work is showcased at the University's annual 'Students at the Heart' conference, which shares project findings and celebrates the co-design process.

Institutional Alignment and Sustainability

The scheme demonstrates a commitment to student-centred practices and co-creation of learning opportunities. It also contributes evidence for TEF submissions and other regulatory requirements, supporting LJMU's student engagement agenda. Despite financial pressures, internship funding has been protected.

Lessons Learned

- Key recommendations for institutions considering similar schemes include:
- Ensure projects genuinely require student input and avoid using interns for tasks that staff could perform.
- Use a managed payroll system to mitigate compliance risks and administrative burden.
- Align calls with institutional priorities to enhance impact and dissemination.
- Explore mechanisms for greater student involvement in decision-making and project initiation.
- Allow projects to start at times that suit their context rather than enforcing rigid schedules.

While LJMU has achieved considerable success, challenges remain in embedding student leadership and sustaining engagement beyond project completion. Future developments may include enhanced training for interns, creating opportunities for student-initiated projects, and hosting celebratory events to showcase outcomes.

Examples of past projects are available from the Teaching and Learning Academy on the LJMU website: https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/teaching-and-learning-academy/projects

Case Study 4

University of Warwick Students' Union (2019-2021) and University of Nottingham Students' Union (2021-2024)

Ashley Storer-Smith, Ex - Student Voice Manager

Identification of Good Practice

Utilising student & staff co-creation and partnership for Impact data gathering, reporting, and closing the feedback loop.

Context

There was no consistency when it came to reporting upwards from course & department level SSLC meetings. The current structure of SSLC Munities did not effectively show the views of students & of staff equally and the uptake was inconsistent across the institution, even within Faculties/Schools. SSLC Minutes was also utilised for Closing the Feedback Loop. This was ineffective as distribution to students was inconsistent and was in a format that was engaging for students to read.

Strategy

The goal was to have a system that could:

- Standardise the data collection of what was happening within an SSLC across an Academic Year so we could effectively analyse inter-departmental trends of feedback

- Create a structure for Closing the Feedback Loop that can balance the professionality of minuting whilst being engaging to students

- Develop a purpose for these structures that is valuable and meaningful for Staff and Students at a SSLC Departmental Level

Practice

Annualised Reporting – SSLC Annual Report

Developed initially within Warwick Students' Union and then redeveloped for UoNSU, the SSLC Annual Report was developed. This is a survey that is formatted as a word document that collects all the information that is needed for inter-departmental trends. The format and questions were co-developed with Academic & Professional Services Staff within departments; Course Reps; Students' Union Leaders; Students' Union Staff; and Faculty/Institutional Senior Managers. This was to ensure that the document has use at all levels of the institution:

- SSLC Department Level – Staff & Student Co-Chairs saw the Report as a handover document between SSLCs across academic years. This helped students and staff understand feedback that were being addressed from last year and the expectations of SSLCs. It was also a great multi-year archive.

- Faculty Level – Reports were developed to look at cross-faculty trends for collaboration on feedback. Faculty staff could also look at interventions by cross analysing the individual reports with NSS & other data.

- Institution Level – An overall report was developed with the data to show the health and direction of the Representation System as a whole. Focused on any key issues that needed intervention from staff & student feedback collated by the individualised annual reports as well as any key Institutional trends on the data.

By ensuring purpose at a local level, there was an enthusiasm for Staff & Students at a local level to put in time to complete these Annual Reports. In the second year, we put on drop ins and information sessions for Student & Staff co-chairs to better support the understanding of these reports and how to fill them in effectively.

Actions Tracker

As we addressed the trend data collection through the Annual Reports System, the focus for the intervention was meeting-to-meeting which could track changes from feedback as well as help close the feedback loop. When looking at the research of our students and staff needs, the following points needed to be addressed:

- Workload & Turnaround – minutes took up significant time to complete which means many SSLCs would opt out of writing them. Also, due to how long it took, there was already updates from the meeting that would need to be included. We needed something that was quick to complete.

- Easy To Read & Understand – minutes were not interesting or easy to read, especially for students who were not in the meeting. They wanted something to glance at and understand. Staff also wanted something where they could easily grab wins for NSS & other promotional periods rather than digging through a backlog of minutes.

- Living Document – there was a real preference for something that could be updated throughout the year, not just when a meeting happened but when updates/progress of changes from feedback occurred.

The Action Tracker was a simple document which was just a table that would last throughout the year. SSLCs had the ability to change or add to the structure of the document but they were required to have the following columns:

- Meeting Number/Date
- Feedback Category
- Detail of Feedback
- Agreed Actions
- Staff/Student Responsible for Action
- Completed? Yes/Ongoing/No
- Updates on Progress

Having this live document that could be easily linked to within a VLE means that students can engage with the feedback quickly and any updates would automatically be changed for students. Staff & Student Co-Chairs were asked to link their Action Tracker to their SSLC Report at the end of the year. In the new Academic Year, the Staff & Student Co-Chair would create a new Action Tracker and then transpose any ongoing actions from the previous year onto this new document.

Impact

The Annual Report System & Action Tracker was received very well initially as we focused on the benefits to the SSLC rather than the benefits to the wider organisation. Linking this to NSS campaigns and Feedback Loop activities at its implementation meant that Staff were able to

enact this work at the local level with its purpose in mind. Within its first year, we saw over 70% of Annual Reports submitted to the Students' Union with that increasing to 90% within a few years after implementing some training & support sessions.

Staff were very satisfied with the approach; feeling that their concerns were addressed and that the solution was easy to understand and implement. Staff also found it easier to do You Said, We Did Activities utilising the Action Tracker & Annual Report data Faculty & Institution Staff felt that our data and understanding of the Reps System was significantly improved and the Annual Reports were utilised for NSS Reporting & Intervention activity.

Students felt that their voice was better heard and supported across all SSLCs that implemented these in the first year. Having a clearer and easier way to see what was happening in SSLCs which was easier to find was the reasons why with NSS free text comments mentioning the Action Tracker.

A secondary impact that we did not initially plan for was feedback for Professional Services Departments. When we wrote the initial Institution Annual Report, we were able to get interesting and useful data for Professional Services areas which they could action. Due to this, Professional Service Staff felt that they could better rely on this data and not have a need to attend SSLCs. This feed up their time to focus on student experience and it meant that SSLCs had a better student to staff ratio which increased Course Rep satisfaction with the delivery of the SSLC Meetings.

Sustainability

Due to the work being distributed across SSLCs, this approach is very sustainable. It reduces the Staff time on SSLC Minuting with a system they are more satisfied with. The increased workload is the Faculty & Institutional analysis activity. This is where sustainability issues can occur as there needs the availability of a few Students' Union Staff across the May-August period where they will be focused on Full-Time Officer training & onboarding. There is the opportunity to utilise AI analysis of the SSLC Annual Reports to support the production of the Faculty & Institutional reports but this has not been tested.

