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Rethinking student voice: how can higher education design effective student governance?

Darcie Jones

With a Foreword from Alistair Jarvis CBE

About the author

Darcie Jones was an intern at HEPI, joining the team after serving a two-year term as sabbatical officer (Vice President Education) at the University of Plymouth Students' Union. She graduated from the University of Plymouth in 2023 with a BA (Hons) History – specialising in twentieth-century British and American social policy and popular culture.

Glossary

Board of governors (the board) – The main governing body of a university or college, overseeing strategy, finances and performance. Also known as Council, Board of Directors, Board of Trustees or the Court, depending on the institution.

Student voice – How students share feedback and influence decisions about their education and experience.

Independent / lay / external board members – Board members from outside the institution who bring impartiality and specialist expertise.

Sabbatical officer – An elected student (or recent graduate) taking a year out to work full-time representing students' interests.

Vice-chancellor – The chief executive of a university, responsible for its leadership and management.

Executive team – The senior management who manage and guide a higher education provider's operations and strategy.

The figures in this report use data from HESA's Table 25 - Governor equality characteristics by country of HE provider 2018/19 to 2023/24 **https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/table-25**

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Foreword

Alistair Jarvis CBE, Chief Executive of Advance HE

I warmly welcome this report by Darcie Jones, who has conducted authentic research and offers valuable insights. At a time when higher education institutions face the challenges of delivering a high-quality student experience while managing acute financial pressures, ensuring effective involvement of students in university governance has never been more critical.

Whenever I think about governance, I draw from a diversity of experiences. I write this foreword as Chief Executive of Advance HE, an organisation that plays a significant role in furthering good governance in higher education. I currently serve as a board member of a charity, UCAS, and also as chair of a board of a commercial subsidiary, UCAS media. UCAS plays a vital role in students' progression to higher education and hugely values students' voices to inform priorities and support access to higher education.

However, my passion for students' involvement in higher education governance goes back 25 years. I write this Foreword as much from my heart and personal experience as I do from my current executive or non-executive roles. As a 20-year-old, I quickly woke from the euphoria of being elected by my fellow students as a sabbatical officer of Kent Students' Union to the reality of also holding the responsibility of being part of the governing body of the university. Exciting, alien, influential, daunting? The emotions were certainly mixed!

From these early experiences I developed both a love for universities but also a critical eye on university decisions and operations. A belief that to be successful universities need to be challenged, need scrutiny and – despite best intentions – do not always act in the best interests of students. This is why it is vital to ensure that student governors are equipped to fulfil their role as full and influential members of the governing bodies of universities.

At Advance HE, we are fortunate to work very closely with student governors through our Governance Development Programme (GDP),

providing us with unique insights into both the challenges these individuals face and the significant value they bring to governing bodies. What makes student members so powerful is their immediacy and authenticity. For example, when a governing body debates student accommodation policies, fee structures or support services, student governors do not need to hypothesise about impact – they speak from direct, lived experience. They bridge the gap between boardroom strategy and student reality in ways that simply cannot be replicated by governors who, in many cases, were students decades ago.

However, this unique value comes with distinct challenges. Student governors often have just one or two years to make their mark yet must quickly master complex areas, such as financial governance and legal responsibilities, while fulfilling their role as equal members with full collective accountability. In our work with student governors, we consistently hear about the difficulties of navigating board cultures that can feel exclusive, the pressure of translating student concerns into governance language, the challenge of being perceived to speak on behalf of every student and the challenge of being heard in rooms where experience and seniority traditionally command authority. I personally remember these challenges well. At best, the feeling of struggling to be heard. At worst a feeling of being an imposter, in an alien environment with a confusing culture.

The benefits of having students on boards are clear. They provide unparalleled expertise in current student experience, ask questions that enhance board understanding in ways that strengthen governance effectiveness and bring perspectives grounded in contemporary student needs rather than historical assumptions. We are also witnessing welcome diversification in student governors – moving beyond students' union presidents to include additional governors appointed, such as international students, postgraduates and mature students, reflecting the changing face of higher education itself.

