What is the student voice? Thirteen essays on how to listen to students and how to act on what they say

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About the editor

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About EvaSys

EvaSys is a leading provider of survey and evaluation solutions, with more than 60 higher education institution customers across the UK and Ireland and over 1,000 worldwide; it is designed to both capture and respond to the student voice. EvaSys enables universities to streamline module evaluation and student surveys while driving up response rates and helping to close the student feedback loop and improve National Student Survey student voice outcomes.

Widely integrated with other higher education systems, such as VLE (virtual learning environments) and student portals, EvaSys provides instant and detailed feedback reports for course and module leaders, as well as extensive insights and management information for academic managers. Fully supported pilots are available to allow institutions to understand more easily the benefits of a central, digital system that aids student engagement and retention and facilitate module and course leader engagement.

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Foreword

Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI

Like many people working in policy, my first real involvement with active policymaking came through students' union activity. It seemed a good way to come into contact with interesting people from across my university, to learn about how change happens and to try and make a difference.

Today, student unionism is typically more professional than it was. I regularly come into contact with students' union officers and never fail to be impressed by their commitment and the level of responsibility they have chosen to take on, often as their first full-time job, for the good of others.

Each year, a small minority of students' union sabbatical officers even manage to combine their local roles with becoming important voices in the national debate on higher education, as happened with Eve Alcock, the first author in this collection. After serving as officers, they then often put their experience to use in other important public service roles, thereby benefiting the whole of our society.

So no one can reasonably doubt the importance of students' unions in improving the student experience, bridging the gap between managers and students and, increasingly, in helping to govern their institutions too.

Yet students' unions are not the be-all and end-all (and nor, to be fair, do they claim to be). Typically, they score relatively poorly in the National Student Survey and, as noted by the one vice-chancellor in this collection, they often have embarrassingly low election turnouts, despite sometimes creative initiatives aimed at increasing the number of voters.

At a collective level, the National Union of Students (NUS) has

faced financial and other challenges. These are specifically referred to more than once in the pages that follow, but they also underscore this collection as a whole. Despite boasting some very effective leaders over the years – one of whom has contributed a chapter here and many of whom have ended up in public life – recent challenges have reduced the NUS's influence in the corridors of power. Although, admittedly, national politicians tempted by culture wars have not always wanted to meet student activists halfway anyway, as Andy Westwood's piece reminds us.

Despite the well-worn phrase that is reflected in the title of this collection, there is in fact no such thing as a singular 'student voice'. Students come from a wide range of different backgrounds, have very different experiences during their time in higher education, like to express themselves in different ways and move on after study to hugely different lives.

Without underestimating their importance, elected student representatives cannot capture all the many experiences of the ever more diverse student body on their own, which explains why this collection has a wider vista. In his contribution, Michael Natzler, who had the idea of this collection and is its editor, considers the important input of the appointees to the Office for Students' Student Panel in England.

Jonathan Neves' chapter meanwhile reminds us of the evidence showing only a minority of students across the UK currently feel, 'My voice is heard and represented by my institution'. Yet as in national politics, those who make up the silent majority deserve recognition too. Their voices can be effectively captured through quantitative and qualitative survey work and other feedback loops, even down to the modular level, as Helena Lim of EvaSys, who have kindly helped to fund this project, explain.

In the pages that follow, we have sought to capture the typical experiences of older students and international students among others. The various authors also seek to think about the student interest in relation to specific areas, such as regulation, curricula and strategy as well as accommodation provision.

Conversations between students and staff can sometimes be tricky but both sides tend to recognise that part of the learning process is engaging with people that challenge your own thinking – and it is the primary role of a think tank like HEPI to make people think by exposing them to a range of opinions.

So there is one chapter in particular in this collection that challenges the somewhat cosy consensus that can characterise conversations on the student voice. Dennis Hayes condemns what he regards as a new censoriousness on campus as well as the managerialism that some students have adopted. He argues that treating students as vulnerable partners harms rather than helps them by denying their rightful agency. He urges students to reject committee work, to read well and to challenge intellectual orthodoxies instead.

This is not a paper about COVID. We hope its lessons will continue to be read, digested and acted upon long after the pandemic has stopped affecting daily lives. However, in one important respect, the pages that follow do reflect the extraordinary COVID times that everyone has been living through.

Recent disruption has shown that the higher education sector, which is so often regarded as slow, conservative and resistant to change, can do things speedily when there is an unarguable case for doing so. This proves the powerful point in Rensa Gaunt's positive piece on promoting the needs of disabled students that 'what we were told was unobtainable' can 'suddenly became readily available'.

An earlier HEPI report, *David versus Goliath: The past, present and future of students' unions in the UK* (2018), showed student representation in Scotland dates back to the fifteenth century, when St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen recognised the role of students as decisionmakers.

Six centuries on, the role of students continues to evolve across the whole country and we can see more clearly than ever before that a university that treats its students primarily as customers is merely an institution; one that listens to its students is a community.

1. Students as governors: walking the tightrope and shouting into the void

Eve Alcock, Former Student Union President at the University of Bath

Every year, hundreds of students armed with flimsy banners, branded t-shirts and several social media accounts attempt to woo their student body in a campaign to become students' union (SU) sabbatical officers (Sabbs). From Sports Officers to Presidents, Sabbs formulate the backbone of the representation structures that exist to represent and advocate for students on the UK's university campuses.

Students run for these positions for numerous reasons: to create change for students, to lead the union, to give back, to get free SU club night tickets … but one reason you will rarely find on that list is a burning desire to become legally and financially responsible for their university. And yet for at least one Sabb per institution each year, that is the reality.

Sure enough, assuming legal and financial responsibility for the University of Bath was not on my motivation list when I ran for SU President in February 2018, but I perhaps knew more about the role of governor than your average presidential candidate prior to my election.

We had just seen a significant breakdown of university governance that led to the resignation of the then Vice-Chancellor, the highest paid in the country. I had protested against her extortionate pay and filed Freedom of Information requests on the membership of the University Board and its sub-committees from the preceding two decades to understand how it had got to this point.

Immediately after my election, I was thrown in at the deep end helping to recruit our new Vice-Chancellor and Board Chair, implementing the recommendations of an extensive external governance review, reforming the way the governance worked and sitting on the Remuneration Committee – in addition to the ordinary membership of the Finance Committee and Nominations Committee and increasing the diversity of our Board members through governor recruitment.

As a result, there were times I was more immersed in the world of university governors than in the student world. You would be forgiven for thinking this would not be an issue; that what is in the best interests of the university is, by proxy, also in the best interests of students. But as any Sabb past or present will attest, the reality is significantly more complicated.

Sabbs already wear multiple hats in their roles: technically still an individual member of the student body; an employed staff member; an elected representative; and, frequently, a trustee of the SU as a charity. The university governor hat is perhaps the most complex of them all, especially when worn alongside all the others.

As the higher education sector has become increasingly marketised, and universities increasingly rely on the fees of students, university governors have been forced to make decisions based on the university as a business, rather than a public good. As a result, many of the decisions student governors have to make can directly contradict the priorities and mandate they have as elected representatives – hiking rent prices, restructuring whole departments that serve students and lifting student number caps, to name but a few.

Most students have no idea their university has a governing body, let alone that one of their student representatives sits on it. Even if they were aware of it, the confidential nature of

agenda items at Board meetings means that the President is often unable to share information with non-governor members of their own Sabb team, much less a 20,000-strong student body.

Despite taking up a huge amount of my time, the work I did as a student governor was work that students – my constituents – never got to see or hear about. I could not tell the student body that I prevented yet another two white men with existing links to one university faculty being appointed to the Board straight after our governance review told us we should diversify our Board. Or that I had raised concerns about a proposed agreement on a block of flats built on a floodplain in town that would not cater for disabled students. Or that our approach to capital projects flew in the face of the climate emergency and nobody – bar students – seemed to care about it.

That work is not easy. To understand the experiences of student governors, you have to understand the power dynamics at play around that Board table. At the most basic level, student governors are normally the youngest governor, often by several decades. So although they are experts on the lives of students, they have less professional experience and are more likely to be new to governor responsibilities.

The layers of complexity only increase from here. While yes, the Vice-Chancellor is accountable to you as a governor, they ultimately have the ability to increase or decrease the SU's block grant. The very same block grant that you are responsible for as an SU trustee (often, as Chair of the trustee Board) that allows yourself and the SU to meet your charitable objectives for the student body, who voted for you to represent them in the first place.

Ultimately, it does not matter how adept a Sabb is at wearing the governor hat, and all the responsibilities that come with

it – what really matters is which hat the other people at the Board table perceive you to be wearing at any one time.

The very reason that student governors have a seat at the Board table – for their knowledge of the student experience and representation of a key stakeholder group – is the same reason why their voices are often ignored. In my experience, which I know is not unique, the more challenging you are at the Board table, the more likely it is that your point will be attributed to an ulterior political motive you have as a Sabb rather than challenging in good faith as governors should. You might even be an expert on the issue by virtue of your role, but because others choose to perceive you as conflicted, your comments hold less value than the board member who has had a 30-year career at a big accountancy firm, but has very little knowledge of higher education.

In my first term, I got to know the other governors very well, very quickly. As lovely as most of them were, I was shocked at their sheer lack of knowledge about the student experience and quickly began to question their effectiveness as governors given the gaping holes in their understanding of students at the institution.

I went out of my way to invite governors for tours of the SU to chat about the student experience with them over coffee. As part of the governance reform, we implemented governor development sessions, with at least one annual session on the student experience. We piloted a link programme where governors were paired up with particular departments or functions of the University to allow them to get under the skin of the institution and hear stories from people on the ground – the reality you do not get to read about in Board papers.

They were shocked to hear about the level of poor mental health in the student population; that if a student was not

experiencing poor mental health themselves, they were supporting someone who was; they could not believe that in order to find housing for their second year, new students had to start looking just six weeks after meeting their existing housemates. The level of discontent in the student population over abysmal bus provision suddenly made sense to them when they realised students paid £350 for their bus passes, but were queueing for hours for a seat.

If governors are not armed with that kind of basic knowledge of the student experience, how do they know what issues are playing out in students' lives that they should be holding the executive to account on?

If such a gap in knowledge can exist between what one reads in Board papers and the authentic student experience on the ground despite the presence of a student governor, then imagine the knowledge gap that exists in government decision-making on higher education: no consistent direct student engagement and no national student representation on the Government's 2020 Higher Education Taskforce.

It perhaps explains why their stance around students' rights to good quality teaching was to signpost students to an ombudsman that does not make judgements of academic quality. Or that it decided freedom of speech was the pressing issue on campuses despite many international students relying on foodbanks to eat. Or why the new Chair of the Regulator was deemed to be appropriate despite no prior experience in the sector whatsoever.

It is impossible to make good decisions about the lives of students without authentic engagement with students to find out what their lives are like, and nowhere is that more important that at the Board level. We assume that the mere presence of a student governor at the Board table proves the

presence of the student voice at the highest echelon of the University. But that voice is just shouting into the void if it is not heard or acted on.

Policy recommendations

- Implement University Board 'links' system where Board members are paired with departments / functions within the University and undertake engagement between Board meetings.
- Deliver development sessions for all Board members twice a year run by students' union officers to increase Board members' knowledge of the student experience and student issues.
- The Committee of University Chairs (CUC) should review their practices to capture best practice and recommendations that recognise the nuances of student governors on Boards and ensure a level playing field at the Board table.

2. What do students think and how do universities find out?

Graham Galbraith, Vice-Chancellor, University of Portsmouth

In an increasingly marketised higher education sector, students have become our 'customers' but they are also far more than this. My students are citizens of the University, most are residents of Portsmouth as well as members of sports clubs, political societies and so much more. In all of these guises they can rightly claim to have some voice in the life of the University – and this voice goes way beyond how they 'consume' their education. Indeed, even in the narrower sense of students' education, the language of the consumer in no way captures students' role, identity and need for a voice. Students are often co-creators of their learning, not passive recipients of a service who can easily exit in the way that the language of markets can sometimes make people think.

These different identities and roles make the issue of the student voice complex and there is no doubt that the changes of the last decade or so have added further layers of complexity. Students pay more for their education, there are more full-time undergraduates than ever before, (happily) the student body is also more diverse than it ever has been and (rightly) students are more confident in demanding what they need from universities and their lecturers. They do not merely accept what a university or individual academic wants to offer: they challenge us and make us innovate and change. University life is almost unrecognisable from my days as an undergraduate and much the better for it.

As students' needs, views and preferences have changed,

universities have also evolved to respond. In our Department of Curriculum and Quality Enhancement (DCQE), the University of Portsmouth has developed an excellent resource for enhancing our students' academic experience through supporting and reinforcing the work of our academic community. But, truth be told, at the institutional level – and like many universities – we have not always got things right, but importantly we are always striving to do better.

The National Student Survey (NSS) has undoubtedly been a key driver of this change. Unlike my time at university, when staff were free to ignore students' views and feedback, the NSS has highlighted the impact of staff's actions on students and their learning. The NSS has been a force for positive change, improving the experience for students. In the early days, it was met with great scepticism but, as we have adapted to using the results to improve what we do, it has been transformational for the sector. There are of course some who remain opposed to the idea of listening to what students think, but with each year there are fewer and fewer of them.

The NSS provides the only opportunity for a consistent and coordinated voice for students, it provides important external scrutiny of universities for the public and government and genuinely supports enhancement of what universities do. It is therefore astonishing that the Government wishes to reconsider its use and might even consign it to history. The evidence shows that the NSS does not dumb-down but more often than not is used by students to highlight their desire for greater challenge, more demanding teaching content and better, more interesting and more relevant teaching experiences.

Of course, even if the NSS were to remain and to be improved it will never be an answer to all student concerns. Students' unions do an admirable job here not least because they can force universities out of any bureaucratic comfort zones and ensure we engage on students' terms, on the issues students judge important. Students' unions can also challenge government – which is perhaps one reason they are not always flavour of the month.

I have experienced challenges from students' unions many times over my career, most recently over the speed with which the University of Portsmouth is addressing the evident racial inequalities within the University, both in terms of student outcomes and experiences. We had been making good progress – the University was in the process of creating the post of Director of Race and Equality – but not enough for our students. Rightly, they pointed this out and pushed us. Discussions were not easy and were fraught with difficulty, but we are better for having had them because they prompted actions that were needed. We are now undertaking a governor-led review of race equality at the University.