Lessons Learned

- Focus on the experience and needs at a SSLC Department/Course Level when producing the template. This drive is essential for uptake and implementation so ensuring that their needs are addressed first is essential.
- Keeping it short and easy to read – when replacing SSLC minutes, you want to make sure what you are implementing is taking less time. The first SSLC Annual Report & Action Tracker Templates were much larger and took much more time to complete than the previous minuting system. Trial the implementation phase so you can iterate on the report.
- Have support for Student & Staff Co-Chairs. In our first year, we just had a cover sheet for the SSLC Report & Action Tracker Template and there was some confusion. Once we added training for the Co-Chairs and some drop ins during key times (i.e. after the first SSLCs for Action Tracker, at the end of the Academic Year for report writing, at the staff of the new Academic Year for report interpretation) went a long way in uptake and quality of implementation.

Case Study 5

Academic Representation Reform, University of Westminster Students' Union

Saadah Osman, College Coordinator, University of Westminster University Students' Union

Context for Intervention

Prior to the intervention, academic representation at the University of Westminster was managed under a single coordinator responsible for over 900 course and school reps. This structure was ineffective; less than half of the reps were engaged, and there was minimal relationship between reps and academic staff. Feedback loops were weak, and students lacked a sense of belonging within their academic communities. The system's scale and complexity made meaningful engagement and timely feedback impossible, prompting a need for structural reform.

Description of the Intervention or Good Practice

The system was restructured by integrating academic representation with academic communities under the Partnership Projects Team. The role previously held by one coordinator was split into three College Coordinators, each responsible for a specific college: Westminster Business School (WBS), Liberal Arts and Sciences, and Design, Creative and Digital Industries (DCDI). This allowed coordinators to manage smaller groups of reps and build stronger relationships with stakeholders. School reps were rebranded as School Community Reps, emphasising community-building and belonging. College Coordinators began attending College Teaching Committees, ensuring student feedback reached decision-making forums.

A key innovation was the introduction of Shared Endeavours: collaborative projects between heads of schools, school community reps, and coordinators to address priority areas identified through data (e.g., NSS scores, internal surveys). Each College hosts Community Assemblies where staff and students are given the opportunity to vote on Shared Endeavours, two-year projects that address institutional priorities. Additional enhancements included Academic Affairs Forums replacing previous rep forums, data-gathering practices for course reps, School Rep Reports each semester with financial incentives (£250), a Reward and Recognition Scheme for course reps, improved training formats, and creation of a Rep Hub on Unitu for peer interaction.

Strategic Purpose of the Intervention

The overarching goals were to increase overall engagement with student representation, enhance a sense of community and belonging, align rep goals with institutional priorities, and improve responsiveness to student voice. By embedding representation within academic governance and focusing on shared goals, the system aims to create a culture of partnership between students and staff.

Impact or KPIs

Success was measured through multiple indicators: feedback quality (reduction in lagging data); platform usage (greater engagement on Unitu); shared endeavour outcomes (positive shifts in NSS scores and improvements in well-being initiatives). At the start of the 2025 term, there has been a higher uptake of recognition (high participation in reward schemes and training completion rates). The introduction of one-on-one meetings between each college

coordinator and the school community representatives has strengthened the feedback shared at the student voice forum. Qualitative feedback from Heads of Schools has confirmed stronger relationships and more effective collaboration.

Sustainability (Institutional Embedding and Senior Sponsorship)

Sustainability is reinforced through senior leadership support, governance integration, executive engagement, and collaborative ownership. Coordinators now sit on College Teaching Committees and Student Voice Forums, ensuring representation is part of institutional decision-making. Executive invitations to College Executive Group meetings embed student voice at the highest level. Quality and Standards team co-delivers training and manages compliance, signalling institutional commitment.

Lessons Learned

Key insights include:

- **Adequate resourcing is critical:** Splitting responsibilities across three coordinators enabled relationship-building and effective oversight. One person cannot manage large-scale representation without compromising quality.
- **Community matters:** Social elements significantly boost engagement. Framing data-gathering within community events increases attendance and participation.
- **Early and inclusive planning:** Moving assemblies earlier in the academic year and opening voting to all students strengthened buy-in.
- **Structured incentives work:** Financial rewards for school community reps and tiered recognition for course reps motivate sustained involvement.
- **Collaborative culture drives success:** Regular interaction with senior staff and integration into governance structures ensures feedback is acted upon and valued.
- **Continuous adaptation:** Piloting, evaluating, and refining processes (e.g., rebranding forums, introducing specialisms) maintain relevance and effectiveness.

This case study demonstrates that academic representation thrives when it is strategically aligned, adequately resourced, and socially engaging, with strong institutional support.

Case Study 6

University of Portsmouth Students' Union

George Baldwin, Student Voice Manager

Context

The Student Voice Manager at the University of Portsmouth Students' Union (UPSU) is responsible for overseeing the representation and democracy systems at UPSU. This includes managing both faculty and course representatives, as well as the student council and other democratic processes. The primary focus of the role is to ensure the effective operation of the student voice mechanisms.

The current manager has held this position since July of the previous year, so is relatively new in role. Upon joining UPSU, the manager was tasked with addressing the inefficacy of course representatives as a means of gathering and representing student feedback. A comprehensive document authored by the Academic Representation Officer examined current and historical practices in higher education, including those in European countries. The conclusion was that eliminating course representatives would not have as many negative consequences as initially anticipated. The primary risk identified was the potential loss of access to student voice, which was already considered weak.

Intervention

The solution implemented was to transition from course representatives to school representatives. The University of Portsmouth is divided into 17 schools, and the new system established a ratio of one representative per 100 to 250 students, resulting in approximately 200 school representatives. These school representatives were tasked with interpreting feedback gathered through the university's feedback mechanisms, particularly the StART tool (Student Academic Representation Tool), rather than collecting feedback themselves. This approach aimed to address systemic issues at the school level rather than at the course level.

Although the new system initially appeared successful, with feedback being efficiently escalated to the appropriate committees such as the Student Voice Committee (SVC), challenges emerged in encouraging students to use the feedback tools. School representatives also faced confusion regarding their roles and visibility among students. As a result, the system was further refined to include two school representatives per school, one of whom is specifically responsible for underrepresented students, specifically People of the Global Majority (PGM) students.

Course representatives were reintroduced, but their numbers and roles are now determined by the specific needs of each course and school. The focus remains on encouraging students to use established feedback mechanisms, with course representatives serving as facilitators. School representatives are now paid for their work, which is feasible due to the reduced number of positions.