There is much that institutions can do to support student governors and this report highlights crucial areas. First, clearer communication about governance roles before students are elected to positions of influence.

Secondly, more tailored and institution-specific induction and training that goes beyond generic sessions. Thirdly, fostering board cultures where chairs actively seek student perspectives before discussions are framed, and where space is created for the generative thinking at which student governors excel. We are seeing good practice emerging: institutions appointing a greater number of student governors, providing targeted pre-meeting support and developing mentoring arrangements pairing student governors with experienced independent governors.

Higher education institutions should be doing everything possible to ensure that student governors are supported, engaged and empowered. Student governors contribute directly to good governance culture, which we know is crucial for institutional success.

This research provides governing bodies with evidence-based insights to enhance their approach. I commend this report to all those committed to ensuring good governance in higher education.

Introduction

In 2025, higher education is facing its biggest financial crisis in recent history, with the Office for Students' *Financial Sustainability of Higher Education Providers in England* report forecasting that 43 per cent of institutions will return a deficit for 2024/25.[1]

Higher education governing boards are responsible for ensuring institutions keep to their charitable objectives, including remaining financially stable and acting in the best interests of their stakeholders.[2] At the core of the financial crisis, and therefore the governing body's decisions, are the university's largest stakeholders: students. However, while students are heavily impacted by board decisions, their voices in these spaces can be particularly quiet. The responsibility for bringing the student voice to university governance is often placed on student governors. They are asked to be the voice of thousands, potentially tens of thousands of students. Is this a fair ask of student governors? To be the voice of their peers and hold the responsibility of institutional decision-making? If so, how can we ensure that student governors are resourced with the appropriate context, skills and knowledge to represent the student body and make informed decisions about the future of their institution?

What is a student governor?

A student governor is a member of the institution's board of governors, elected or co-opted (appointed to the board by existing board members) to act as the voice of students, offering student perspectives and ensuring student consideration within institutional decision-making. Student governors provide institutional familiarity on the board, offering insight from a student perspective that may not be understood by independent members of the board.[3]

The importance of students as board members stems not only from their familiarity with the institution. In many respects, students are the institution, providing a lived example of the workings and impact of the provider. They are the primary participants in the university's core mission.

Their experiences reflect the daily reality of how policies, strategies, research and resources translate into practice. Unlike external governors, students live the outcomes of institutional decisions, embodying both the successes and the failings of governance. Their perspective ensures that boards remain grounded in one of the institution's most essential purposes: serving its students.

Often, the aim of having student governors on university boards is to promote university connection with the student experience in high-level decision-making.[4] This helps ensure student perspectives reflect the diversity of the university community and that the institution remains accountable to its students. It is important to note that a student governor with full voting power should be held equally to account and bear collective responsibility for institutional activities, including defending collective decisions of the board, regardless of individual opinion.[5] That is, student governors hold the same legal responsibilities as other members of the governing body.

Purpose of this research

This report focuses on UK university governing boards, known as the Board of Governors, Council, Board of Directors, Board of Trustees or the Court, depending on the institution. By identifying barriers to student access and participation within higher education governance, including highlighting the effects of institutional board cultures and relationships, this report examines how higher education can design effective methods of accessible, empowered and diverse student voice within university governance. While the analysis centres on the experiences of student governors, many of the barriers evidenced – such as exclusionary cultures, limited access to informal networks or unequal power dynamics – are not unique to students and can equally affect other governors. The discussion is therefore intended to inform wider efforts, through a student lens, to create more inclusive governance environments for all members.

This research is based on semi-structured interviews with former student governors (who served on a board no longer than two years ago), students' union CEOs, higher education staff and senior management (including

vice-chancellors, registrars, clerks and governance managers) and chairs of governing boards. These interviews offer nuanced insights into common challenges faced across the sector and the specific institutional contexts that shape how student voice is, or is not, embedded in governance. Insights from interviews ensure that recommendations in this report are grounded in experience but can also be adapted to fit the diverse governance arrangements found across the higher education sector.