Of course, the issue of racial inequalities within universities is unquestionable because the evidence is there for all to see – particularly in universities' Access and Participation Plans. This is not true for all issues and the reality is that only a minority of students ever actively engage with their union and election turnouts are typically at levels that would make even local councillors' blush. This means that whenever an issue comes up from a students' union one is always left asking how significant really is this issue for students? What other issues that students care about are not getting through? When independent evidence supporting students' unions' priorities is not always

present, how should universities respond? We have to find new ways to engage with our students to help them articulate their voice.

The student voice during the pandemic

One of the central features of crises is that they speed up the pace of change, highlight latent tensions and test institutional culture. On the whole, the University – indeed the sector – has done extremely well but there have been pressure points along the way. Two in particular stand out for me: 'no detriment' in 2020 and graduation in 2021. The University got both of them right … eventually. We also learned a huge amount.

Like all universities, in 2020 we had to adapt our examination and assessment regulations in light of the pandemic-precipitated lockdown. We adopted a series of practices to ensure students would suffer (in the language of the time) 'no detriment'. I have nothing but admiration for the way our academic staff and professional services teams adapted and applied the new approach; it worked. But, unfortunately, before it had a chance to succeed, we learned that we had not done enough to explain how the system would work in a language students understood.

In our race to ensure the work was done – and it is easy to forget the unprecedented chaos of spring 2020 – we did not make the imaginative leap to realise that explaining the changes we had made in dry QAA-approved language would not necessarily reassure deeply worried and anxious young people whose lives had just changed completely.

Looking back, given the pressures, it is hard to see how we could have done things very differently. As I say, it was

unprecedented chaos – chaos that affected everything and everyone across the whole country, indeed the world. But we did have difficult seas to navigate: we were telling students we were doing what they wanted, but they were telling us we were not. Working closely with the students' union, we got through it and we have not had the same problems this year. But we might have avoided choppy waters last year if we had a better grasp on what students had thought and – more importantly – felt about the matter.

Roll forward to this year and lockdown in January. The prospect of in-person graduation ceremonies in July seemed impossible. As graduation ceremonies need to be planned many months in advance, a decision had to be made. In February 2021 we wrote to students telling them there would be no in-person graduation ceremonies this summer. The speed with which my inbox filled up with emails from students and parents, the contents of which were (on the whole) far from supportive of the decision did indeed tell me what students thought. It is not, though, my preferred way to understand the student voice (and not students' preferred method of articulating it either I imagine).

Our error was to view this summer's graduation ceremonies too rationally and without emotion. But graduation ceremonies are intrinsically about emotion. We thought we were helping students so that they had to worry about one less thing. But as many students passionately explained, we were taking away something that had kept them going and that would be a deeply significant event for them and, in many cases, their families too. As a result, over a three week period from 12 July 2021 we ran 44 separate in-person graduation ceremonies.

What we have learned

All institutions, be it businesses, bureaucracies or governments (both local and national), get things wrong sometimes. For universities, it is important that when errors are made – when students' voices are not heard or not properly responded to – they are rectified, but this is not enough. Universities need to innovate and find new ways to engage with the student voice. We ran focus groups on what students value most about graduation, so that if ceremonies had to be altered because of social distancing requirements, we could make sure we kept what is most valued.

On focus groups, polling and other forms of deliberative engagement, universities can learn a lot from businesses and government about how to get more regular input and feedback and a better grasp of what people want and think. Universities also have to become more responsive to the sometimes insistent and confusing views that come through social media. In today's world, no organisation can ignore social media and we must all see it positively. These ways to engage with the student voice must be added to the valuable role students' unions play, as well as surveys both within institutions and nationally.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution here. Given the many different identities of students – 'customers', citizens of a university, residents of a place – it would be unreasonable to expect that there would be. Embedding different ways to engage with the student voice will be new and challenging for many in the sector, particularly over the next few years as we enter more difficult and straitened times. Despite our near-term prospects, indeed perhaps because of them, embedding

different ways to engage with the student voice will not only become more important, in fact it will be critical for the sector's continuing success both domestically and internationally.

3. Disabled students: the experts we forget we need

Rensa Gaunt, Former Disabled Students' Officer 2020/21, University of Cambridge

Introduction

I see two separate eras of my activist career: before the 'Participatory Action Research Project' and after it.

I had been involved in disabled people's organising at the University of Cambridge for several years before becoming a sabbatical officer at Cambridge's Students' Union. Lobbying always felt very antagonistic: although students on the ground had a good understanding of what was and was not working, by the time an issue filtered up to senior management through various committee structures and representatives, any solutions had either been watered down beyond relevance or, more commonly, abandoned. External or internal staff consultants might have been asked to work out what students needed, but we were very rarely meaningfully consulted ourselves.

This led to a very strong sentiment that marginalised students were being deliberately ignored and their concerns sidelined. Meanwhile, in our student-led organising, we were building exactly what we needed: spaces with accessibility and inclusivity at their core, unconstrained by bureaucratic structures and regulations.

As part of their Access and Participation Plan, the University of Cambridge committed to reducing the grade awarding gap and the gap in non-continuation rates between non-disabled students and those with a declared mental health condition.[1]

1 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/

In other words, to find out why these disabled students were dropping out more and receiving lower grades on average, and to try and reduce it between 2020 and 2025.[2]

Instead of unilaterally imposing a solution, we were to co-design it, and thus the Participatory Action Research Project was born.[3]

Example student-led research project

My project ('Double Time'), one of the ten to be researched in 2020, gave a simple answer to a simple question: why are so many disabled students dropping out or taking time away from their course? As it turns out, it is because that is the only option they are offered.[4]

Full-time study (100 per cent rate of study) is the default mode of study for undergraduate degrees at the University of Cambridge. The only other option normally available is 0 per cent rate of study or 'intermission'.

Intermission is taking time out, usually a year, to recover, for example, from an illness or a bereavement, before resuming full-time study. It is a familiar process for many staff and students and is therefore wrongly assumed to be appropriate for all disabled students, and to be the only alternative to a 100 per cent rate of study. Students may also discontinue their course permanently.

Under the Equality Act 2010 definition, a disability is an impairment which has a 'substantial and long-term adverse effect' on your daily life.[5]

2 https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/access-and-participation-plans

3 https://www.inclusive.cctl.cam.ac.uk/awarding-gaps/app-par-project

4 https://www.inclusive.cctl.cam.ac.uk/awarding-gaps/app-par-project/cycle-1/double-time

5 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/6

Many such conditions fluctuate substantially, take a significant portion of the day to manage and will not be 'cured' by a break in one's studies. The barriers a disabled student faced prior to the break may still be there upon their return if adjustments are not made.

Officially, part-time study is only available for some postgraduate courses, at a lower rate of funding than full-time, as you are expected to be able to work alongside your studies. 'Double Time', as it is known colloquially, or switching to a form of part-time study with full-time maintenance funding as a reasonable adjustment, is a possibility at Cambridge which is not advertised or widely known about and is therefore hardly ever offered to the students who need it. It enables disabled students to access their undergraduate degree at a rate of study that is appropriate for them, usually around 50 per cent, without having to also get a job to pay for their student accommodation.

Findings

The research involved speaking to disabled students at Cambridge and found that:

- almost half of the respondents did not know about Double Time; and
- over half of the respondents had considered intermission for a chronic health problem, even though many of these problems are unlikely to be cured within a year, if at all, and studying at a reduced rate may be more appropriate for them.

Previous lobbying on Double Time had shown that staff had even lower awareness of this mode of study and therefore the awareness-raising had been almost exclusively student-led.

The project's simple recommendations included that the University raise awareness of Double Time among both staff and students, urgently review the application process and specifically make sure that students were made aware of the option of Double Time before submitting an application for intermission. As of 2021, this has prompted a review of the overarching policy on disabled students, but not yet a change in procedure.

Impact of the research projects

The research projects were a meaningful opportunity for both students and staff alike to work towards common goals.

Efficiency of message: As opposed to previous, mostly frustrated, attempts to influence university policy, these research outcomes were communicated directly from some of the most affected students to the most powerful senior members of staff. The research did not need to be filtered through the universities' committees which might deprioritise or water down the recommendations before they reached senior staff: it was a frank conversation about what was going wrong and – importantly – what would help most to improve it. While the project conclusions might seem obvious when stated so clearly, it was not an issue that was previously considered at such a high level.

Research skills: Students were given direct access to staff researchers at the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning, where they gained valuable research experience. The staff involved also recognised that they were able to learn from students in their work, rather than see us as the opposition. It is the only time that my lived experience was genuinely valued by the University, despite many years as an engaged activist.

Legitimacy and genuine collaboration: It is very difficult for any

student-authored report or appeal to get traction with staff, especially senior staff. Producing the reports as collaboration between students and staff not only gave legitimacy to the joint work, but also produced outcomes that both sides would have a stake in achieving. It was important that the student co-researchers, like the staff researchers, were paid for their research time in recognition of the work's importance. Far too often, the most exhausting self-advocacy is left to the most affected students to undertake unpaid with no thanks and with no material support, as has also been explained by former Cambridge sabbatical officer Amatey Doku in a previous HEPI report on racial inequalities.[6] The costs constituted a fraction of the costs previously paid to consultants – and in my view produced a more purposeful outcome.

Policy recommendations

Do not guess at a solution – speak to the students most affected

We will tell you if you ask! It is often difficult for us to get a clear message to senior staff, and the wider sector, and we routinely face barriers from well-meaning individuals who assume to know what the problems and solutions are without having talked to us. It is imperative to create formal structures to support meaningful consultation, not just to tick a box.

Treat students as valued team members, not as the opposition

Just as you would with professional experts, make sure we have the research support needed and the funding available to conduct a proper investigation and present the findings.

6 Hugo Dale-Rivas, *The white elephant in the room: ideas for reducing racial inequalities in higher education*, HEPI Report 120, 19 September 2019 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/09/19/the-white-elephant-in-the-room-ideas-of-reducing-racial-inequalities-in-higher-education/

Paying student co-researchers costs less than consultants, and we will tell you how things really are. Students can be cost-effective co-researchers with lived experience; it can be that simple!

While staff are accustomed to defending their ideas on their own to a large group of superiors, students may not be, so engage in dialogue in a genuinely collaborative way, rather than a combative way and take feedback. This will ensure we can use our existing experience and knowledge to find solutions that will genuinely help.

Take our recommendations seriously and do not water them down

Students, especially marginalised students, have exceptional insight that university leadership is so often lacking. Believe us and do not be defensive! We are experts on our own lived experience and we want a positive outcome just like you do. Instead of jumping to compromise or delay, consider developing an implementation strategy with us.

If there is any lesson that we disabled students learned from COVID-19, it is that what we were told was unobtainable yesterday suddenly became readily available today.

4. Using surveys to represent the student voice and demonstrate the quality of the experience

Jonathan Neves, Head of Business Intelligence and Surveys, Advance HE

As I write, the future of the UK National Student Survey (NSS) is under review. Led by the Office for Students (OfS), the review and accompanying consultation (phase one of which was published in late March 2021) were launched in direct response to a Government policy paper published in September 2020, which caught many in the sector unawares in the extent to which it questioned the role and remit of the NSS and its link to quality.[7]

For many in the sector, the NSS and other sector-wide surveys, play a vital role in maintaining standards – rather than supposedly driving them down. Likewise, instead of purportedly creating an administrative burden, the focus of institutional resources in maximising response rates and conducting full analysis and action on the results signifies a genuine desire to represent the student voice fully and to ensure it is at the heart of institutional change.

Student surveys and polling represent some of the most powerful tools available to represent students' views on their experiences, providing a statistically valid complement to other more direct or in-depth approaches to gathering feedback from students. In our sector in particular, survey findings generate headlines, and, crucially, can influence policy. Robust sector-wide surveys, and the insight they

7 See https://https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-bureaucratic-burdens-higher-education/reducing-bureaucratic-burdens-on-research-innovation-and-higher-education and https://www.https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b6ad8f44-f532-4b55-aa32-7193497ddf92/nss-review-phase-1-report.pdf

generate, draw attention to issues that require action both at institutional and sector level, sparking debate and discussion and generating further research activity. At the heart of this is the principle of representing the student voice and ensuring it can make a difference.