The long-term objective is to build a culture in which students are familiar with and actively use feedback mechanisms, eventually making course representatives unnecessary. This cultural shift is planned to occur gradually over the next three to four years, allowing for careful evaluation and adjustment.

Impact and Evaluation

To measure the effectiveness of these changes, UPSU tracks the usage of the StART tool, engagement with course representatives, and training rates, which currently stand at approximately 65%. The impact strategy also includes monitoring student confidence in providing feedback and analysing trends in student voice scores from the National Student Survey (NSS) and annual union surveys. If a significant proportion of students are using the StART tool and report adequate access to student voice, the union intends to pilot the removal of course representatives in select faculties.

The StART tool itself is a survey-based platform developed in-house, designed to categorise and route feedback. Efforts are underway to make it more interactive, potentially incorporating features to increase student engagement and provide direct responses to feedback.

Sustainability and Lessons Learned

The initial proposal for these changes was authored by an officer and approved by the University Executive Student Experience Committee (UESEC), with strong support from senior university leadership. However, the rapid implementation across all 17 schools, coinciding with a university-wide restructure, led to unintended consequences and resource challenges. In retrospect, a phased pilot in one or two faculties would have allowed for more focused support and better outcomes. The current strategy is to refine and pilot the system further, with full implementation aligned with the university's new strategy by 2030.

The overarching aim is to effect a cultural change over a three-year cycle, focusing on new students and gradually embedding the use of feedback mechanisms into the student experience. This approach prioritises long-term change over immediate procedural adjustments. But it needs time and investment in inducting students into making the most of their student voice opportunities.

Case Study 7

Anglia Ruskin University

Ben Fenner, Diversity and Culture Research Lead

Context and Strategy

Anglia Ruskin University is a large, highly diverse institution, with over 35000 students across multiple campuses in different geographical areas of South-east England. It has a significant population of Black and mature students, particularly in nursing, health, and business programmes. This diversity shapes our approach to closing attainment gaps and addressing broader societal trends.

The Access and Participation Plan Feedback Project comes from within the Diversity and Cultural Change team (Student & Library Services) at Anglia Ruskin University, which focusses on delivery of Access and Participation initiatives and equity and inclusion for students. This piece of work is motivated by the need to deliver a successful Access and Participation Plan (APP). The strategic objective of this initiative is to support diversity and cultural change, equality, equity, inclusion, and closing attainment gaps.

This case study examines the challenge of developing and launching a student voice intervention, in a large, complex institution under tight time constraints, working with a range of stakeholders from across the institution.

Practice

This student voice project is closely tied to the institution's APP KPIs, calling for new student feedback to inform interventions aimed at reducing continuation and awarding gaps among groups such as mature students, students from deprived areas, and Black and Asian students. The approach combines targeted interventions with broader strategies to improve the experience for all students. We recognise that barriers may disproportionately affect certain groups, such as those with limited time or resources, and that assets may be more accessible to some students than others.

A significant aspect of the work involves evaluating the current feedback mechanisms and considering how they should evolve. We have identified issues such as siloed feedback systems, limited integration with demographic data, and survey fatigue. For example, student feedback is often collected through separate systems, making it difficult to analyse responses by demographic group. Engagement with centralised surveys is limited, and the feedback does not always reflect the broader student experience.

Initially, the project appeared to be the development of (yet another) survey, but there is a desire to avoid traditional survey formats while still collecting survey-type data. The challenge is to reconcile these requirements within the scope of a one-year project.

This year, we plan to run a pilot project using Explorance Blue software, which is currently used for module evaluation surveys. The aim is to leverage this software to distribute questions to the majority of students in a light-touch manner, such as one question per week over five weeks. Students should be able to respond quickly and easily, and the analysis will allow responses to be broken down r by demographic group.

We are working with students and the Students' Union to develop the questions, focusing on themes such as belonging and mattering within the university community. Open-ended

questions may be used to identify barriers to success, with follow-up questions and focus groups to refine the analysis.

Artificial intelligence will assist in analysing open responses to identify common themes, which can then be related to responses on closed questions. The goal is to combine qualitative insights and quantitative data, always considering the impact on different student groups.

The pilot project will avoid targeting students preparing for the National Student Survey (NSS) to prevent overburdening them. We are consulting with the Students' Union to refine our approach, and with key staff members to ensure the process is integrated with university systems.

Regarding incentives, the pilot will likely use simple rewards such as entries into a prize draw for each question answered. While more sophisticated reward systems have been discussed, resource constraints necessitate a straightforward approach for now. We are mindful of inclusion concerns, and are working with student partners and disability leads, with the aim of ensuring all students feel comfortable participating.

We are also exploring in-person engagement initiatives, such as providing vouchers during campus feedback events, to complement online efforts. These initiatives have proven effective in other institutions.

Impact and Evaluation

The impact assessment for the pilot is still being developed. The immediate priority is to launch the project and gather data, with plans to work with student partners and the Students' Union to evaluate the experience and inform future activities. Long-term impact will be measured by changes in institutional statistics, though this may take years to become evident. Mid-term impact may be evaluated by embedding key questions with annual feedback cycles, to enable year-on-year analysis.

Student Partners, play a key role in shaping the initiative. We have completed the first phase of recruitment and onboarded a group of 11 students who contribute through consultations and workshops, both asynchronously and in person where feasible. The dispersed nature of the university presents logistical challenges, but we are committed to supporting student involvement across campuses.

The Student Partners programme evolved from ARU's Race Equality Advocates initiative and now aims to provide broader consultancy to the university. We strive to offer training and support to ensure students are effective and comfortable in their roles. The programme is closely aligned with the Students' Union, and we are working collaboratively to co-create the project design and development.

Lessons Learned

One lesson learned is the need for communication, collaboration, and consistency across the university to address the challenge of disparate and fragmented feedback systems. Successful initiatives at other universities often rely on well-established internal networks or organisation rather than isolated individual or team efforts, and this is a model we aspire to develop.

Case Study 8

Sheffield Hallam University Students' Union

Ed Robinson, Representation Manager and Eve Woodall, Representation Coordinator

Context and Strategy

Sheffield Hallam Students' Union recognised that there were significant amounts of student voice activity undertaken, including Course Reps, but that it was difficult to determine how consistently it was happening, what resulted from it, and what Course Reps' contributions were beyond recruitment and training attendance. The Students' Union has been working for some years towards developing a way to measure and incentivise Course Rep activity without being intrusive, and in a way that is not labour-intensive.