‘I had no idea that I would be sitting in these kinds of meetings’: How does recruitment and induction influence the effectiveness of student governors?

The methods in which student governors join the board vary across the higher education sector and commonly fall within three categories:

1. enrolled students apply through a formal university-led application process;

2) enrolled students undertake an election process often run in collaboration with the students’ union; or

3) the student governor role is a responsibility within the role of elected students’ union officers, commonly known as sabbatical officers.

Despite differences in how they are selected, all three routes share key features. In each case, the individual is a current student, ensuring the student voice is represented at the highest level of institutional governance. Whether through a formal application, an election process or a responsibility of the sabbatical officer role, all routes involve a structured process that seemingly provides legitimacy and accountability. For all recruitment paths, student governors hold a formal position on the board, participating fully in decision-making and helping to ensure the university remains responsive to the needs and perspectives of its students.

However, each method of recruiting student governors has its individual benefits and barriers.

Student governors applying to the university

University-led recruitment processes for student governors are relatively rare within the sector. This uncommon process shows no link to provider type, with both the University of Bristol and the University of Portsmouth

employing university-led recruitment of student governors.[6] A formal recruitment process for student governors – mirroring that of external governors – may be considered a logical and structured approach that offers an opportunity to assess candidates' skills and competencies. However, this method remains contested within the sector.

Although recruitment of students as governors via application processes may appear meritocratic, this method can reinforce board cultures that favour compliance and conformity, diminishing alternative or critical voices. By structuring recruitment around predetermined criteria and formalised processes, universities wield influence in setting the tone for the desired nature of the student governor appointment – one less likely to challenge decisions or offer critical perspectives.

In interviewing students for the position, universities gain an opportunity to see how students operate within board spaces, their confidence in professional settings and openness to critiquing the university. For universities seeking student governors who are confident in holding leaders to account, this offers the opportunity to recruit a student with the necessary skills to undertake the role. However, for universities that operate within a more passive culture (where questioning or challenging board decisions is discouraged and conformity is expected), the process may act as an opportunity to 'test' the student to determine if they will be compliant, or at very least let the culture of the board continue unquestioned.

Students undertaking election

The most common method of recruiting student governors who are not sabbatical officers is by undertaking a student governor election. These run separately from sabbatical officer elections, but are often held at the same time. Students nominate themselves for an institution-wide election process, in which the student body votes for a student governor based on a manifesto. The method of election is less disputed within the sector than formal recruitment due to the democratic process voted for by the student body. However, electing a student via a manifesto may be considered disingenuous. Those in elected student union posts are held to

account by the student body through a variety of mechanisms, as required by law, including regular student meetings. However, while elections are often supported by the students' union, the post of student governor is a university role, therefore exempt from union accountability structures. This results in the absence of a mechanism for students to hold the elected student governor accountable:

> *I didn't get any of it [the manifesto] done and nor could I ever get any of it done because I was just a representative. I didn't really have any decision-making power. […] It is kind of just like elect me, I'll say nice things or say the things you want to hear and then I'll be gone. I don't think there's any particular accountability for me.* **Student governor (elected), Russell Group institution**

So, if students are being elected on a manifesto, but mechanisms are not in place to hold them to account, is it truly democratic?

Sabbatical officers as governors

The most common and widely recognised method of recruiting student governors within higher education is that elected student union sabbatical officers also become student governors on election. In most cases, the students' union President automatically becomes a member of the institution's governing board upon taking office. Where boards include two sabbatical officers as student governors, the students' union is typically given the responsibility of selecting the second representative.[7] Within interviews with student governors and university executives, this method seems to be the most effective for ensuring representation of students on the board in an accountable manner.

University preferences for sabbatical officers as student governors often stem from the roles and responsibilities held within the elected officer portfolio. The extensive portfolio of the role, supported by comprehensive training and support, arguably provides sabbatical officers with the strongest skills, support and insight to ensure an effective student voice within university governance.