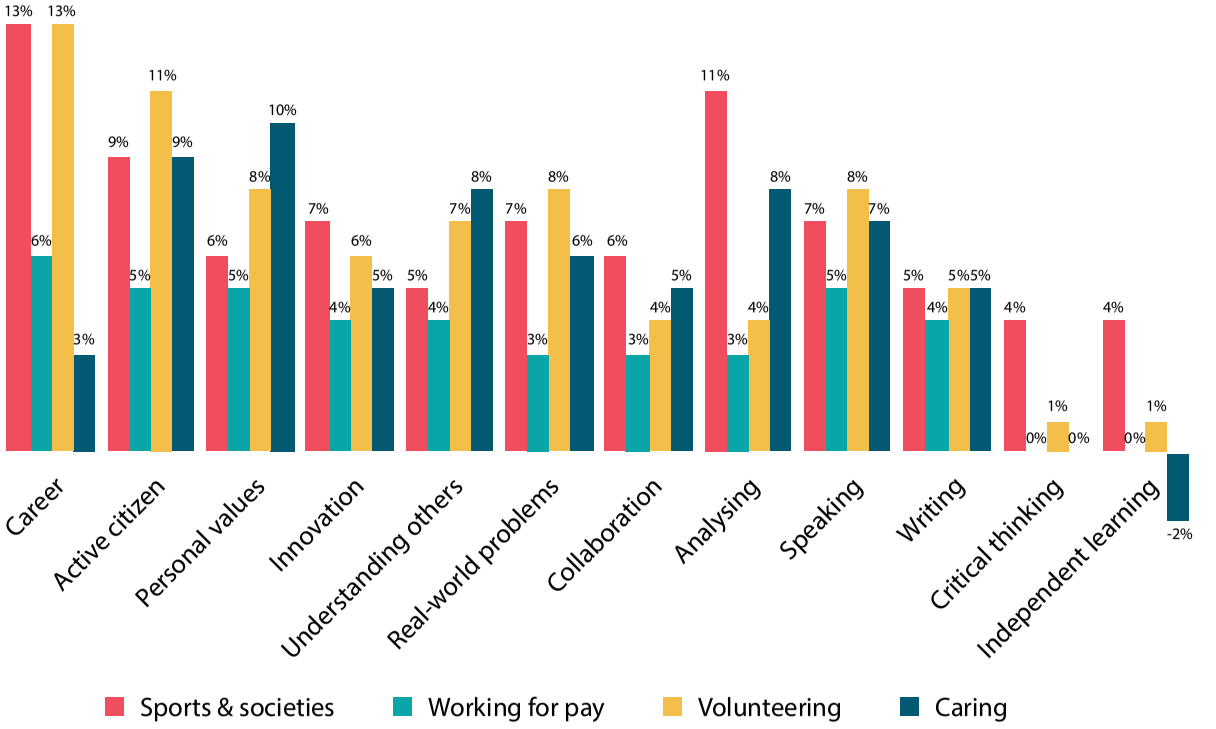
At Advance HE, we operate three sector-wide student surveys. These cover undergraduates, through the *UK Engagement Survey* (UKES), and postgraduates – the Postgraduate Taught and Postgraduate Research Experience Surveys (PRES and PTES). In addition to this, in partnership with HEPI, we produce the *Student Academic Experience Survey* (SAES), which is an annual poll of full-time undergraduate opinions on a range of aspects impacting their experience. Between them, these surveys gather the views of more than 150,000 students annually, with direct engagement from around 120 institutions. This of course requires real commitment from the participating institutions and crucially from the students who spare their time to respond while dealing with multiple pressures. However, with this commitment comes an undertaking, on behalf of those using the data, to genuinely listen to what is said and to use it to maximise the quality of the academic experience.

The link to quality?

One of the main criticisms made by the Government which prompted the review of the NSS was that it is 'exerting a downward pressure on quality and standards' – a claim that generated some robust defence.[8] It is perhaps unsurprising to many that the phase one report from the Office for Students found no evidence of any lowering of standards. However, the fact that this criticism arose at all – and prompted a major review – indicates that we may need

8 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-bureaucratic-burdens-higher-education/reducing-bureaucratic-burdens-on-research-innovation-and-higher-education

Impact of activities on skills development



Source: UK Engagement Survey 2019

to work harder to emphasise the link between capturing the student voice via surveys and the issue of course quality.

One established method of emphasising this link is through the concept of student engagement, as measured by mechanisms such as the *National Survey of Student Engagement* (NSSE) in the United States and Advance HE's UKES, which was developed directly from it.[9] There are also well-established engagement surveys in China, South Africa, the Republic of Ireland and several other countries. Specifically, student engagement measures how students spend their time in 'activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning'.[10] By measuring time spent in these activities, the data provide a direct view of student development and the influences on this – an explicit link to quality.

This is illustrated in the chart above, using data from UKES 2019, focusing specifically on time spent in extra-curricular activities.

The chart shows the percentage difference in the development of each skill between students who participated in each activity compared to students who did not participate at all. For example, levels of career skills development were 13 percentage points higher among students who spent time in sports and societies compared to those who did not.

This example highlights the role extra-curricular activities can play in the development of self-reported skills. Logically, levels of development are greater (with one exception) among students who had spent time in each activity, but the relative differences are crucial here. Sports and societies, as well as volunteering, link very strongly to development of most skills,

9 https://nsse.indiana.edu/nsse/

10 Hamish Coates, Engaging Students for Success - 2008 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement: institution report. Australian Council for Educational Research, 2009, p.8.

while working for pay and caring show weaker connections.

As well as highlighting the importance of creating opportunities for students in particular areas, this analysis also identifies implications for how students are supported during the pandemic, as data from UKES 2020 identified that students were having to spend more time working for pay and caring – the areas with lower links to skills development.

Unlike some other parts of the world, the concept of student engagement has not fully gained traction in the UK to date among policymakers and, in some cases, within institutions. Arguably, part of this is due to the presence of the NSS as the dominant survey in the undergraduate landscape, although there are many institutions that run both UKES and NSS effectively alongside each other. However, given its clear link to quality and its potential for global comparison, it will be fascinating to see if larger parts of the sector take the opportunity to promote and implement the concept of measuring student engagement as part of their student voice strategies moving forward.

Representing the postgraduate voice

An aspect where the UK higher education sector is arguably one of the leading global exponents is through its systematic measurement of the postgraduate experience, which is achieved through a voluntary focus on enhancement rather than through regulatory means. Through established annual measures like PTES and PRES, with around 100 institutions annually, UK higher education institutions demonstrate a real commitment to capturing the views of postgraduate students and researchers.

This was particularly evident during the 2020 survey season, which coincided with the onset of the pandemic and the first

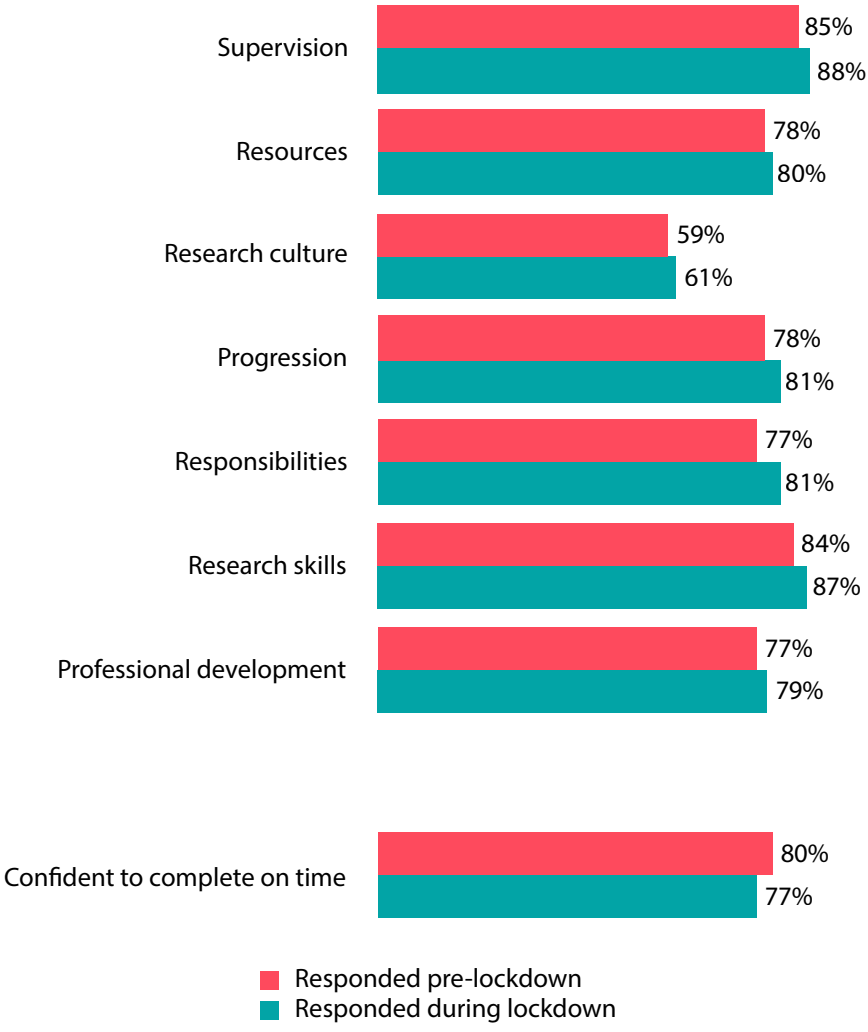
UK lockdown. Under substantial pressure and with resources stretched, a significant cohort of institutions went ahead with their postgraduate surveys, capturing the student experience at a uniquely challenging but vital time. As well as providing their own data to drive enhancement activities, the level of participation helped create a sector-wide dataset which straddled the introduction of lockdown and enabled an early assessment of how it impacted the student experience.

The example in the chart below uses data from the 2020 PRES at sector level and provides evidence of a strong institutional response to the challenges faced, while also highlighting some of the early impacts on postgraduate researchers' (PGRs) future plans.

Strikingly, most major aspects of the experience were rated higher among PGRs responding during the spring 2020 lockdown. It might be argued that the PGR experience would be inherently less impacted by a sudden move to online delivery than undergraduate or postgraduate taught delivery, but this would be to underplay the importance of PGR supervisors and other staff in a PGR-facing role maintaining levels of support, resources and development opportunities while dealing with a largely unforeseen crisis.

The fact that all key aspects improved is a strong endorsement of the sector response, illustrated by direct comments from PRES which shine a light on the quality of the support received.

Ratings of PGR experience 2020



Base: Pre-lockdown, on or before 16/03/20 (3,234) and during lockdown, from 17/03/2020 (5,198). Source: Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2020

'Under the specific conditions of Covid-19 I felt a huge effort from my Faculty/Department/supervisors/Administration team and students, to make sure all research degree students were doing well and keep up our motivation.'

'Due to Covid-19, all facilities closed. My supervisor went out of their way to loan small equipment to me to be able to continue to collect data and work from home.'

'My supervisor is excellent in terms of academic knowledge and always supports me, such as giving a lot of comments and feedback back to me after we have meetings. Moreover, when I feel confused and not so sure about some parts of my research, they are always here to support even during Covid19.'

What the results also tell us is how the pandemic impacted on the timings of their research, with PGRs' overall confidence to complete on time falling during the lockdown period (as shown in the above chart).

'Covid19 means that my workload has doubled. Therefore I may be delayed in finishing.'

'Unfortunately my research is on hold due to Covid-19. I am unable to collect data and have to wait till my stakeholder groups return, which may not be until late 2020.'

'Covid-19 has detracted from my time (full-time NHS role) and the availability of my supervisors.'

'Because of the Covid-19 lockdown, the first part of this growing season has been lost so an extension may be requested at the end of the project.'

- All comments from PGRs responding during lockdown

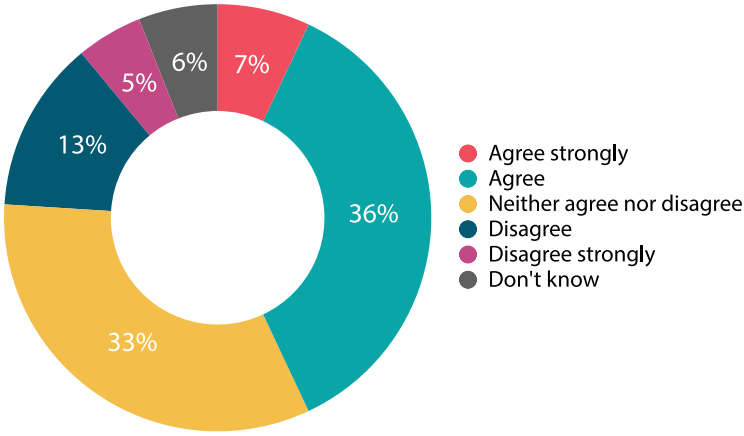
This finding is perhaps logical given the exceptional circumstances. However, while this is clearly a concerning situation for those involved, the gathering of feedback in this way provided a vital opportunity for these concerns to be heard and for action to be taken at an institutional level to provide support and flexibility to help mitigate the impacts wherever possible.

Do students feel their voice is heard?

As well as capturing a range of trackable data on the overall quality of the student experience, the Advance HE / HEPI *Student Academic Experience Survey* features an annually changing series of questions which reflect key issues of particular interest to the sector and policymakers at the time.

In the light of the pandemic, one of the key questions included in the 2021 survey was whether students felt their voice was heard and recognised by their institution.

My voice is heard and represented by my institition (agree or agree srongly)



Base: Total sample (10,186). Source: Student Academic Experience Survey 2021

Overall, just over four-in-ten students agreed, or agreed strongly, that this was the case. Only 18 per cent disagreed, but a further one-in-three gave a neutral response. Although there is no previous data to compare to, the finding that less than half of students actively feel their voice is heard is perhaps lower than we might have hoped.

These data imply there is more to be done to capture and represent the student voice across a range of approaches. While students are not necessarily referring only to surveys and polling when considering this question, these approaches can represent some of the most effective ways of doing this when all stakeholders work together.

Rather than creating a burden or driving down standards, surveys and polling can provide a clear measure of the quality of the student experience, as well as representing how institutions have adapted to challenging times across all levels of provision. The challenge now is to bring together institutions, students and policymakers to recognise this and to focus on using these tools to make the student experience the best it can be.

5. The virtuous loop: capturing the student voice through course and module evaluation

Dr Helena Lim, PFHEA
Head of Opportunities, EvaSys

In recent years, UK higher education providers have increasingly used surveys to capture the student voice to understand the student learning experience. They typically survey their students at the end of each teaching period, sometimes mid-module, usually using a mix of paper and online surveys. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the temporary closure of physical campuses, evaluation is now mainly administered and managed online.

The rich granular data captured from course and module evaluations can shed light on student experiences and augment institutional understanding of how to enhance the learning and teaching delivered. Done correctly, the evaluation process also opens a dialogue with students which in turn can improve student engagement and enhance partnership in the collaborative venture of learning.