Practice

The Union has been working to incentivise Course Rep activity, aiming for a self-serve approach that reduces operational burdens. They have created a 'Badge' system, allowing Reps to log and be rewarded for their contributions. Making use of collaborative tools and features in the MSL membership management system has enabled a cost-effective and more user-friendly system. Some of the functions were developed in-house by the Representation Manager (with a bit of help from Chat GPT) and has resulted in a system that allows intuitive tracking of engagement and progress towards badges which the students can manage much of by themselves.

The SU has created nine badges across three tiers, marking levels of engagement from basic requirements to advanced student voice projects. Attendance tracking at Course Rep meetings, once challenging to consistently monitor across the institution, is now managed via a Microsoft list and form, streamlining administration and providing real-time updates. Badge acquisition is largely automated, and students can download certificates directly, minimising manual work. The system is scalable, sustainable, and focuses on meaningful activity, with ongoing improvements to meeting logs. If issues arise, students can report them for prompt resolution. The badge system encourages leadership and normalises active representation among students. This also allows Reps to keep track of their achievements and skills they have developed in the role.

For example, signing up automatically grants the first badge, requiring no additional input from the SU staff. This approach focuses on capturing meaningful activity rather than just maintaining the process.

One time-saving feature is that when students unlock a badge tier, they can download their certificate automatically. The system retrieves the name from the database and generates the certificate, eliminating manual work.

The system adds the right amount of self-serve functionality. The first tier covers up to the student voice meeting, the next tier includes school-wide activities and additional training, and the final tier is more free-form and involves a student voice project. The top tier is for those who want to demonstrate high engagement. The badge system helps create mini student leaders who are normalising engagement with student voice.

Impact and Evaluation

The systems created have enabled much better tracking of student engagement in the form of meeting logs and badges, which supports evaluation activities. Previously, it was impossible to track attendance at student voice meetings due to lack of infrastructure, but by using a Microsoft list and form, course leaders can log attendance efficiently. This system minimises administrative work and provides real-time tracking for students. There is still some manual input, but it's much less than before. The system is sustainable and scalable, allowing us to add new badges as needed.

Having passionate and competent student leaders makes it easier for others to get involved, and the system makes it much easier to identify these students. Adding a social element to representative roles adds an additional motivation to get involved with a role that is not immediately attractive to everyone. Some of the lead representatives have become local heroes, recognisable amongst the student body and admired for what they do. In turn, this has made the lead representative role more desirable, and the SU hope that this will improve both recruitment and retention in representation roles going forward.

Sustainability

Some criticism in the sector is that representatives aren't truly representative, but Hallam SU thinks it is unrealistic to expect volunteers to gather a scientifically representative sample. Surveys rarely get full response rates. Instead, effective student voice work should combine survey data with real-life conversations between students and lecturers. The role of a rep should be less about providing a representative sample and more about being a point of contact, like a holiday rep.

The Hallam Union approach emphasises building a network rather than a community. Recruitment is part of that, as is equipping and empowering reps with training and resources. Ensuring reps feel valued is also key. This can include badges or a simple thank you email. We've also started recognising staff who support student voice, through initiatives like Student Voice Champions.

Lessons Learned

The purpose is to empower students to make positive change. We spent a couple of years on approaches that weren't scalable or self-serve, which may not have been worthwhile. It's crucial to think carefully about scalability and sustainability.

Don't underestimate the value of a simple thank you or note of recognition. This is important for students and the staff who support them.

Listening to students is often more valuable than solving every problem. For example, when we addressed the cost of materials for art students, they appreciated being heard. You don't have to solve every problem. Students knowing they are listened to is just as important. Having a simple way of tracking student voice activity allows us to 'play back' student sentiment, helping them to feel appreciated.

Case Study 9

University of Leeds

Laura Conroy, Student Partnerships Advisor, Organisational Development and Professional Learning

James Forde, Head of Curriculum Development and Enhancement

Context and Strategy

The University of Leeds, through its 'Curriculum Redefined' programme, sought to further embed the ethos of students as partners into its educational strategy. This approach was not simply about launching a traditional partnerships programme, but about fostering a lasting culture of partnership across the institution. The initiative was driven by senior leadership, with the recognition that while there was already significant activity labelled as partnership work, this activity was systematically recorded and tracked. The strategic aim was to move beyond isolated projects and instead build institutional benchmarks for authentic partnership, ensuring that such practices became an integral part of all university enhancement activities.

A key contextual factor was the university's size and diversity, which presented both opportunities and challenges. The approach was informed by previous experiences at other institutions, where large-scale partnership programmes were successful in reach but raised questions about long-term sustainability once funding ceased. At Leeds, the focus shifted to creating enduring cultures of partnership at the programme and school level, working closely with leadership to ensure that partnership practices were appropriate for different departmental contexts and, ultimately, self-sustaining.

The Intervention in Practice

The intervention began with a diagnostic phase, engaging staff in Schools and programmes to understand their existing student partnership practices within their disciplinary community, and to identify any specific challenges. Rather than imposing a fixed plan, Student Partnership Advisors worked with staff to clarify partnership goals and desired outcomes. They offered advice and recommendations throughout the process and co-designed bespoke activities to achieve these aims, enhancing existing practices or developing new approaches.

This process was highly bespoke, adapting to the readiness and needs of different staff and student groups.

Student involvement varied across projects, ranging from providing contextual insights to participating in co-creation workshops and planning meetings. The advisory team modelled partnership practices for staff, demonstrating the value of involving students in strategic thinking and project direction. A significant aspect of the intervention was supporting staff development 'by doing', and through ongoing dialogue, reflective practice, and coaching, rather than through more conventional, formal training programmes. Playfulness and creativity were encouraged in partnership activities to break down hierarchies and foster genuine collaboration.

The approach also prioritised inclusivity, aiming to involve a broad spectrum of students beyond traditional student representation roles and the most engaged students. Toolkits and resources were developed to support the participation of underrepresented groups, with the goal of making partnership experiences accessible and meaningful for all students.

This toolkit is part of a growing set of resources created by the team, including guidance on co-creating with students, collaborating with student representatives, establishing and facilitating Student Advisory Boards, and introducing play into partnership. These resources were developed to help staff confidently embed inclusive, sustainable partnership practices and involve a wider range of students in meaningful ways.

Impact and Evaluation

While formal Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were not imposed, the Partnerships Team monitored short-term measures of success including the breadth of engagement: reaching all seven faculties and a diverse range of staff, including those new to partnership work was an important milestone. Attendance and engagement at workshops and events were tracked, and reflective feedback was collected from both staff and students. Partnership advisors note positive feedback from staff about how they have been supported.

A key marker of impact is the legacy of partnership practices: staff expressing a desire to continue partnership work independently, and the ripple effect of upskilled staff sharing their experiences with colleagues. Tangible outputs, such as co-created resources and new programme developments, were also noted as evidence of impact. The team recognise the challenge of attributing changes in broad student metrics (e.g., NSS, TEF) directly to their work, but plan to evaluate influence through staff practice, student development, and the spread of partnership culture.