Sabbatical officer induction for the elected role rapidly acquaints new officers with the higher education sector and its current challenges. To counteract the challenges of the officer term being only one year, officers are expected to learn and navigate the challenges of the sector quickly. This induction process also equips them with contextual knowledge in their role as student governors.

A key responsibility of the sabbatical officer is to work alongside staff at the university, in formal committees, working groups and informal spaces. Officers spend a considerable amount of their role building relationships with other stakeholders. Boardrooms are made up of a majority of external or 'lay' members. However, pre-existing relationships between sabbatical officers, senior management and staff governors play a key role in how quickly student governors can make allies in the room and therefore feel empowered to be an active student voice within the space.

Most importantly, while sabbatical officers are not necessarily representative of the whole student body, they are often equipped with the skills, knowledge and data through their role, and student union support, to offer diverse insights into the activities and challenges of the student body. The role of the sabbatical officer is to campaign and be the voice of students. Therefore, officers spend a large portion of their time talking to students, gaining insights and creating collaborative solutions to institutional issues. Consequently, it seems appropriate to place sabbatical officers into these roles to offer an informed and representative view of the student body.

Although sabbatical officers as student governors is the most common practice, this popular method also highlights important issues within the induction process.

A lack of awareness by students' unions and institutions of the role of the student governor within the sabbatical officer portfolio has been raised as a barrier to engaging with the governor induction process: 'I had no idea that I would be sitting in these kinds of meetings […] I didn't even know it existed', said one student from a post-92 institution. During the sabbatical officer election process, information about the role of student governor within officer responsibilities is often overlooked or only briefly noted

under the responsibility to 'be the student governor'. That is not to say that students should not be responsible for independently researching the roles and responsibilities within the elected officer portfolio. However, the lack of clear reference to the student governor position in job descriptions and candidate materials means candidates are often unaware of the need to prepare for it. The role of the sabbatical officer is undoubtedly vast, with sabbatical officer job descriptions that comprise an extensive list of responsibilities – it blurs into one. This lack of awareness of the role of the student governor within the officer portfolio ultimately leaves new student governors unprepared, out of their depth and lacking the knowledge and empowerment to set expectations for their induction, training and development as a student governor.

That is not to say that all sabbatical officers are unaware of the student governor role, but those who highlight an awareness of the role are usually already highly-engaged, a privilege for many students:

> *[I had] sat on my college's governing body, it made quite a lot of sense to me that when I became president of the SU, I would sit on the university's governing body. I'd done quite a lot of stuff throughout my time at uni with the SU, and I understood roles – I think better than the average student would.* **Student governor (Sabbatical officer), Russell Group institution**

Relying on students to be informed about governance roles based on previous engagement with student union activity presents a risk. HEPI / Advance HE's 2025 *Student Academic Experience Survey* highlighted the growth of students taking up paid employment due to the cost-of-living crisis. This survey demonstrates that 68 per cent of students undertake paid employment during term time – doubling since 2021.[8] This change in student priorities means the culture of student engagement in campus activities has shifted. To have the time and resources to engage with activities and processes relied on by election candidates is now a minority experience. Therefore, as more sabbatical officers from disadvantaged

backgrounds enter elected roles, they may be left to assume knowledge and put at a disadvantage as student governors.

Therefore, universities and student unions need to work in collaboration to establish clear communications on the responsibilities of the student governor, before students are elected to positions of influence and legal responsibility within university governance. For example, one student union CEO highlighted that to address this barrier, they meet one-to-one with every election candidate to explain and ensure they are educated and aware of the responsibilities of the role, including what it means to be a student governor. Sabbatical officers are elected to the role and as student governors to be 'experts in the student experience'. Yet many report feeling that institutional cultures assume a level of governance expertise beyond their remit, placing additional expectations on them. Therefore, acknowledging the lack of knowledge and working collaboratively to provide more education on the role enables students to undertake preparation in advance.