The move towards seeking the student voice has been driven by policy, regulatory and market conditions. The June 2011 Higher Education White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* set out the Government's expectation that student evaluation at module level should be used in an 'open and transparent' way to inform 'a continuous process of improving teaching quality':

> *allowing students and lecturers within a university to*

> *see this feedback at an individual module level will help students to choose the best course for them and to drive an improvement in the quality of teaching.*[11]

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education also recommends this underlying practice for all higher education providers:

> *The provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience … Providers work in partnership with the student body to close the feedback loop.*[12]

At the sector-level, the National Student Survey (NSS) has been conducted annually since 2005 and is an established survey for capturing useful data that help providers and their students' unions identify areas of success and areas for enhancement. It also provides students with the opportunity to help shape the future of their course at their institutions. At the request of the Universities Minister, the NSS was reviewed in late 2020 to address concerns that while the NSS remains an important indicator of student opinion, the survey may be creating huge administrative burdens and therefore impacting on standards. The results from phase one of the review reported that the NSS would be run in 2020/21 broadly in the same way as before, with results published at a statistically robust level, and with more efforts to raise student awareness on use of the data.[13]

11 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31384/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf

12 https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance#

13 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b6ad8f44-f532-4b55-aa32-7193497ddf92/nss-review-phase-1-report.pdf

So it would appear that student surveys are here to stay for the foreseeable future. But before we go any further, we must stop to ask, who are student surveys for? In a guest blog for EvaSys, Christine Couper asserts:

> *There are lots of possible answers to the question of what student surveys are for, like 'highlighting the strengths and weaknesses in an approach to teaching', or 'evidencing the need for change' and 'giving students the opportunity to share their opinions'. These, in turn, led to some more questions: Who are the key stakeholders when running a survey? Do they all benefit? Do some receive very little benefit? Can we make surveys more useful?*
>
> *From a university perspective, students who participate in survey work for altruistic reasons provide a great service. Surveys may be the most efficient way to provide a voice to a whole cohort of students such that everyone gets a similar hearing. The feedback should impact directly on the teaching and learning of the next cohort.*[14]

Luke Humberstone, Vice President of Welfare and Wellbeing at the University of the West of Scotland Students' Union, offers the following reflection:

> *In my experience capturing the student voice as a mechanism of the quality process is something that should be done with the genuine intent of improvement. Sometimes academics might use the processes as a box-ticking exercise or are too quick to say that something cannot be changed or improved because of the capacity*

14 https://evasys.co.uk/how-to-have-structured-conversations-with-students-post-survey/

of the individual or team. Even that being fed back to students can be useful in illuminating them to the real life pressures on academics.[15]

And there you have it. The whole point of gathering student feedback is to directly impact on and improve learning and teaching. Further, closing the student feedback loop to students is a highly effective way to facilitate two-way communication between students and institutions and provide a constructive framework to enable lecturers to reflect on and enhance their practice.

At the University of Greenwich, evaluation data is used to open up a dialogue at module level. The university uses EvaSys to provide automated survey outcomes directly to participants when a survey closes. This enables students to ascertain their experiences against that of the rest of the cohort. But it does not stop there. If the primary objectives for gathering course evaluation data are to improve teaching quality and the student experience and at the institutional level for broader quality assurance and enhancement, then timely reporting to staff is an equally important feedback loop to close. Staff engagement with survey outcomes is key and, at Greenwich, module leaders are required to reflect on and respond to their module outcomes and these responses are shared with their students. These can include thanking students for positive comments but, more crucially, explaining how key issues will be resolved.[16]

The University of Hull uses a similar approach. Module leaders

15 Helena Lim, Interview with Luke Humberstone, Vice-President of Welfare and Wellbeing at the University of the West of Scotland Students' Union 12 July 2021. Luke was previously President of The National Union of Students Scotland 2017/18 and Student President, Students Association at the University of the Highlands and Islands 2015/17.

16 https://evasys.co.uk/how-to-have-structured-conversations-with-students-post-survey/

are encouraged to reflect on areas of good practice and areas for development from their module survey feedback and then propose actions they will take to enhance the module in future. The Student Insight and Sector Policy team at Hull evaluated data from three trimesters across 2019/20 and 2020/21. Historically, the survey question referring to marking criteria being clear in advance was their lowest ranked result. The team found that working to improve this has been one of the most frequent types of enhancement activity proposed by staff in their reflections on module feedback:

> *Staff are recognising the importance of explaining and signposting the assessment criteria early on in the module. They are aiming to provide more detail to address that the criteria is too vague, or conversely, simplifying it when it is too complex. They are also aiming to cover the marking criteria in a variety of ways ... The sustained focus on improving this area has seen incremental increases in student satisfaction each trimester, producing an overall uplift of 7.6 per cent by 2020/21 trimester one since the lowest position in 2017/18.*[17]

At Hull, module leaders not only reflect on student feedback but also inform students about how their feedback has been used to shape teaching practice. 'Student Reports' are disseminated to all students in each module cohort, including to those who did not submit a response to the module evaluation. This 'you said, we did' feedback at the module level creates a virtuous feedback loop where each new student cohort understands where current aspects of

17 https://www.hull.ac.uk/choose-hull/study-at-hull/teaching-academy/news/closing-the-loop-evaluating-the-use-of-student-feedback-to-enhance-teaching

delivery have evolved from previous student feedback, while also being able to contribute themselves.

Closing the feedback loop is also imperative for securing and maintaining student participation in the evaluation process.[18] Students are more likely to complete surveys if they know their feedback is important to their tutors, department and university and that their feedback will be acted on. From the perspective of providers, gathering student data and listening to their concerns, needs and comments can result in the more efficient use of resources, enhanced retention and better employability – but only if the right questions are asked and institutional leaders and staff are prepared to act on the feedback.

Closing the feedback loop will make students feel a part of an effective, value-added process and this in turn will ensure continued engagement with future evaluations. Ismail Ali, President of the Student Union at the University of the West of Scotland in 2020/21 perfectly sums up the importance of the virtuous feedback loop:

> *Closing the student feedback loop makes students active partners in ensuring that teaching and learning delivery not only works well but continues to improve over time. The dialogue between students, module leaders and the wider university is an ongoing project and it is imperative not just to close the feedback loop but to stay in the loop too*.[19]

18 Sarah Watson, 'Closing the Feedback Loop: Ensuring Effective Action from Student Feedback' *Tertiary Education and Management*, 2003, pp. 145–157; Anniken Hoel and Tove Irene Dahl, 'Why Bother? Student Motivation to Participate in Student Evaluations of Teaching' *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 2018, 44, pp. 361–378; Mahsood Shah, Chenicheri Sid Nair and John Richardson *Measuring and Enhancing the Student Experience,* 2016.

19 Helena Lim, Interview with Ismail Ali, Student Union President, University of the West of Scotland, 12 July 2021.

6. The student voice at the heart of the system (but only when they're thinking what we're thinking)

Andy Westwood, Professor of Government Practice
at the University of Manchester

If this were an essay about the use of the term 'students' in higher education policy discourse – in political speeches from governments or oppositions, green and white papers or in the deluge of documents from regulators, other bodies or from universities themselves – then it might be a very different exercise. Students, in that sense at least, are everywhere.

In the last decade, the funding and regulatory system in England has been entirely reorganised in their name or in their supposed interests. But it is a very different proposition to try to assess where and to what extent the voices of students have been or are taken into account in forming policy. Here there is a clear mismatch between the two, a gap that has become more problematic over the past decade. It is something that urgently needs fixing, but does not look like it will be.

Co-creation had become fashionable in policymaking circles – especially some of the more wonkish ones in 2004. CK Prahalad and Venkat Ramaswamy, in *The Future of Competition*, defined co-creation as the 'joint creation of value by the company and the customer; allowing the customer to co-construct the service experience to suit their context'.[20] In 2010/11, the Coalition Government were keen to deploy such an approach,

20 C.K. Prahalad and Venkatram Ramaswamy, *The Future of Competition: Co-Creating Unique Value with Customers,* 18 February 2004 https://store.hbr.org/product/the-future-of-competition-co-creating-unique-value-with-customers/9535

improving teaching and value for money by driving up competition and students acting more as consumers – and in the process, balancing market power away from universities.

> *This White Paper builds on that record, while doing more than ever to put students in the driving seat ... So we will empower prospective students by ensuring much better information on different courses. We will deliver a new focus on student charters, student feedback and graduate outcomes.*[21]

These ideas of choice and competition in public services have been a feature of policy reform over the past three decades from New Labour to the present day (more or less). The spirit of choice and voice and a rebalancing of power from suppliers to consumers dates back to Tony Blair and extends to welfare reform and skills, as well as to the introduction and extension of university tuition fees.

More recently, it can be seen in the reforms introduced under the Coalition and then enhanced by Jo Johnson in the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) and in the setting up of the Office for Students. As his 2016 white paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy* stated:

> *the market needs to be re-oriented and regulated proportionately – with an explicit primary focus on the needs of students, to give them choices about where they want to study, as well as what and how. This Government has therefore chosen to put choice*

21 Department for Business Innovation & Skills, *Students at the Heart of the System*, June 2011 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307683/bis-11-1050-impact-assessment-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf

for students at the heart of its higher education reform strategy.[22]

That period then saw the acceleration of the architectural reforms introduced under David Willetts and Vince Cable. The rhetoric of the student voice was ramped up but so too were concerns about free speech, marked by Jo Johnson appointing Toby Young to the new Office for Students board. The howl of protests greeting that might not be heard so sympathetically today. The Office for Students does now have a student panel (who first met in 2018). Although this is a welcome step, it still seems to carry significantly less weight in policy delivery than the regulators and consumer lawyers appointed to the Office for Students to act in the student interest.

This brings us to the latest phase in higher education policymaking and essentially to a new Conservative Government led by former shadow Higher Education Minister, Boris Johnson, and his only Education Secretary so far, Gavin Williamson. The overall direction of higher education policy at the time of writing remains unclear. We do not really know whether this is a Government that is quite as keen on competition and the animating role of student choice or whether it thinks a regulatory approach as embodied by the Office for Students is the right one. Both of these things may be tackled in autumn 2021 where we are promised both a full response to the Augar report and the Spending Review.

What we do know is that this is a Government that is prepared to pick arguments with the sector – both universities and

22 Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice,* May 2016 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523546/bis-16-265-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-web.pdf

students' unions. And it looks to be rather less concerned about dialogue or evidenced arguments (if running contrary to what they wish to do or say).

There are two important aspects to this which are directly related to each other. The first is relatively recent and it is the Minister's increasingly hostile agenda towards the National Union of Students (NUS) and students' unions, especially on free speech and so-called 'woke' or 'cancel' culture. It plays well among Conservative supporters – especially since the EU Referendum and the polarisation of politics around place, age and education levels, particularly between graduates and non-graduates. Ministers enjoy repeatedly playing to these galleries. Universities and students are, after all, part of a 'left-leaning', 'remain elite'.[23] They are then more characterised as political opponents rather than as co-creators of policy.

Furthermore, there are extra incentives to do this when there are pressures elsewhere such as on exam plans, 'catch-up' funding or on many instances of poor decision making during the pandemic. In this case, a headline on 'woke students' or university regulations quickly becomes a 'red meat' avoidance or deflection strategy. You can see this every time Department for Education Ministers answer questions in Parliament. With continuing chaos in education, last minute or late decisions on schools, colleges and universities and crisis after crisis on funding, health and exams, this has always been a welcome distraction. Criticising universities, their expansion and campus culture allow respite from the pressures of day-to-day

23 Richard Brabner and Nick Hillman, *The UPP Foundation and Higher Education Policy Institute Public Attitudes to Higher Education Survey,* 2021 https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-UPP-Foundation-HEPI-Public-Attitudes-Survey.pdf

policymaking during COVID-19. As Michelle Donelan recently found time to say, 'The 2004 access regime has let down too many young people ... [and] taken advantage of – particularly those without a family history of going to university'.[24] Or Gavin Williamson warning against the 'chilling effect' of 'unacceptable silencing and censoring' in universities when unveiling measures to protect free speech.

There is also a growing spatial element to the culture war. After the local and mayoral elections in May 2021, the Conservatives are tightening their political control of England and 'doubling down on levelling up'. According to the *Sunday Times* on 9 May 2021, this means a new focus on towns and local economies, with Boris Johnson promising to 'stop the brain drain to cities'.[25]

That runs pretty much in the opposite direction to most higher education policies put in place over the last decade. It is not obvious where student choice fits or whether ministers will now try and enhance their voice in the provision of higher education in 'left behind' places.

This brings us to a second issue and one that has been relevant over a rather longer period. The existing higher education model has always had a clear vision of how students should act and influence the system since its beginning. In the main, that is as a rational economic actor making decisions and consuming higher education much like products and services in other markets. This does create demand and interest in student voice but only in the way that its architects and

24 Department for Education and Michelle Donelan MP, *Universities Minister calls for true social mobility,* 1 July 2020 https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/universities-minister-calls-for-true-social-mobility

25 Boris Johnson, 'I'll stop the brain drain to the cities', *The Times*, 9 May 2021 https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/boris-johnson-ill-stop-brain-drain-to-the-cities-wn77c29sn

regulators think it should – that is making rational economic choices, exerting consumer rights on value and making complaints accordingly.

Attitudes to students (and universities) during the pandemic have exacerbated both of these issues; late or incomplete decision making from the Department for Education, university students treated differently to those in colleges or schools and their interests 'traded off' against others, for example on returning to campus during the roadmap out of lockdown. Throughout the pandemic, there have been inadequate levels of financial support when the principle elsewhere in government has been to support individuals or organisations required to lockdown and stay at home. NUS or student voices have also been missing from meetings or taskforces assembled by ministers.

But responding to student concerns has been weak – either batted down to institutions or largely ignored. The regulatory and funding model has allowed the Government to stand back and to delay or avoid important decisions. Worse perhaps is using this opportunity to pursue or explore other agendas more actively instead, such as the limiting of student numbers, reducing public funding or introducing free speech legislation. Throughout, the Government and its agencies seem to have been much more interested in the voices that agree with and reinforce any of these agendas than those requiring immediate and practical help during the pandemic. If anything is at the 'heart of the system', it is these political and cognitive biases or those that might share them.

So where do we go from here? To a new phase of co-created policy in the student interest? Perhaps hearing even more

from those voices currently at the margins of policymaking – from older adults and part-timers or from those in or from under-represented places? But the Government remains distrustful and uninterested in this kind of dialogue. Voice and co-creation entail compromise and a flexibility that simply does not fit the current political environment.

Even if we put prejudice, 'culture wars' and 'levelling up' to one side, we still have government ministers that believe student satisfaction is too high, too many students are making the wrong decisions and that too many are doing full-time degrees in the wrong subjects and at the wrong institutions. Neither the National Student Survey nor the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) have confirmed the 'right' answers and so they must be reformed too.

Chris Cook, writing about the NHS, described 'a fragile state' and a regime ill-prepared for the pandemic. He could have easily been writing about universities. A system that incentivises the recruitment of more full-time residential students moving around the country through the year and then demands that they are taught online to the same levels of quality and value for money has been far from ideal. Students in the system have been telling them this but the Government, with its suspicions, political agenda and lack of any policy alternatives does not want to change. And does not really want to listen.