Sustainability

Sustainability was a central consideration from the outset. T The approach of the team was designed to enable staff members who initially work with the Advisors to lead their own partnership work in the future. The focus was on equipping staff with the skills, confidence, and reflective capacity to embed partnership practices within their own contexts. Success was defined not by the completion of discrete projects, but by the normalisation of partnership as a core aspect of educational development. The team's role is evolving from hands-on support to a more advisory or 'check-in' function as staff become more self-sufficient, enabling the team to support other contexts in need of advice and guidance.

The approach also emphasised the importance of context sensitivity, trusting staff to know their environments while providing challenge and support as needed. The legacy of the intervention is seen in staff independently initiating partnership activities, sharing their experiences at conferences, and integrating partnership principles into ongoing practice.

Lessons Learned

Key lessons include the importance of starting from where staff are, taking incremental steps, and ensuring that every partnership experience is productive and contextually appropriate. Imposing large, prescriptive plans was seen as unsustainable and potentially alienating. Instead, building trust, valuing process over output, and being transparent about experimentation and potential failure were emphasised.

Another lesson is the value of reflective practice, not only for staff development but also for consolidating effective partnership approaches. The Partnerships team learned to trust staff's contextual knowledge while remaining open to challenging assumptions and co-exploring solutions. Finally, knowing when to step back and allow staff to take ownership was identified as a critical judgment call for sustaining the culture of partnership.

Case Study 10

Huddersfield Students' Union

Heather Wade, Representation and Voice Manager

Context and Strategy

The University of Huddersfield Students' Union recognises the distinctiveness of the University population, which is predominantly commuter-based, with an average student age of 28. The Union's strategic approach centres on fostering a genuine partnership with the University, prioritising student engagement and representation. This partnership is characterised by strong, reciprocal relationships at all organisational levels, from the Union CEO to academic representatives. The Union's staff structure is unique in the sector, relying heavily on part-time student staff who maintain close connections with academic Schools, enabling authentic peer-to-peer conversations and community building.

Description of Good Practice

The Union's good practice is rooted in several key principles:

- **Student-Centred Engagement:** The Union places students at the forefront when designing student voice opportunities, enabling societies and student-led initiatives to thrive. Activities such as coffee and cake sessions, and topic-specific forums are designed to be accessible and responsive to student needs, with student leaders clearly visible.

- **Authentic Representation:** Student-staff facilitate ongoing dialogue, feedback collection, and event organisation, ensuring students can engage on their own terms. The Union's approach values authenticity and bravery, encouraging students to voice concerns and participate without barriers.

- **Innovative Collaboration:** The Union and University collaborate on creative initiatives, such as the "Pirate Workshop" funded by RAISE, a creative and liberating approach to encouraging students to participate. This activity generated rich feedback, giving evidence to contribute to the development of a new student voice framework.

- **Data-Driven Impact:** Engagement is meticulously tracked using algorithms to enable the Union to monitor participation, target resources, and demonstrate impact to the university. Social media is leveraged to document and celebrate student-led events, contributing to a vibrant narrative of student involvement.

- **Matching the academic culture:** Flexibility is encouraged, allowing each school to tailor engagement methods to their distinctive student demographics and culture.

Impact and Evaluation

The partnership model has yielded several positive outcomes:

- **Meaningful Student Engagement:** The Union's approach has resulted in strong student engagement, with between 700 and 800 volunteer reps annually and 14 student-staff working in representation, managed by the Students' Union, to help support them. Student voice activities are well attended.

- **Rich Feedback and Institutional Change:** Innovative practices, such as the Pirate Workshop, have produced valuable feedback that directly influenced university policy. The Union's and the students' contributions are valued in university meetings, and their actions are documented and acted upon.

- **Responsive Resource Allocation:** The Union's data system allows for targeted interventions when engagement drops in specific schools, or for specific demographics, ensuring resources are efficiently directed and impact is maximised.

Lessons Learned

Key lessons from the University of Huddersfield Students' Union experience include:

- **Partnership and Bravery Are Essential:** Building and maintaining a genuine partnership with the university is foundational. Bravery in trying new approaches and moving away from historic practices is necessary to meet the evolving needs of today's students.

- **Flexibility and Individualisation:** Engagement strategies must be flexible and tailored to the diverse needs of students. Topic-specific, student-led, and online options are vital for inclusivity.

- **Authenticity Over Formality:** Authentic, informal interactions—such as offering pizza or vouchers for local businesses and experiences—help break down barriers and foster genuine connections. Allowing students to choose their own rewards, for example, makes them feel seen and understood as individuals: they feel their views matter.

- **Data-Informed Practice:** Rigorous data collection and analysis underpin effective evaluation and resource allocation, ensuring that the Union's impact is measurable and transparent.

- **Sustained Commitment:** Long-term staff commitment and a willingness to adapt are crucial for sustaining cultural change and delivering lasting benefits to students.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Stage 1 Call for Responses: Audit of Student Representation and Student Voice Practices

Please see the below Call for Participation from the University of Westminster which is leading a collaboration to audit Student Voice Practice in the UK. Following a successful pilot led by the University of Nottingham Students' Union in 2024, this new survey aims to draw responses from Student Union Student Voice Managers, University Student Experience Leads, and/or Quality Managers from UK Universities.

If you completed the survey in 2024, please note this is a separate survey where we invite you to respond again with your most up-to-date practices. If you are the right person to complete this, please see the survey below. Or please forward on to your Student Voice Lead at your University or Student Union (Please note, we can take more than one response per institution).

The Audit of Student Representation and Voice Practices - QAA Project Survey We represent a consortium of universities and students' unions, supported and funded by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education as part of a Collaborative Enhancement Project, to conduct a sector audit of student voice facilitation in UK Higher Education. Led by University of Westminster, we are inviting participation from both Students' Union and University education or student voice leads. This short survey should take **15 minutes of your time** and all responses will be anonymised in the analysis process. University names are only needed for response tracking and will not be shared in the findings. At the end of the study, there will be an opportunity to give contact details if you wish to share a case study of best practice in Phase Two of this study.

Click this Survey link

Who should participate in this study? This study should be completed by Universities or Higher Education Institutions, where ideally, the survey should be completed by those with knowledge of Student Voice, Module Evaluation and Course Evaluation practices. This could be Students' Union Staff (especially Representation Managers), and for Universities, PVCs, Directors of Quality and/or Heads of Learning and Teaching.

Note: **This survey can have multiple responses per university**. Please forward this on to colleagues to complete separately if, for example, different staff members coordinate different areas (such as SU coordinating Student Representation, and University coordinating Module Evaluations). **You do not have to answer all the questions.**

- Section 1 asks for your institutional information.

- Section 2 asks for information about representatives.

- Section 3 asks for information about student rep training, hours of service and academic societies.

- Section 4 asks about module evaluations and other student voice practices.

- Section 5 asks if you would like to provide an email address for follow-up interviews.

Data Management: The data is being collected by a survey held by the University of Westminster, where the data will be held on a secure Westminster Microsoft SharePoint for 3 years. Following this, the data will be destroyed. Any participants wishing to remove their data will be able to do by

emailing T.Lowe@westminster.ac.uk prior to the 31st August 2025. This research has been approved in line with the University of Westminster Ethics Code of Practice (Ref: ETH2425-1095)

Appendix 2 RAISE Spring Webinar 1: To Pay or not To Pay?

Report compiled by Jill LeBihan, Research Associate, University of Westminster (J.LeBihan@westminster.ac.uk)

Over one hundred participants joined us for the RAISE webinar on 9th April 2025, where the topic under discussion was titled 'To Pay or not to Pay?', and we explored the views of our participants on how student representation might be recognised or incentivised.

Discussion leaders

- Ashley Storer Smith (RAISE SU representative, Anglia Ruskin University)

- Faye Ap Geraint (RAISE Professional and Learning Services Representative, Aberystwyth University)

- Daisy Bao (RAISE Student Committee member, University of Edinburgh)

To pay …

We discussed creating a paid role to recognise the time commitment, seeing the role as a job with expectations or responsibilities. There is a need, as the responsibilities increase, to recognise students' input and make it possible for students to choose the representation work rather than a casual paid job. Participants agreed there is a need to recognise the costs of participation (travel, parking, childcare) particularly with rising costs of living.

Participants noted that paying students as representatives was an indicator of the marketized nature of higher education. Colleagues wanted to show student representatives are valued and paying them is one way of doing that, especially if students feel that action does not follow their input. Being responsive to student voices is one way of showing they are valued, but colleagues were conscious this does not always happen.

Where colleagues currently do not have the resources to pay students for their time, they indicated that they would really like to be able to.

There was consideration of whether pay acts as an incentive that maintains student engagement with full training and activities over time.

Or not to pay …

There was lively conversation around reasons to not pay students. Some reasons were pragmatic (too many students wanting to be course reps to make it affordable or practicable); some reasons were around conflicts of interest and students potentially having a more authentic voice if they were not being paid for their views. Fully paid systems may create competitive environments that could lead to exclusion, particularly for students from marginalised backgrounds. There was discussion of the administrative headache of managing payments for students on a large scale (especially via payroll).

Colleagues noted the need for a clear remit for distinct kinds of roles so that students are clear what they are being asked to do, how they are being recompensed, and to make sure that roles do not come into conflict.

Colleagues did want to draw a distinction between students acting as representatives, taking part in a required quality assurance process, and students who are subjects of research/user experience, where they are being asked for their views rather than working as employees. It was noted that the use of incentives for subjects in research can affect the data that is collected

and may influence the power dynamic between the researcher and the student as research subject.

Volunteering

There was discussion around civic responsibilities of institutions and the future of volunteering, with consensus that there should be training for students to be citizens and members of communities (rather than customers). Some participants noted a decline in willing volunteers for representation roles whilst paid student consultants/student advisors had significant contributions to make.

The discussion continued to circle around the issue of maintaining a volunteer spirit whilst recognising the practical realities of student life and the barriers to engagement without some recompense. The role of student unions was felt to be important in supporting students to develop as volunteers, and Student Unions were seen to have a clear role in volunteer management.

Variable Reward Systems

It was noted that the payment ecosystem is very varied, even within a single institution (which is partly why the audit is important).

There was a discussion about how to set an appropriate amount: can you pay too much? Is it always going to be too little? This also raised the question of whether paid voices are stronger or given more weight. Colleagues wanted to understand more about how students themselves perceive this difference: do they see their voices as more important if they are paid for?

Alternatives to and choices on pay

There was a view that recognition of student's time commitment: doesn't have to be financial: certification or other kinds of recognition, such as local volunteer accreditation, can work.

Participants stressed the need to close the feedback loop and there is an argument that this can be as much an incentive as other more tangible rewards.

Discussants agreed strongly that there should be some element of choice around payment. Some students don't want payment at all (as it may affect their other benefits, or their Visa status). Grocery vouchers could be more welcome than Amazon. 'One for All' vouchers were suggested. Some students donated their wages to charities.

There was a broader question of how we get students supported enough so that they don't have to choose between casual work and taking on a representation responsibility.

Request for sector-level guidance

There was a strong request for sector guidelines around rewarding representation.

The idea of a policy piece around labour and reward/payment – an understanding of the work required for representation – was welcomed.

Colleagues agreed there was a need to look at workloads and role definitions across each institution and the sector.

Activism and/or partnership: SU and University responsibilities

There was some discussion about the difference between being paid by Students' Unions and by universities, and whether payment directly from a university might constrain students' freedom to speak out. Colleagues reported that students were honest and open, regardless

of whether they were paid or not. Meetings facilitated by non-academic staff were seen to support open expression.

There are clearly tensions where reps are paid by a students' union and then given work by the institution. Where there is partnership work, the fiscal responsibility is an awkward issue to manage.

Some colleagues felt that universities having financial responsibility but having the Students' Union disperse payments was a helpful separation to have.

Colleagues noted the need to distinguish between giving personal opinions and more representative feedback, and formal Student Union functions supported this distinction.

Colleagues noted the 'messiness' of feedback, insight, and co-creation: the student engagement paradigm continues to be a difficult one to manage.

Best practice recommendations and suggestions

For reflecting on student partnership and payment, colleagues recommended sparqs's resource and the section on "recognition and reward": https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/Partnership_Ambition_resource.pdf

The closest to formal guidance in England from the Office for Students is in B2: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/part-v-guidance-on-the-general-ongoing-conditions-of-...

Colleagues recommended clear descriptors for both paid and unpaid roles.

Colleagues suggested models of good practice from Europe where academic credit is awarded for representation roles and Scandinavia, where PhD students earn a salary.

For non-pay options, colleagues suggested that open forums/town halls forums or student opinion panels might serve a strong representative function in place of more traditional models.

Problems needing solutions.

There were some problems raised that we should not lose sight of:

Colleagues mentioned the tension between wanting to involve students more, wanting to reward them appropriately, and then the financial landscape in the HE sector now.

Colleagues also noted the tension between expecting students to have a responsibility to reflect on their learning on the one hand, and on the other understanding that some are just desperately hanging on in there, recognising that time to reflect might be a luxury they do not have.