7. The Office for Students' Student Panel in their own words

Michael Natzler, Policy Officer, HEPI

Introduction

Over a fortnight in June 2021, I interviewed six of the 15 members of the Office for Students' Student Panel. Nicola Dandridge, Chief Executive of the Office for Students, wrote, shortly before the Panel's launch in 2018, that 'effective student engagement has to be an integral part of our strategy' and that the Student Panel can 'define their own agenda in the context of our regulatory responsibilities and priorities'.[26] All of the interviews were recorded individually on Zoom and it was agreed prior to speaking that all conversations would be anonymised.

Panellists reported similar reasons for wanting to join the Panel with many coming from a student representation background. One joined 'to make sure that student voice is part of the decision-making process' while another relished the fact that 'you can actually speak to them directly and they can hear what you are saying'. For another, it was to represent an area which 'other outlets of student voice were not representing'.

Every panellist was very positive about the work setting. They cited the 'inspirational' 'passionate team' at the Office for Students and the 'inclusive', 'respectful and open space' enabling them 'to really share'.

26 Nicola Dandridge, 'How the OfS student panel is taking shape', *Wonkhe*, 7 February 2018 https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-ofs-student-panel/

How do they describe their work?

The focus of all panellists' descriptions of their main responsibilities was the online four-hour meetings they have four times a year. They consist of discussions of set agenda items, break-out discussions and a question and answer session at the end without the Office for Students' staff, where the Panel can raise anything for the Panel Chair to feed back. All the panellists mentioned their WhatsApp group, the meetings they have with the Minister for Universities and additional opportunities to engage with various policymakers.

Reflecting on the meetings, each panellist highlighted they have 'niches' that apply to certain areas, for example, the Panel includes an A-Level student, a mature student and a recent graduate. In each case they reported feeling 'confident' and 'welcome' to contribute to discussions with a general consensus that the Panel 'defer to the person … who has got the most experience with that particular topic'.

Panellists talked about their approach to the role of providing student input. Those still in higher education were similar in saying they felt 'quite integrated … so it's quite easy to just get feedback from people'. Some report having consulted specialist student officers at their higher education institution to 'talk to their forum [of people they represent] and get feedback' when the topics were less familiar to them and 'Facebook forums' were mentioned by two panellists. Two panellists said they wanted to be able to speak to more students, with one panellist suggesting granting panellists some limited access to the topics raised in the notification system which the Office for Students runs, where students in

England can register concerns about their higher education provider. The panellists are all keen to meet students on campus when COVID restrictions allow it.

Each panellist described their roles with various nuances:

> *It is about putting your opinion, your views, your experiences and those of other people that you have spoken to into the conversation.*

A term used by all was 'consultant'. Half the panellists said their role included being a 'representative' too, but there was caution around the word: 'I think of us as consultants rather than representatives because we were not elected'. No panellist considered the Panel to be wholly representative or a representative body. Others drew the distinction between representatives 'coming up with campaigns' and the Panel's role of 'saying what students think'. Another said 'although representing is not the right word, we are representing our specific area'. Two panellists referred to their roles as 'critical friends' of the Office for Students and another used the term 'neutral disruptor'. Most of the panellists reflected that engaging the Panel alone was not enough and there was 'a need' for 'other forms of [student] engagement'.

In some conversations the role of the National Union of Students (NUS) and students' unions came up, having been mentioned as examples of centres of the student voice. One panellist said:

> *We're not trying to be another NUS and people who maybe are not as familiar with our work might kind of perceive it as that.*

Many of the panellists put the distinction down to the political nature of the NUS: one panellist said the NUS and the Panel are 'in effect saying similar things … with politics out of the way'. Another panellist said the Panel can 'advocate for students without being political … the NUS will always be political by nature'.

How are the Panel meetings run?

Panellists reported a balance between discussion of items on and off the agenda, with the general feeling being that the meetings were 'good' or 'great' and that the Panel are 'steered to kind of what we need to be talking about, but also we do have the opportunity to raise some other issues'. A second panellist said:

> *[The agendas] designed for those meetings cover areas that we can meaningfully engage with. There is no point in us raising things that are not on the table for discussion or that there is not active post engagement work going on for.*

A third panellist found it frustrating 'always getting [given] a set agenda … [and] it would be a lot more empowering if we were asked what the topics should be' suggesting it would be useful to have a 'better induction' into 'the official duties of the Office for Students under the Higher Education and Research Act … and the grey areas we can't regulate on', referring to the legislation that outlines the Office for Students' regulatory remit. They continued, 'I don't think we're consulted enough on policy. I think we are consulted on projects … more like workstreams'. Panellists were in agreement that on some topics they are consulted once and others more than once.

Two panellists said they always heard back after the meetings on points which could not be resolved immediately: 'they are good at closing the feedback loop'. Two other panellists said there had not been an occasion when they needed an answer. One panellist expressed frustration at not hearing back about points they raised: 'sometimes when you give feedback it can just hang in the air … I don't want to be the person chasing it five times'. Another panellist said 'It is really important that those who are involved really definitely get to see the outcome [of their input] without having to necessarily find it elsewhere' and wanted the Office for Students to 'make it really clear what has happened as a result [of their input]'.

All panellists shared reflections about the impact and outcome of their feedback, acknowledging that impact is complicated to track and attribute. One panellist said instead of tracking outcomes, they focus on 'getting their views across'. Two panellists said they did not always know whether they had impact, as some areas they worked on were very specific to higher education, which they followed 'only to an extent'.

A theme that emerged from every single interview was the desire for more engagement. One panellist noted with 15 panellists 'if we meet [for] four hours, four times a year, everyone will barely get one hour to speak'. Other panellists spoke about their capacity in relation to time and resource: 'A lot of the time it comes down to resources and what we actually have the time and capability to achieve' and said they had seen growing engagement from people consulting the Panel who might not have had 'much experience working with students … and how helpful their input is'. Another panellist said 'If there was resource, it would be great if [meetings] were once a month' acknowledging that the Panel are sometimes not

consulted between meetings on smaller pieces of work due to time commitment issues. Two other panellists suggested their work as representatives could be taken as a 'module', with one saying that representative roles:

> *have shown me far more than my academic work … a lecture hasn't changed my perspectives … and it hasn't taught me new skills.*

Meetings with the Minister for Universities

Every panellist mentioned the meetings with the Minister for Universities, Michelle Donelan. They were described positively by all panellists as a 'significant achievement', a 'big step' and 'meaningful'. These meetings were described consistently by panellists. One panellist said:

> *A quick welcome and round the table of hellos … she might ask us about one pressing question … and then there might be a kind of last 15 minutes for open Q&A where we can raise issues directly with her.*

Panellists explained why they felt the meetings were important, that they 'have the ear of people that make decisions'. Another panellist said 'It's so important that they are listening and that they're willing to listen'.

Connection to other parts of the Office for Students

Every panellist was positive about the connection to the rest of the Office for Students and all panellists mentioned the two-way mentorship programme between panellists and Board members, with a panellist noting the Chief Executive as 'very, very good'. One panellist suggested there might be more ways for 'cross-pollination' of ideas between the Panel and the

Board and there was room to 'strengthen the feedback loop and communication'. Another panellist described the recent opportunity to learn about and meet the Board members as 'really lovely':

> *[There was] a bit of a Q&A with them and they kind of explain their background and what their reasons are for being on the Office for Students Board.*

Conclusion

Panellists were positive about their experiences throughout the interviews and offered constructive feedback about how they might contribute more effectively as members of the Student Panel. The most consistent points raised were:

- the panellists feel their work is important, fulfilling and they feel supported and keen to continue to engage with the Minister for Universities, the Office for Students' Board and with more students;
- many of the panellists want to get more involved and have more opportunities to engage with the Office for Students' work than is currently offered; and
- many of the panellists feel they could feed into the policymaking process at an earlier stage and help set and co-create priorities for the Office for Students.

The author would like to thank the panellists for giving their time and sharing their experiences.

8. The importance of the NUS for representing the voices of students

Aaron Porter, Council Member of Goldsmiths University, Chair of BPP University and a former President of the National Union of Students in 2010/11

The National Union of Students is on the cusp of celebrating its centenary. Founded in 1922 in the aftermath of the First World War, at a meeting at the University of London, it was formed with an explicitly internationalist outlook but crucially to advance the cause of students studying in the UK.

Over these 100 years, the NUS has a rich and varied history. There have been monumental victories, including: exempting students from Council Tax; being at the forefront of liberation issues to change the law affecting women, LGBT, disabled and ethnic minorities; helping to create the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIAHE); securing hundreds of millions of pounds to support students and student projects; an instrumental role in the fight against Apartheid; winning the right for statutory student representation; and countless research reports which have influenced governments decade after decade.

But there have also been crushing lows and moments when the very existence of the organisation has been called into question. It has had to deal with hostile governments who have publicly sought to challenge and undermine the organisation, particularly in the 1980s and early 1990s, but it has also worked constructively with governments, opposition parties and devolved administrations.

As a former President during 2010/11, my outlook toward

the organisation is influenced by my own involvement and a fundamental sympathy for the principles with which the organisation was founded and still aspire towards today. But it is of course an organisation not without its faults – today and previously – which is hardly surprising, given the diversity of the members it represents, the turbulent environment it operates within, coupled with the experience and turnover of its elected leaders.

Before I consider how effective the organisation has been, it is important to answer the question as to whether a national union should exist at all. Critics will say that individual students' unions can advocate for students locally, or more recently that consumer and legal rights, or the creation of the Office for Students in England, ensures that students are now well protected. But this is to miss the point of why a national union exists. There are issues which affect students irrespective of where they study and are most logically dealt with at national level. Bluntly, even the most hostile government towards students would still prefer to deal with one national organisation rather than trying to deal with a fragmented student population. And unlike any other body, the priorities of the NUS are determined by students and representatives directly elected by students, giving it a legitimacy others do not have. If a national union of students did not exist, I suspect in almost all circumstances it would need to be created.

Whether the NUS is, or has been, effective is a matter of opinion. On the whole, I think it has been a remarkable organisation which manages to marry democracy with evidence, lobbying

and direct action, local, national and international concerns, together with education and the societal issues faced by students in their wider life. Each of these choices present options for what the NUS should focus on and where to deploy its resources and emphasis. In some respects, it needs to pay some attention to all of these, but it is the balance which is most important. Ultimately, the NUS is most effective when it remembers what uniquely unites all its members: their education.

But there is also a key dilemma to strike which is more important than any thematic one, which is the balance between pragmatism and idealism. It is perhaps this conundrum which is most difficult, the battle between head and heart. It is probably the accusation that is most powerfully levelled at the NUS, that its priorities can be too idealistic but simply not feasible. This is an accusation that needs to be taken seriously because an obsession with idealism can lead to irrelevance.

In order to combat any suggestion that the NUS is too idealistic, evidence is crucial. And this is true for students' unions too. You can never have enough information to help you understand your members, their priorities and experience. Throughout its history, there have been times when research from the NUS has started or shaped a national debate, led to policy changes or funding and ultimately helped to improve the lives of students. During my Presidency, I can point to the annual student experience research we conducted and published which shed new light on the learning and teaching experience of students and the *Hidden Marks* report, a study to explore the experience of women students facing harassment

and violence.[27] I would implore the NUS to return to ground-breaking research like this to help advance its cause.

There is a crucial role that the NUS needs to play in supporting and building capacity in local students' unions. This often is not glamorous or headline grabbing, but it is absolutely essential. This can be anything from helping to form a students' union in a local further education college, sixth form or alternative provider where there has been no history or tradition of student representation, through to the training and development which the NUS has offered for decades to elected student representatives. When this is done well, it can be transformational to the impact and effectiveness of student leaders across the UK. Most student officers are elected through a combination of their own ideas, being well known and a cause or campaign they want to see advanced. But the ability to be an effective representative and to enact that change requires a different skillset and this is where the NUS can be vital in its help and support.

I know personally that the NUS was formative in the development of my own ideas and opinions. Some of this was reinforced by meeting like-minded people, but just as importantly meeting and debating with others who held different beliefs and opinions. The NUS should offer a place to allow different opinions to be aired and discussed, right across the political spectrum. Sometimes the NUS is criticised for being centre-left in its outlook. This is hardly surprising. Every

27 NUS / HSBC, *Student Experience Report 2010/11: Teaching and Learning* NUS, 2011 https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/nus-hsbc-student-experience-report-2010-11-teaching-and-learning and NUS, *Hidden Marks: A study of women students' experiences of harassment, stalking, violence and sexual assault,* 2010 https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/hidden-marks-a-study-of-women-students-experiences-of-harassment-stalking-violence-and-sexual-assault

poll I have ever seen going back decades shows that a decisive majority of students share that view, so it would be much more surprising if the NUS ever ventured away from that.[28] There have been times when it has flirted with the hard left, and hard left groups certainly organise within the NUS, but this a feature of organised student groups across the world. More recently there are some concerns that debate and free speech is being curtailed within the NUS and students' unions, but in general terms this has not been my experience. Indeed I witnessed and was able to participate in debates right across the political spectrum, from Tories to Trotskyites, and the NUS was all the stronger because of it. During my time as President, the 'No Platform' policy was reinforced and I still support a democratic body deciding that for a handful of groups who offer nothing but hate and promote violence be excluded. But this should not extend to those we simply disagree with or find disagreeable. No platforming Conservative politicians or campaigners like Peter Tatchell does not make sense to me. We can disagree with them – they are not advocating violence and we should be able to debate with them.

The fertile debating ground, which for many years the NUS has encouraged and not sought to censor, has in part contributed to an important by-product function of the NUS: the churning out of future leaders across a wide spectrum of politics, higher education and further education, the charity sector, journalism, the civil service and public life more broadly. While former Presidents like Jack Straw and Charles Clarke are most well-known (seven of the 14 Presidents between 1969 and 1996 went on to become Labour politicians), there are leading politicians from all major parties including the Conservatives,

28 Nick Hillman, *Student voters: did they make a difference?,* HEPI, 2020 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/09/17/student-voters-did-they-make-a-difference/

Liberal Democrats, SNP and Plaid Cymru all with roots in the NUS. Having leaders in public life who understand student issues and the NUS has held it in good stead, but it is less clear whether this conveyor belt will continue to be as influential in the future. It is the willingness to foster debate that has often meant that the NUS has been at the forefront of causes and issues, talking about student partnership long before it became fashionable, highlighting the inequities of access to higher education, focusing on student outcomes or the Black awarding gap – but also using new methods and means to engage with students. This need for innovation continues to be as important today.