There was a request for the audit to be extended to FE and Colleges.

Appendix 3 RAISE Spring Webinar 2: To Elect or Select?

The Panel took place on 15th May 2025 and was chaired by Tom Lowe, University of Westminster. Panel discussants were: Saadah Osman (University of Westminster Students' Union); Simon Varwell (University of Highlands and Islands); Conor Naughton (University of Nottingham); Lysandre de-la-Haye (Birmingham Newman University). This report was prepared by Jill LeBihan (University of Westminster).

Summary of Discussion on Student Representation: To Elect or Select?

1. Approaches to Student Representation (Saadah)

Institutions across the UK and Ireland adopt a variety of models for appointing student representatives, ranging from elections to selection processes, or a hybrid of both. The choice often depends on institutional structure, student demographics, and available resources.

- Hybrid Models: Some institutions use a combination of self-nomination, staff nomination, and interviews. For example, students with prior experience may be invited to apply for more senior roles, while course leaders may automatically reappoint returning reps.
- Selection vs. Election: While elections are seen as more democratic, selection can ensure that committed and capable individuals are appointed. The key is balancing inclusivity with effectiveness.

2. Key Considerations in Representation Models (Simon)

- Capacity: Institutions must assess their ability to manage elections or selection processes, including training and support, particularly in times of diminishing resource.
- Constitution: Institutional and student union policies may dictate or influence the method of appointment.
- Culture: The prevailing culture of student engagement—whether participatory or passive—can shape the effectiveness of either model.
- Citizenship: Representation can be a tool for civic education, helping students understand democratic processes and stakeholder engagement.

3. Challenges and Practicalities (Conor)

Several challenges were identified in implementing effective student representation:

- Student Fatigue and Engagement: Many students lack the time, energy, or motivation to engage in complex election processes. Simplifying these processes can improve participation.
- Continuity and Awareness: Some students are unaware they can continue in rep roles, highlighting a need for better communication and onboarding.
- Overpromising and Under-delivering: Marketing materials often exaggerate the impact reps can have, leading to disillusionment when institutional change is slow.
- Tokenism: There is concern that some institutions engage in student voice initiatives performatively, without genuine intent to act on feedback.

4. Supporting and Empowering Reps (Lysandre)

Support structures are critical to the success of student reps:

- Training and Preparation: Reps need clear, accessible training to navigate institutional jargon and governance structures. Some institutions provide glossaries, online modules, and mentoring.

- Incentives: Financial compensation, recognition in achievement reports, and career development support can motivate and retain reps.
- Feedback Loops: Institutions should visibly act on student feedback and communicate changes to reinforce the value of representation.

5. Discussion from participants and panellists

Models of Representation: Electing vs. Selecting

- Mixed Approaches: Many institutions adopt a hybrid model, combining elections, self-nomination, and staff recommendations. This allows for flexibility based on context and student   demographics.
  - Appointment decisions and empowerment: The method of appointment should align with the function of the role. For feedback collection, selection may suffice; for strategic representation, elections may be more appropriate. We should consider w*ho is empowered by the election process.*
- Disciplinary Cultures: Different academic disciplines exhibit varying levels of engagement and competitiveness in rep selection, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective. Election mechanisms might be biased towards students who already understand or have experience of that sort of process.
- Practical suggestions included an 'expression of interest' form and online elections

Motivations and Authenticity

- There was debate over whether the motivations behind student engagement (e.g., institutional performance metrics vs. genuine partnership) matter if the outcomes are positive.
  - Authenticity and transparency in motivations were seen as important for trust and long-term engagement.

Challenges in Student Representation

- Barriers to Engagement: Formal election processes can be intimidating, especially for mature or underrepresented students. Simplified processes like expressions of interest have improved participation in some contexts.
- Red Tape and Burnout: Bureaucratic hurdles and unrealistic expectations can lead to disengagement. Students need clarity on what they can realistically achieve.
- Tokenism and Power Dynamics: Students often feel underprepared or sidelined in formal meetings. Representation must be meaningful, not symbolic.

Supporting and Empowering Reps

- Training and Preparation: Comprehensive training and clear expectations are essential. Students perform better when they understand their role and are properly prepared. Make sure students have an ally in the room (who can spend time preparing them and debriefing them).
- Recognition and Incentives: Paying reps or formally recognising their contributions (e.g., in achievement reports) can validate their efforts and encourage sustained involvement.
- Framing Success: We need to help reps understand the value of their work, and understand its transferability to the workplace.
- Making sure there is respect and support for managing peer-to-peer discussion, and making sure reps can speak without consequences.

- Make sure student voice is valued on the agenda (not 'AOB' at the end of a long meeting). Consider student chairs or co-chairs of meetings.

Enhancing Representation Structures

- Partnerships: Strong collaboration between student unions and academic staff is vital. Staff encouragement can significantly boost student confidence and participation.
- Ensure the whole community buys in to the student representation model; it's not just about partnership with the 'converted'. Everyone needs to be brought along the journey.
- Dialogue Over Division: Avoiding "us vs. them" dynamics between staff and students fosters a more collaborative environment.
- Flexible Engagement: Institutions should explore alternative formats for engagement (e.g., forums, informal drop-ins, asynchronous feedback) to accommodate diverse student needs.

Recommendations and Reflections

- Tailor Approaches: Adapt representation models to suit the culture and needs of different student groups and disciplines, depending on how much encouragement they might need.
- Prioritise Inclusion: Ensure that all students, regardless of background or confidence level, have pathways to participate.
- Focus on Impact: Representation should lead to tangible outcomes. Institutions must act on feedback and communicate changes clearly; but be realistic about what can be done (don't over-promise).
- Formal committees are not the most important places of influence; make the most of informal opportunities for feedback too.
- Keep the Conversation Going: Ongoing dialogue between students, staff, and unions is essential to refine and improve representation practices.

Appendix 4 RAISE Spring Webinar 3: Should we evaluate everything?

Participants

Session Chair: Tom Lowe (University of Westminster; Chair of RAISE)

Session Facilitator: Faye Ap Geraint (Aberystwyth University, RAISE Committee)

Session presenters: Dr Stuart Sims (Greenwich University); Dr Nathaniel Pickering (Greenwich University); Dr Jill LeBihan (Westminster University)

Over two hundred participants joined us for the final of our trio of webinars discussing student voice. Thank you to everyone who has participated this Spring. You have made the sessions lively and informative, and there has been a genuine exchange of ideas and sharing of contacts and resources via the active chat.

The following report has been anonymised and distilled. We hope you find this is helpful in capturing the content of the session.

Presenters' Comments:

Stuart Sims began by casting a sceptical eye over the use of institutional metrics, arguing that metrics are not necessarily objective and that the numbers are sometimes used to produce retrospective justification for decisions or processes. He argued that presenting metrical data can produce an emotive response, and might even result in people 'tuning out' or turning away. Citing Brown and Hesketh (2004), Stuart mentioned the 'science of gut feeling' as a way in which data can be misused. Nevertheless, in summation Stuart made a (rare) argument in favour for the potential offered by the NSS as a way of listening to students at scale, but with the view that the instrument needs redesign.

Jill LeBihan argued that we might make room for more creative approaches to working with students on evaluation (and examples of good practice from participants were shared – see below). She also argued for evaluations to be more embedded into meaningful activities for students rather than tagged on. She argued that very high-level, generic questionnaires (particularly about teaching and learning activities) are too difficult to design to be meaningful for everyone, given the diversity within institutions. She suggests activities that align to class assessment techniques (Angelo and Cross) enable students to test where they have understanding and confidence, and for staff to use these as feedback on what is working (or not) in the teaching delivery. Co-designing improvements with students can follow. Jill argued for the Peseta and Bell (2020) model of 'teaching the university' so students can make the most of it.

Nathaniel Pickering argued that we shouldn't evaluate everything, but that we should evaluate change activities. He argued for developing a culture of evaluation, with a degree of proportionality. Evaluation must be embedded in change processes from the beginning, with clarity about what people are doing and why. For example, Access and Participation Plans focus on the need for belong and community, but are often using metrics for student success instead of developing more relevant and specific measures. Similarly, he argues that module evaluation questionnaires are used by too many stakeholders for too many things. Are they about identifying areas of risk, or about improving teaching, or about demonstrating responsiveness to student voice? Nathaniel argued that a focus on quick wins detracts from an understanding that institutional change takes time and requires patience.

1. The Nature and Limitations of Metrics

- **Metrics are not neutral**: Participants emphasised that metrics often reflect institutional priorities and biases. They can drive behaviour in ways that may not align with educational values.

- **Reductive tendencies**: Metrics simplify complex realities, potentially overlooking nuance and context.

- **Sample bias and interpretation**: Concerns were raised about statistical validity, sample representativeness, and the risk of misinterpretation.

- **Institutional pressure**: Metrics like NSS, PTES, and PRES are tied to performance reviews and course evaluations, sometimes leading to performative compliance rather than genuine improvement.

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2. The Value and Challenges of Qualitative Data

- **Transformative potential**: Qualitative methods (e.g., listening rooms, anecdotal observations, digital stories) were seen as more meaningful and impactful for both students and institutions.

- **Bias and interpretation**: Qual data can be politically charged or misused. Some noted a trend toward more hostile or polarized student feedback, especially toward female staff.

- **AI and qual analysis**: Tools like Student Voice AI are emerging, but concerns remain about accuracy and the need for human oversight.

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3. Student Engagement and Feedback Mechanisms

- **Survey fatigue**: There's a consensus that students are over-surveyed, though this is more often voiced by staff than students themselves (potentially because students just don't respond rather than respond wearily or complain about over-surveying).

- **Mid-module evaluations**: These are used as a way to make timely changes and demonstrate responsiveness (compared to more formal end of module surveys).

- **Creative approaches**: Examples include co-lab festivals, spin-to-win incentives, and artistic or discipline-aligned feedback methods. Reference was made to the University of Leeds 'Campus Re-imagined' project and their Co-Lab festival, which inspired colleagues at Bath Spa to run a similar event.

- **A three-week 'sprint'** for institutional surveys. Week 1 - survey; week 2 - follow up focus groups based on the headline findings; week 3 - feedback to (all) students with initial actions.

- **Closing the feedback loop**: Essential for maintaining student trust and engagement. Transparency about what can and cannot be changed is key.

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4. Co-Creation and Student Partnership

- **Benefits and boundaries**: While co-creation is valued, some questioned whether it can go too far, potentially undermining academic expertise or delaying necessary changes.

- **Theory of Change and collaborative strategies**: Institutions are using structured frameworks to embed student voice in strategic planning.

- **Ethical concerns**: Issues were raised about the ethics of soliciting nominations or feedback that may favour popularity over pedagogical quality.

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5. Institutional Practices and Policy

- **Survey governance**: Some institutions require approval for large-scale surveys to avoid duplication and ensure data is used effectively.

- **Data saturation and representativeness**: Questions were raised about how much qualitative data is "enough" and how to ensure it reflects diverse student voices.

- **Use of metrics for improvement vs. justification**: A tension exists between using evaluation for genuine enhancement versus proving value to senior leadership.

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6. Broader Philosophical Reflections

- **Purpose of higher education**: Some participants questioned whether current evaluation practices align with the broader goal of helping students become "better people," not just better students.

- **Neoliberal influences**: There was critique of the consumerist model of education, which may prioritize satisfaction over learning or development.

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7. References

Colleagues mentioned and shared various references and sources:

Co-lab festivals:

- Campus Reimagined | University of Leeds

- Campus Reimagined Live! Full event round-up | Campus Reimagined

Creative strategies for student voice

- Digital Storytelling: https://yorkshireuniversities.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/137/2018/04/digitalstorytellingprojectguide.pdf

- listening rooms

- Brown MEL, Finn G. (2024) Shut up, or Set Free: Poetic Inquiry into Disabled Students' Experiences of Differential Attainment. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, *13*(1): 561–571. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/ pme.1392

Institutional management of data

- The Mismanagement of Talent - Paperback - Phillip Brown, Anthony Hesketh - Oxford University Press

Teaching evaluation

- Class Assessment Techniques: 50_cats.pdf

- A chapter on evaluating your teaching: Marshall, Fry and Ketteridge (2014) https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781315763088/handbook-teaching-learning-higher-education-stephanie-marshall-heather-fry-steve-ketteridge

Analysis of module evaluation data using AI

- https://evasys.co.uk/evasys-and-student-voice-ai-announce-exciting-new-partnership/

Problems with using institutional teaching awards data

- https://hogreutbildning.se/index.php/hu/article/view/4096

Using Changebusters for learning about evaluation

- https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/changebusters

Restricting use of students as research subjects

- Guidance for external researchers | Research Support

Embedding an understanding of how to make the most of university and student voice:

- Peseta and Bell (2020) Seeing institutionally: a rationale for 'teach the University' in student and staff partnerships: Higher Education Research & Development: Vol 39, No 1

Student hostility in feedback

- Use and Abuse of the Student Voice | Advance HE

- Daskalopoulou, A. (2024). "Understanding the impact of biased student evaluations: an intersectional analysis of academics' experiences in the UK higher education context." Studies in Higher Education **49**(12): 2411-2422.