It is becoming increasingly plain that the consumer protection arrangements put in place for the higher education sector are not fit for purpose. At times there has felt like an awkward blurring between the boundary and authority of the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) and the Office for Students in England – or funders elsewhere in the UK – in holding to account the promises that providers have made. The NUS itself has often found engaging in the debate on 'students as consumers' deeply uncomfortable, conscious that to focus on students as partners in learning is not mutually exclusive from students as consumers in other respects. As the law and regulation around student consumer protection will surely need to be revisited, there is a question about what role the NUS can and should play and its capacity and interest in so doing.

For the NUS the last few years have been difficult; a combination of financial challenges together with a focus on a relatively narrow set of issues has called into question the legitimacy and credibility of the organisation. We should not

underestimate the financial problems the organisation has faced, resulting in the loss of its headquarters in London, a significant reduction in the staff base (around 70 per cent) and a dramatic reduction in elected officers and associated activity costs. The implications of this has not just diminished the organisation, it also has practical implications for the extent to which the organisation can engage and support the sector as it had done previously and it has had to make some difficult choices about where it can no longer engage.

At its heart, the NUS has always been a hybrid of a representative body and a campaigning body. In the turmoil of the last few years, it is clear the campaigning body continues to survive, but evidence of where the NUS as a representative body sits is less clear. There is nothing wrong with that per se, but ultimately there will always be a need for a representative voice to speak on behalf of students. Calls remain for the governance and democracy of the organisation to modernise further and to clarify its representative role.

But these are not unique challenges in the hundred-year history of the organisation. As the foundations are being reset, and as the NUS gears up for its second century it would be well served to look back to its roots. The NUS can continue to be an effective and important organisation for students when it prioritises the uniting feature of its members: education. It should underpin its activities with evidence and research, ensure it is seen as valuable to students' unions, facilitate debate, continue to innovate and be wise in its choice between idealism and pragmatism.

9. Restoring the real student voice

Dennis Hayes, Professor of Education, University of Derby

A recent BBC News article reported that students at the University of Oxford had voted to remove a picture of the Queen from their common room as they felt it represented 'recent colonial history'.[29] This emotionalism of offence from privileged students is an example of how the once radical student voice now calls for a retreat from reality. In 2022, we will celebrate the Queen's platinum jubilee with a four-day bank holiday. Will universities be able to provide enough safe spaces for students to hide in or is it time for students to return to their radical roots and the real student voice?

The voice of the offended student

In the press and on social media, the student voice is often a censorious voice. Calls for speakers to be cancelled, disciplined or sacked for their views regularly hit the headlines. Often these attempts fail as even a cursory look at the list kept by Academics For Academic Freedom will reveal.[30] The lack of success in censoring speakers is sometimes pointed out by those who deny there is a free speech issue in universities, but that denial misses the point. The overall effect is to create a chilling atmosphere on campus. The student voice that seeks to silence speakers deserves a bad press. And, in reply to a criticism that is sometimes made, this is not an argument for censoring the censorious student voice. A belief in free speech requires that even censorious voices be heard but challenged.

29 BBC News, *Queen's portrait removed after vote by Oxford University students,* 9 June 2021 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-57409743

30 The 'Banned' List, Academics For Academic Freedom 2021: https://www.afaf.org.uk/the-banned-list/

This censorious student voice should come as no surprise. It was the National Union of Students (NUS) that first 'no platformed' political groups they disliked in the 1970s. The nature of NUS and student censorship changed and developed over time, and we now have wide-ranging attempts to censor almost anything that students find offensive. Some of the sillier bans, including the song 'Blurred Lines', sombreros and on certain hand gestures or clapping, make the student voice seem infantilising and wacky. But many are serious and deliberately try to stop the discussion of important issues such as by saying that there can be no debate as the matter is settled, or that the university must be a 'safe space' full of 'puppy rooms' and 'petting zoos'.[31] These ideas represent fear of intellectual challenge and change.

Often people argue that the university should be a safe space for discussion. But that is not what 'safe space' means today. It means a place where ideas that are deemed unacceptable by the emotionally offended can be excluded. But that is not a university. A university cannot be a safe space from difficult and unsettling ideas and universities should have made public their commitment to open debate and discussion to challenge such ideas.

The voice of the student as manager

Another 'student voice' that gets little publicity and is simply accepted by all is the voice of the student as manager.

For university leaders and the Office for Students the student voice is an important voice of management. The student

31 See https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/publications/2020/apr/creating-safe-spaces-students-classroom; https://www.lse.ac.uk/study-at-lse/Summer-Schools/Summer-School/Social-programme/Secure/Puppy-therapy; https://lsu.co.uk/events/id/26-petting-zoo

voice is heard on every committee from programme to the Governing body. This student voice is indistinguishable from that of managers. The assimilation of the student voice happened because it is the voice of the offended victim. If you enter university and feel nervous – as freshers have for hundreds of years – you should still be excited about the changes that could happen to you. You may learn enough to challenge the understanding of your tutors. But today your nervousness will be recognised, and the university will adapt to your sense of vulnerability. The vulnerable student is no threat to university management and students who represent their peers as vulnerable can become part of management without any element of threat. Management will argue that they want the university to be a safe space for students and the student voice can only cry 'Not safe enough!'

The culture of victimhood has arisen because students have had years in schools with a therapeutic ethos that seeks to avoid any emotional upset or offence.[32] This makes them easily incorporated into management to demand more awareness raising activities around equality issues framed as protections and safeguarding. When the student voice on these issues is celebrated by universities is there not a whiff of manipulation?

The therapeutic voice of the student

In all these cases and in many others the student voice is an expression of therapy culture. That is what has changed over the last decade. Whether the student voice is censorious or managerial it is based on emotion either on being emotionally hurt and taking offence or giving advice to other students

32 See Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes, *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education (Second Edition)*, Routledge, 2019

and staff based on your feelings. The current student concern with 'identities' illustrates the therapeutic turn well. It is an expression of a therapeutic need for emotional connection with others, present or past. The argument that there is a therapeutic turn in universities cannot be won through an opinion piece. But listen next time you hear a student speak. They will talk about their feelings. They will suggest a more welcoming approach or will seek to revise the content of the curriculum that they find upsetting. But, so far, they know little and their feelings need to be challenged. What should be the response is debate and discussion related to their concerns. That will involve getting students to know the literature that may give them the intellectual understanding they need.

The real student voice

I overheard a student in a corridor with a colleague who had just left a tutorial that focussed on subject content rather than student feelings. The student said, 'That really affected my mental health!' The language of mental health is being adopted in the latest twist in therapy culture. Students coming out of a difficult tutorial should feel shame for not having done enough reading and not having any facts, or arguments, to put forward. The student could have said 'That won't happen again. I will read more and prepare.' Therapy culture allows students to see such ordinary situations as emotionally damaging. They feel that education is making them ill and that they cannot take charge of their own learning. Instead, they will get their representative to raise their anxieties at the next meeting of the 'Wellbeing Committee' in the hope that there will be interventions to ensure that academics put students' feelings first. The 'supportive' nature of such committees is a sham that denies student agency – their ability to take control

of their own learning. It is time for students to abandon any committees that reinforce the idea that all students are vulnerable. That probably means all committees.

The real student voice we need to hear is the voice of the student that has read carefully and well. That student could challenge lecturers by spotting flaws in their arguments or putting forward insights that challenge sleepy academic orthodoxies. They would not be damaging their lecturer's mental health but would be giving them a wake-up call.

Students should leave their safe spaces, managerial committees and destressing programmes and get back to raising their traditional voice. This may seem nothing like a return to the student radicalism of the 1960s but in contemporary therapy culture it would be equally radical.

10. Students' voices in curriculum design

Professor Dilly Fung, Pro-Director Education, London School of Education and Political Science

Woodrow Wilson's assertion that 'It is easier to move a cemetery than to change a curriculum' is being put to the test in higher education. Institutions in the UK and around the world are actively developing and re-designing their programmes of study. Students are increasingly being drawn into programme design, review and enhancement but many still feel that their voices, values and creativity are excluded from this key area of activity. How can educators work with students in curriculum design and enhancement and ensure that students' diverse voices are truly heard?

Curriculum design and development are complex activities. They may involve creating brand new programmes or updating the content and design of pre-existing individual courses or modules. They may entail reviewing the whole of the current curriculum in a particular discipline, perhaps as part of a periodic review and planning cycle built into institutional policy, or in response to the changing requirements of external professional bodies or new developments in research. More radically, an institution may set out to refresh its entire portfolio of learning opportunities across all disciplinary areas. It may shine a spotlight on cross-cutting themes such as inclusivity or internationalisation and challenge departments to strengthen courses in relation to those strategic priorities. Or it may devise and apply a new cross-institutional curriculum framework, such as the Connected Curriculum at UCL, Educate for Global Impact at the LSE, the Civic Learning Programme at

Science Po in Paris or the Melbourne Curriculum in Australia.[33] Curriculum change may be explicitly embedded into a broader strategy for radical values-based institutional change, such as the Transformation process at the University of Cape Town.[34]

While students have traditionally participated in some way in these layers of curriculum design and development, typically as a result of policies which require student representation on committees and review panels, their voices are very likely to be in the minority. Students may have a seat at the table, but the table may be long and the students may sit at the very far end. There has been much discussion across the sector about how best to address this, but however committed an institution may be in principle to hearing students' voices, power dynamics are inevitably at work. Academics and professional staff involved in student education have more experience, subject knowledge and authority. Crucially, they also have more longevity in these developmental spaces, since each cohort of students can only become 'partners' for a relatively short time in the life of an institution. Students can and do make valuable contributions through those structures, bringing their unique experiences and perspectives into discussions, but their voices may only be heard at the margins.

Working with students as partners in authentic ways to develop the curriculum is undoubtedly complex. Two academics,

33 See UCL Connected Curriculum: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/connected-curriculum-framework-research-based-education; LSE Educate for Global Impact. LSE 2034: https://www.lse.ac.uk/2030/educate-for-impact; Sciences Po Collège. The Charter of the Civic Learning Programme: https://www.sciencespo.fr/college/sites/sciencespo.fr.college/files/parcours-civique-charte-pedago-en.pdf; The Melbourne Curriculum: https://about.unimelb.edu.au/strategy/melbourne-curriculum

34 University of Cape Town Transformation: https://www.uct.ac.za/main/explore-uct/transformation

Catherine Bovill and Cherie Woolmer, in their analysis of a number of academic papers on this theme, argue that:

> *co-creating the curriculum can reframe the learning spaces in universities by enabling the co-construction of knowledge; redressing traditional hierarchies between teacher and learner; and developing new forms of … radical collegiality*.[35]

The recent academic studies they review suggest that the process of co-creation enhances engagement, motivation and identity development and even enables students to gain deeper insights into teaching and learning processes that can lead to improved performance in student assessments. Yet Bovill and Woolmer also observe multiple challenges, including the time intensive nature of genuine partnership work, some areas of cultural resistance and the difficulty of 'navigating institutional norms'.

In this context, institutions are developing imaginative ways of situating students as agents of change. Initiatives such as those at UCL, LSE, the University of Exeter and the University of Nottingham enable students to take a proactive role in identifying not only problems to solve but also creative innovations.[36] These schemes typically enable students to work in small groups to imagine new possibilities for

35 Catherine Bovill and Cherie Woolmer, 'How conceptualisations of curriculum in higher education influence student-staff co-creation *in* and *of* the curriculum', *Higher Education*, Issue 78, pp.407–422, 2019 https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0349-8

36 See UCL ChangeMakers: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/changemakers/; LSE Change Makers: https://info.lse.ac.uk/current-students/part-of-lse/change-makers; University of Exeter Students as Change Agents and Partners: https://www.exeter.ac.uk/changeagents/; University of Nottingham Students as Change Agents: https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/currentstudents/studentopportunities/students-as-change-agents/index.aspx

curriculum design and delivery, undertake research and develop evidence-based recommendations. Students can, for example, undertake a comparative analysis of the content and design of their own degree programme with that of others in the sector and use that analysis to inform discussion with their own department.

Formal, cross-institutional programme review can also include students in imaginative ways. At LSE in the UK, for example, students were actively involved in a series of events relating to programme review across the whole institution. Claire Gordon, Director of the LSE Eden Centre for Education Enhancement, led a review of 45 undergraduate degree programmes that focused on programme coherence and diversifying methods of assessing students. She built student-staff partnerships into the undergraduate programme review process by:

- including the Students' Union Education Officer in the central advisory board;
- ensuring that students were involved in departmental curriculum mapping processes, central review panels and Departmental Teaching Committees; and
- creating paid opportunities for students to undertake research projects focused on students' experiences of undergraduate programmes.

In a follow-up survey, 77 per cent of staff indicated they had engaged with the findings of the student projects. Interviews with student contributors underlined the importance of their involvement: 'Often student representation can appear to be tokenistic; it certainly was not with the programme review'. A departmental education leader responded, 'One of the key aspects of the process that was of great value was the ability

to knit together the narrative of the programme from the academic viewpoint with the students' perspectives'.

Arguably, the most powerful way of giving students space and agency in curriculum design and development is to adopt policies that draw them into the highest layer of institutional strategic planning. When institutions set out to consult on, develop and articulate clearly their overarching institutional mission and strategic plan, they can create inclusive opportunities for dialogue with students about the whole curriculum portfolio: its content, its structures, its interconnections across disciplines and its links with external partners. All members of an institution's community can come together to discuss questions such as:

- What is the current profile of our programmes of study, and is that right for this time and this place? Where are there gaps? Is there any unnecessary duplication?
- What is really important for curriculum in terms of content? Does the current content include knowledge traditions from around the world? Do new developments in technology and new global challenges suggest the need for changes?
- Does the current design of learning and assessment activities make the most of inclusive opportunities afforded by innovative digital and physical spaces?
- Should there be more interdisciplinary learning in the light of complex regional and global challenges?
- Should more learning take place outside the classroom, for example at partner institutions, in the workplace, through entrepreneurial projects or through civic engagement?

These questions and more were discussed, with students at the heart of the conversation, when UCL – a large, multi-disciplinary, research-intensive institution in the UK – developed its commitment to connecting student education more closely with its world-leading research. An overarching institutional framework called Connected Curriculum was embedded into UCL's 2034 strategy.[37] The foundations and story of UCL's approach, summarised in *A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education*, tell a story of enhancing student engagement in curriculum development.[38] Soon after publication the monograph had reached 175 countries, indicating significant global interest in working with students to re-think the curriculum.

One key group with which students were actively engaged at UCL was named 'Liberating the Curriculum'.[39] This involved staff and students working together to 'challenge traditional Eurocentric, male dominated curricula and to ensure the work of marginalised scholars on race, sexuality, gender and disability are fairly represented in curricula'. Profound and often very challenging discussions addressed the nature of the existing 'canon' – that is, what is traditionally considered to be important knowledge content in higher education programmes of study – and about how learning design can enable diverse voices to be heard. When the Connected Curriculum was articulated to the UCL community through an accessible brochure, a set of values-based statements about

37 UCL 2034: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/2034/

38 Dilly Fung, *A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education*, UCL Press, London, 2017 https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1558776/1/A-Connected-Curriculum-for-Higher-Education.pdf

39 UCL Liberating the Curriculum initiative https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/research-based-education/liberating-curriculum

'good' curriculum was included on the centre pages, mapped to the six dimensions of Connected Curriculum framework.[40] Powerfully, the articulation of 'excellence' for each dimension includes key statements relating to liberating the curriculum that were co-written by students. These statements were then used as reference points for programme accreditation, development and review.

Students should be involved in local, incremental curriculum developments. It is vital to include students in formal programme review and very helpful to empower them through 'students as change makers' schemes. But most promising of all is the possibility of co-creating structures and policies in such a way that students' voices are at the heart of things: the institution's values, its strategic intentions and its articulation of goals. There is still much to do in this area, but promising steps are being taken.

40 UCL Connected Curriculum: Enhancing Programmes of Study: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/sites/teaching-learning/files/connected_curriculum_brochure_oct_2017.pdf

11. The student voice and accommodation

Jenny Shaw, Student Experience Director, Unite Students and
Paul Humphreys, Founder and CEO, StudentCrowd

Today's students are powerful consumers, especially when this power is wielded as a collective. This chapter explores the impact of that collective voice on student accommodation through both reviews and direct feedback. The power of the student voice has helped move the discourse from one of 'provision of bed spaces' to a more student-centric and value-add view of student accommodation. Within the private Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) in particular, it has prompted a renewed interest in student-centric product and service design.

The rise of customer reviews has been one of the most important trends in the hospitality industry over recent years. TripAdvisor has made it very difficult for poor quality hotels to remain in business and has guided more successful brands to hone their offering to better meet the needs of prospective guests. Indeed the power of customer reviews has played an important role in allowing Airbnb to disrupt the hotel and holiday lets market, relying strongly on reviews to drive up standards and to guide customer choice.

The power of reviews among students is best demonstrated by the results of the UCAS *New Applicant Survey* (2020), in which 78 per cent of respondents rated 'online reviews by other students' as important in the decision on where to apply, second only to university websites.

StudentCrowd was created to help students make decisions about their university, course and accommodation. Making

their voice heard is central to why students engage with the platform. It has helped over 1.5 million students make decisions in the last 12 months and the most popular content is reviews on student accommodation.

With no real option to 'try before you buy', prospective students put their trust in current students to steer their decision. Accommodation providers' websites typically give plenty of factual information – location, price, facilities and so on – but reviews tell students what it is really like to live there, with no marketing gloss applied. To ensure the reviews can be trusted, StudentCrowd verify that reviewers are current students using university (ac.uk) email addresses.

This is especially important for international students, most of whom are unable to visit accommodation before they arrive. This is highlighted by a Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) report in which international students rated other students as being more influential than university staff when it comes to information about accommodation.[41]

According to HESA data, in 2019/20, 22 per cent of students studying in the UK came from outside the UK, but during the same time period 34 per cent of StudentCrowd users were international students. Reading reviews is one of the only ways they and their parents can gain a candid and unbiased view of the place they will be living, in a strange country, for at least a year.

As well as being important to students themselves, this large-scale approach to the student voice is also of growing

41 QS, *International Student Survey 2020 Report – Volume 2: Information and Influence*, 2020 https://www.qs.com/portfolio-items/international-student-survey-2020-report-volume-2-information-and-influence/

importance to parents. Parents have become more and more involved in research into university and accommodation choices over recent years. StudentCrowd found a greater than 600 per cent increase in parents researching universities during Clearing in 2020 compared to the previous year.

The impact of review sites on PBSA has also been profound, especially among private providers who are competing for students' business. To put it simply, reviews wash our dirty linen in public. Poor quality buildings, weaknesses in service and low staff performance are hung on the line for all to see.

This of course has an impact on the bottom line of private providers and indeed of university accommodation teams who have budgets to meet. As far as we are aware, there is no existing research on the impact of the student voice on choice of accommodation. However, using generic consumer data from Temkin Group, Unite Students recently estimated that for every 100 unhappy customers, 50 would tell friends or family, 15 would give a bad rating or review and 14 would mention it on social media. Conversely for every 100 happy customers, 79 would recommend the accommodation to friends, family, via a review or social media.

Although largely invisible, word of mouth recommendations are particularly powerful; Martin Gellersteldt and T. Arvemo have found that they outweigh and even overturn the impact of online ratings when it comes to hotel bookings.[42] Word of mouth can be a hidden factor in the effectiveness of student accommodation marketing, but may be measured by proxy as noted below.

42 Martin Gellerstedt and T. Arvemo, 'The impact of word of mouth when booking a hotel: could a good friend's opinion outweigh the online majority?'. *Information Technology & Tourism,* Volume 21, pp. 289–311, 2019 https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-019-00143-4

Students also make their voices heard via surveys, though in a less visible but more direct way. The Global Student Living Index (GSLI), formerly the National Student Housing Survey, has also seen rapid growth in participation over recent years. Although feedback goes directly to providers rather than the public domain, an associated programme of awards highlights high performing accommodation based on student feedback. Both the GSLI and internally-run accommodation surveys provide a measure of the impact of a good accommodation experience. The Net Promoter Score – a measure of how likely students are to recommend something – is a particularly popular measure with direct impacts on business or organisational performance. Across all industry sectors it has been proposed that a seven-point growth in Net Promoter Score equates to 1 per cent growth.[43] Such is the power of the customer voice!

National level surveys such as the GSLI also provide insight into the developing needs of students with regard to their accommodation. Back in the early 2000s, the discourse around student accommodation was highly utilitarian. HEFCE wrote about 'bed spaces' as a commodity that would support growth in student numbers and the 2003 higher education white paper had nothing at all to say on the matter. As a sector we now understand much more about what today's students need from their accommodation in terms of community, belonging and mental health support and measure our performance in these areas accordingly.

For individual university accommodation teams and private PBSA providers, giving students a voice in product and service design is increasingly seen as best practice. Unite Students has

43 Paul Marsden et al, 'Advocacy Drives Growth', *Brand Strategy*, December 2005

involved students in the design process since 2015, resulting in the development of the Ambassador Scheme, many of the MyUnite app services and redesign of most student-facing processes such as maintenance and rental payments. Its in-house Customer Panel, now in its fifth year, is in constant demand by internal teams seeking the student voice to guide improvements. Students have a voice in specification design and procurement, and the student voice is a regular item at the monthly Operations Board. Rather than asking them to ratify a decision that has already been made, the focus is on understanding their context, needs and preferences in order to develop better services.

The student voice – both collectively and individually – is highly valued within the student accommodation sector because it drives value. Value for students who are better able to have their needs met and value for accommodation teams and providers who only remain viable if students want to book with them. In an era strongly characterised by peer-to-peer reviews and recommendations, there is simply no hiding place for a poor accommodation offer, but mutual benefit for those that are prepared to listen to the student voice.

And this stands true for the wider university experience: there is simply no hiding place for poor academic provision. The aforementioned UCAS statistic demonstrates that 78 per cent of applicants found 'online reviews by other students' to be important in their university application decision. Universities must listen to the student voice and engage with the student reviews. We have found the reviews provide real-time feedback for universities to help shape policy decisions and budget allocations and add a richer understanding of the student experience.

12. Mature students: a silent or silenced voice?

Cath Brown, former President of the Open University Students Association

Undergraduate students become officially 'mature' if they commence their course aged 21 or over; for postgraduates it is over the age of 25. Currently 39 per cent of undergraduate entrants and 50 per cent of postgraduates are mature at UK universities.[44]

Despite this, there remains a prevalent 'young student' narrative in society, with mature students remaining comparatively unseen and unheard. How can this be explained and addressed?

Who are they?

It is not surprising that mature learners are more likely to have family or caring responsibilities, have a disability or come from lower socio-economic backgrounds.[45] Table 1 illustrates that with increasing age, mature students are more likely to be Black and female.

44 Sue Hubble and Paul Bolton, 'Mature higher education students in England', *House of Commons Library,* Number 8809, 24 February 2021, p.6 https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8809/

45 Sue Hubble and Paul Bolton, 'Mature higher education students in England', *House of Commons Library,* Number 8809, 24 February 2021, p.12 https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8809/ and HESA, *Who's Studying in HE*, 2020 https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he

Table 1. Percentage of total acceptances through UCAS by age group for mature applicants who are Black or female.[46]

	% of acceptances through UCAS in age group	
Age	Female applicants	Black applicants
21-25	56.6	10.6
26-30	66.5	11.9
31-35	71.3	18.7
36+	70.7	31.3
Overall HE population	*56.9*	*7.60*

How and where do they study?

A significant proportion of mature students are also 'non-traditional' in other ways.

The proportion of mature students studying part-time is over five times that of young students, for both undergraduates and postgraduates. A fifth of mature undergraduates study with the Open University. Distance learners are the ultimate unseen students: they are not seen on campus, they rarely show any markers of student identity and they do not live in student accommodation.[47]

Mature students are far from uniformly distributed across qualifications or providers. Those who applied via UCAS reportedly favoured lower-tariff providers and a smaller range of courses. By far the most popular are Education and

46 UCAS, *Admissions Patterns for Mature Applicants*, 2018, p 13 https://www.ucas.com/file/175936/

47 Sue Hubble and Paul Bolton, 'Mature higher education students in England', *House of Commons Library,* Number 8809, 24 February 2021, pp. 6,14 https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8809/

Subjects Allied to Medicine. Students studying for Level 4 or 5 qualifications are also disproportionately mature (79 per cent).[48]

Mature students also have less good outcomes, are more likely to drop out and, when full-time, they gain fewer higher classification degrees than young students.[49]

Mature students and the National Student Survey (NSS)

The NSS is admittedly an imperfect instrument, but its role in the student voice cannot be ignored.

Although collective data is not released for mature students, given that 89 per cent of part-time students are mature, part-time vs full-time is a reasonable proxy.[50]

The aggregated data show a stark difference in response rate – 70.4 per cent for full-time but 55.9 per cent for part-time. This does not tell the full story: the exclusion of subject areas and providers that fail to reach the 50 per cent threshold will tend to disenfranchise courses with many part-timers as they are less likely to be the 'beneficiaries' of on-campus NSS drives. One example is the Open University having narrowly missed the inclusion threshold in 2020, despite the raw numbers responding being higher than those at many included institutions.[51]

48 Sue Hubble and Paul Bolton, 'Mature higher education students in England', *House of Commons Library,* Number 8809, 24 February 2021, p.7 https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8809/

49 Office for Students, *Topic Briefing: Mature Students*, 27 July 2020, https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/mature-students/

50 Sue Hubble and Paul Bolton, 'Mature higher education students in England', *House of Commons Library,* Number 8809, 24 February 2021, p6 https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8809/

51 Office for Students, *National Student Survey – NSS*, 2020 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/get-the-nss-data

Despite this incompleteness, the responses of part-time learners are telling. Table 2 shows the relevant responses.

Table 2: NSS Responses of full- and part-time students on key areas.[52]

Score Awarded
Increasing favourability →

	1	2	3	4	5
Learning Community					
Full time	3.5%	7.1%	13.1%	39.0%	37.3%
Part time	6.1%	11.7%	20.7%	36.0%	25.4%
Student Voice					
Full time	3.5%	7.5%	14.8%	38.2%	35.8%
Part time	3.8%	7.6%	23.4%	34.7%	30.5%
Student Union					
Full time	5.5%	8.7%	29.4%	34.7%	21.7%
Part time	2.8%	4.0%	45.1%	28.3%	19.8%

'Learning community' is included as the best proxy for a sense of belonging. Belonging underpins effective student voice. The very marked differences in this measure would alone hint not all is well. It is also apparent the responding part-timers are less positive about their student union's academic representation and student voice in general.

Combining the notoriously low turnout for students' union elections with the NSS data might feed into the hostile response to students' unions and the Government's allegations

52 Office for Students, *National Student Survey – NSS*, 2020 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/get-the-nss-data

of 'niche activism'. The huge efforts put in by sabbatical officers, working long hours on low pay to look out for their members, most certainly do not deserve this condemnation.[53]

But something is not working.

What is going on?

Why are mature learners not heard? It is a complex picture.

Practicalities are crucial. Mature learners are typically time-poor, whether due to family or caring duties, full-time employment or the demanding and time-consuming placements on the medically-related courses so popular with this cohort. Part-timers, in particular, are more likely to have focused brief visits to campus.[54] Fitting in their studies is a juggling act; 'inessentials' will not merit time or mental resources. So anything perceived as peripheral, even giving basic feedback, is likely to suffer.

But even if the practical issues were dealt with, how far do mature learners feel motivated and empowered to use their voices?

The purpose of feedback is largely to improve things for the future. Offering feedback requires identifying with the institution – a sense of belonging. This concept is difficult to quantify and perhaps even more demanding to develop purposefully, but that does not render it any less crucial.

Not only can being in a less visible group in an institution lead

53 Eve Alcock and Michael Natzler, 'Students' Unions are a crucial puzzle piece for this academic year', HEPI Blog, 29 September 2020 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/09/29/students-unions-are-a-crucial-puzzle-piece-for-this-academic-year/

54 John Butcher, *Unheard: the voices of part-time adult learners,* HEPI, 2020 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/02/06/unheard-the-voices-of-part-time-adult-learners/

students to feel their contribution will not be valued by the institution, but also that it is not in itself valuable. It is not uncommon to hear mature students commenting along the lines 'Get the young ones involved – they are who the university should hear from' or 'I am too distant from the normal students'. There is also some evidence of differences by subject, with healthcare students (many of whom are mature) exhibiting less sense of belonging.[55]

One powerful student voice mechanism is feeding into student representatives, or indeed becoming a representative. In many institutions, candidates for these roles are typically young students rather than mature students and those getting involved are often in informal networks with existing 'insiders'. While representatives may be very willing to hear and amplify the voices of students in different demographics, that does not alone remove perceived barriers.[56]

A further issue is the perceived value of student voice. Incentivising completion of the National Student Survey (NSS) or course questionnaires is common; this may seem an obvious short-term strategy but it is an established psychological phenomenon that incentivisation tends to reduce perceived intrinsic value.

Furthermore, if the student voice becomes a matter of delivering quotable statistics, students will understandably feel their institution aims to profit from their labour rather

55 Mi Young Ahn and Howard H. Davis, 'Students' sense of belonging and their socio-economic status in higher education: a quantitative approach', *Teaching in Higher Education,* 2020, p 11 https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1778664

56 Rachel Brooks, Kate Byford and Katherine Sela, 'Inequalities in students' union leadership: the role of social networks', *Journal of Youth Studies,* Volume 18, Issue 9, 2015, pp.1204-1218 https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1039971

than genuinely wishing to listen to them. The mature student who already feels somewhat 'othered' is unlikely to want to be crowded into a hall with their younger peers to do what feels like a tick-box survey in return for pizza.

What can be done?

The high proportion of mature students who are 'non-traditional' in other respects suggests that solutions to their voices may pay dividends with other missing voices too.

There is a need to move away from a deficit model which sees mature students in terms of the issues or difficulties they have. Mature students have life experiences they can bring to the university, for example their ability to prioritise and manage their time are often extremely well honed by necessity. These should be actively valued. The sheer courage of tackling studying when you are atypical should be celebrated.

A starting point is a 'Universal Design for Student Voice', in which approaches to encourage and facilitate marginalised voices are embedded right at the start, rather than as a bolt-on to a mechanism focused on young full-timers. As a starting point, this requires flexible and remote opportunities as the default.

Many students' unions are rightly aiming to increase the diversity of the students who engage with them, and vital as this is, it is not necessarily going to be a quick win. So, without undermining their students' unions, universities need to explore additional mechanisms for students to use their voices. If mature students see their feedback valued by the university, that may itself encourage them to consider a more formal role.

University staff need to appreciate that encouraging the voice of non-traditional students may require different approaches. If diversity is to be increased, and mature students empowered to engage, then barriers need to be removed. Even students' unions officers may find university governance impenetrable at times and have concerns about power imbalances, as Eve Alcock outlines in this collection. How much worse are these issues for non-traditional students? Routes in, other than formal and potentially intimidating ones, need to be developed.

This does not mean staff being patronising or making 'there-there' noises, but it does entail openness and treating students with respect, as fellow adults. This author had one experience of being blatantly patronised and laughed it off. For a less confident mature student, it could mean their first foray into using their voice was their last.

Moving student voice past the simple 'feedback' model towards real partnership and valuing experience and insight could pay dividends. And be prepared to pay students for their labour – not with pizza, but on a financial basis, as consultants. For mature students in particular, time is money.[57]

57 Helen Young and Lee Jerome, 'Student voice in higher education: Opening the loop', *British Educational Research Journal,* Volume 46, Issue 3, 2020, pp.688-705 https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/berj.3603

13. International students in the UK – perspectives put in context

Roy Kiruri, Former International Students' Officer at the University of Bristol Students' Union

The attraction of the UK as a destination for international students seeking a tertiary education has long been on the rise and this is evidenced by the fact that in 2018 these students added an estimated £20 billion to the UK economy.[58] Not only that, government bodies such as the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) have – for example – an *International Research and Innovation Strategy* (2019) that looks to invest £110 million in Artificial Intelligence (AI) Master's and PhD programmes that researchers and innovators from around the globe can benefit from.

With this growing international student population and the funding that is being utilised to support it, one would be forgiven for thinking that these students have a relatively smooth journey during their time at university but, unfortunately, this is not always the case.

Given my experience over the last year as the International Students' Officer (ISO) at the University of Bristol Students' Union (SU), I want to shed light and provide a voice to the topics and concerns which international students care about more generally, but also specifically as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. Given the infancy of my role in our students' union, there has been much scope to influence meaningful and

58 HEPI / Kaplan International Pathways, *The costs and benefits of international students by parliamentary constituency,* HEPI, January 2018 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Economic-benefits-of-international-students-by-constituency-Final-11-01-2018.pdf

lasting change and it is through this lens that I hope to frame my observations.

Employability

A survey titled *International & EU Students Research Project* (2018) that was run by Bristol Students' Union shows that of a group of 208 students who were asked their motivations for coming to study in the UK, 66 per cent of these students chose the option 'to help my career prospects'.[59]

The Careers Service at the University of Bristol is by all accounts a very knowledgeable and approachable facility for students to utilise, offering interview tips, CV / cover letter review sessions, workshops on securing work visas in the UK and even publicising various internships through its 'myopportunities' page. To add to this, there is a piece of active policy that mandates Bristol Students' Union seek to create an 'SU Job Shop'. Nevertheless, the odds always remain stacked against international students, given the ever-competitive nature of many job postings and the unwillingness of several companies to sponsor a work visa.

As such, the arrival of the 'Graduate Route Visa' (as of 1 July 2021) has been a very welcome addition to the arsenal of tools international students can use to find work in the UK. Preliminary records of student opinion already show a real satisfaction with the introduction of the visa, with a UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) Fest poll showing that of the 42 respondents that were asked 'How do you plan to work in the UK after graduating?', a very

59 Bristol Students' Union, *International & EU Students Research Project*, June 2018 https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/nusdigital/document/documents/49006/debf9e53e919f6e1d29814ec08a8ea96/International_Students_Report_June_2019.pdf

encouraging figure of 20 said they intend to 'Via Graduate Route then stay in the UK'.

Yet the effects of COVID have meant the scope of this visa may not be all-encompassing as students need to be in the country by 27 September 2021 to take advantage of this, and many students may not be able to do this due to travel restrictions. As such, mitigations could be put in place to make the positive impact of this scheme more far-reaching. One such mitigation could be removing the requirement for students who received distance learning in the past academic year having to apply for a Student visa before they are eligible for the Graduate Route visa.

Tuition fees

In the 2010/2011 academic year, the University of Bristol had average undergraduate overseas tuition fees of £11,900 for 'Band 1 (Arts / Classroom-based)' courses and £14,950 for 'Band 2 (Science / Lab-based)' courses.[60] This contrasts starkly with the fees in the 2021/2022 academic year, where the average Arts / Classroom-based course is £20,100 and for Science / Lab-based courses this figure rises to £24,700.

In March 2020, Bristol Students' Union ran a full-scale tuition fee campaign with the intended aim of securing partial tuition fee compensation and reduced international tuition fees for future cohorts. Certain impacts of COVID, such as the loss of specific educational experiences (for example lab time, field trips and use of equipment) and the proposed 'blended learning' experience not being able to run fully throughout the

60 Simon Rogers, 'Tuition fees 2010/11: find out how much each university charges', *Guardian*, 12 October 2010 https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2010/oct/12/tuition-fees-universities

year, due to national lockdowns in November 2020 and January 2021, were both key factors in the Sabbatical Officer team's campaign for both home students and international students. However, international students suffered especially, with some not being able to travel to the UK (as a result of COVID restrictions in their home countries) while others travelled to the UK, only to take part in limited physical teaching, with many not having the opportunity at all.

The international element of the campaign primarily involved working with International Students' Officers at other Russell Group universities, encouraging students to write letters to their embassies, arranging a meeting with our University's Fee Setting Group and gathering signatures for a government petition.

Even with these extensive efforts and our Sabbatical Officer Team managing to reach consensus with our University Senior Management Team on several of our requests, a painful understanding that was universally reached is that none of our asks could be realistically enacted without support from the Government – as this would only leave the University with a significant financial risk to bear by itself. Consequently, it appears quite clear to me that a serious rethinking of the current model of funding higher education needs to take place – otherwise international students' fees will continue to rise to deal with universities' increasing running costs, inevitably resulting in both students and institutions being placed in a precarious position.

Asian hate and Sinophobia

Racism against members of the East and South-East Asian community is by no means a new phenomenon, but it is

painfully clear that these instances of discrimination have spiked since the prevalence of COVID-19. Between January and June 2020, 457 cases of race-related crime against people identifying as 'Oriental' ethnicity were reported to the Metropolitan Police, with 64 of these cases occurring in February alone.[61] These incidents have happened in a variety of circumstances, even while victims have been doing the most ordinary of activities, as was the case when Dr Peng Wang, a lecturer at the University of Southampton, had racial slurs yelled at him and was physically attacked during a jog in February 2021.[62]

Bristol has been no different, with multiple instances of Asian hate having been reported to the police since the start of the pandemic. Efforts to counter this have come in the form of student efforts – such as the BME Network hosting an event titled 'Standing Against Sinophobia', giving students a space to talk about their experiences and how others can be effective allies – as well as through staff efforts, such as a statement of solidarity and support being placed in a staff newsletter. From a students' union perspective, I ran a survey that was distributed among East and South-East Asian students to gauge if any of them had experienced specific instances of discrimination and the results overwhelmingly confirmed they had. The University Student Inclusion Team has continued to try and put this information to good use, feeding into their 'Intercultural Awareness Training', but from a more individual support perspective there is still scope for the results to feed into

61 Abbianca Makoni, 'Racism and Asian hate crime during Covid: Young people from the community speak up', *Evening Standard*, 23 March 2021 https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/racism-hate-crime-covid-met-police-b925572.html)

62 BBC News, *University of Southampton lecturer 'beaten up in racist attack',* 26 February 2021 (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-56209881

something such as increasing the number of counselling staff with language skills to help students feel more comfortable when divulging certain information.

Accommodation – guarantor

Rent and accommodation are substantial costs that a university student will need to manage during their studies and this is particularly daunting when you are an international student, as not having a guarantor could result in having to pay a year's rent all before having even moved into the property. Bristol is notorious for having a bustling but also expensive student property market, with students paying the fifth-highest amount in the country behind King's, UCL, Brighton and Edinburgh.[63]

During my term as an International Students' Officer, I lobbied the University to institute an in-house guarantor scheme, similar to schemes that exist at Edinburgh, UCL, Cardiff, Sheffield, Sussex, LSE, Imperial, Glasgow and Durham.

Though the University of Bristol currently has a commercial agreement with Housing Hand, where students pay £250 to have the company be a guarantor for them, this is still a weighty amount of money that not every student has readily available. Additionally, most university-run schemes only require students to pay £50, a much more manageable amount. Though there are financial and reputational risks the University may need to bear during this process, it is crystal clear that from a student perspective this would feel like a genuine gesture of kindness and support.

63 Danny Shaw, 'New study reveals Bristol has the fifth most expensive student housing in the country', *The Bristol Tab*, 2019 https://thetab.com/uk/bristol/2019/10/29/new-study-reveals-bristol-has-the-5th-most-expensive-student-housing-in-the-country-37876

COVID specific matters

As COVID has continued to have an increasing foothold in students' lives, it has greatly impacted specifically the experiences that international students have had during their time at university. At the end of November 2020, it became known that this group of students would need Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests to travel for the Christmas holidays and not the less reliable lateral flow antigen tests. By this point, LSE was already intending to offer free in-house PCR tests to its international students given the average cost of £200 at the time. Subsequently, I advocated for an equivalent provision to be implemented in Bristol. Through my lobbying, £150 was allocated per person for students to fly home and the same amount was made available to students looking to come back to the University after the holidays.

When the two-test quarantine package became mandatory for those returning to the UK, my prior work with the University on a related issue meant that it was a lot easier to advocate for an additional £210 per student. The introduction of the Red, Amber, Green system created another set of challenges as students from red-list countries needed to attend quarantine in government-sanctioned hotels and this would cost a staggering £1,750 for the 10-days required.[64] Given the immense financial pressure that the University was under in the 2020/21 academic year, this cost could not be covered. However, through continued discussions with the University, a concession was reached and this cost will be covered for the next academic year.

64 Alix Culberton, 'COVID-19: How does hotel quarantine work in UK and how does it compare with other countries?', *Sky News*, 16 February 2021 https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-how-will-hotel-quarantine-work-in-uk-and-how-does-it-compare-with-other-countries-12198716

During the 2020/21 academic year, the efforts of the University of Bristol were sector-leading in many instances and what they are now offering is not only what students have been asking for, but also exactly what they need during this tumultuous time. Nevertheless, an area that the institution and the sector could still improve on is hardship funding for international students. In Bristol, a specific 'Coronavirus impact fund' was created so that hardship funds offered by the Government could be distributed to all students – and with great success.

Yet the 'International hardship fund', a fund specifically created to support international students, remains dangerously underfunded and, in a year where COVID did not exist, this would place a large group of students in a situation where they are under a significant financial burden with no real avenue for redress. With the University currently having well-funded undergraduate and postgraduate 'financial assistance funds' dedicated to providing aid for struggling home students, it would be prudent to provide their international counterparts with the same resources to ensure international students are not left by the wayside.

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This collection explores a variety of perspectives on the student voice in UK higher education.

Featuring reflections from a vice-chancellor, student representatives and interviews with the Office for Students' Student Panel, as well as sections considering disabled students, international students and mature students, the thirteen essays each provide an assessment of the different ways in which the student voice can be captured.

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