Training, skills and development

The training of student governors is key to establishing a foundation of knowledge and skills that enables them to participate fully on the board. Alongside the training of students, structured training and ongoing development for non-student board members in 'promoting a collegiate, collaborative and cooperative approach to liaise with students', is key to a successful board culture that embraces the student voice.[9]

Training and skills development is essential to equip all members of the university board. However, student governors often join with more limited experience in governance and strategic decision-making. Targeted and ongoing training is therefore crucial for helping students understand the legal and regulatory context of higher education governance. This may include interpreting performance data – most importantly, financial accounts – and how to make informed contributions to high-level discussions. Without access to basic contextual knowledge and understanding, student governors feel that '[they] are starting on the back foot when it comes to accountability and representation'. This is not to

claim that students, or any governor, needs to be an expert in all governance topics. However, to enable students to provide informed insights or make decisions in which they bear legal responsibility, they should be equipped with the relevant understanding of governance decision-making.

Interviews with student governors and university executives / board chairs highlight examples of good practice to support students in developing these skills and contextual knowledge within a short period. Most student governors interviewed claim they have met, on at least one occasion, with the institution's Chief Financial Officer (CFO) to understand how to read financial accounts and what the accounts mean both for the institution and students. Within one institution, student governors were partnered with or sat next to a governor with skills and experience in complex governance topics (university finances in one student governors' case). Doing so allows student governors to seek clarity, understand discussions during the meeting and provide contributions from an informed perspective.

Advance HE provides a commonly utilised Governor Development Programme (GDP) for student governors. It is often referenced as a valuable resource to support the understanding of governance processes and students' roles within institutional decision-making. Provided in two day-long sessions, the programme is designed to 'equip newly appointed student governors with the essential knowledge and skills needed to excel in their first term on the governing body', and later reflect on their year as a governor, using these reflections to provide further skills development and network mapping.[10] Student governors in our interviews regard the development programme as a key support for their overall development, offering 'motivation' for enacting visible and impactful change and discourse within board spaces. Most notably, student governors highlight networking, and a space to form connections with other student governors, as a primary advantage of these training sessions. Students who found the role particularly difficult or were the only student on the board found spaces to build networks relating to university governance especially supportive. It helped them understand the barriers they experienced to participating actively in board discussions were not a singular experience:

> *[the GDP] was really helpful in getting me to speak to other sabbatical officers and student governors who were in the same position as me.*

Although training such as the Governor Development Programme has been highlighted as imperative to the development and overall experience of the student governor, interviews with student governors highlight a risk of universities over-relying on organisations such as Advance HE to provide comprehensive training – substituting external training for little to no institutional training. It was noted that many universities offer student governors a general training session, often lasting no longer than two hours, giving insight into the role of the board and committee structures. Wider contextual understanding, such as challenges within higher education and how to understand complex data and information, is often left to the responsibility of Advance HE. However, this leaves student governors with no training specific to institutional contexts, including what challenges are being faced within their institution and how to incorporate the student voice – appropriate to their student body – into decision-making.

While the Governor Development Programme offers structured sessions on challenges in higher education and what this could mean for boards, to provide context and tailored training catered to individual institutions would be unrealistic. Therefore, the risk of university reliance on external providers in the training of student governors equates to student governors entering board spaces with equal responsibilities to other governors, but without the knowledge of what those responsibilities are and how to use them within an institutional context.

To better embed themselves into the board, including understanding how decisions are made and how to influence discussions, students feel it is important to understand key skills and the board culture. However, student governors acknowledge that training 'lacked the practical skills of how to behave in a boardroom' and was 'very good for knowledge transfer, not so great for the skills element'. Setting expectations of cultural behaviours, such as understanding the impact of having 'allies'

and establishing relationships with board members, would 'really help [student governors] in the experience'. All student governors interviewed also highlight that induction processes do not include undertaking skills mapping or matrix exercises. Highlighting the skills held by current board members is important for implementing development opportunities and for understanding the diversity of skills within the board. Exercises such as this are commonly undertaken in the recruitment and training of external board members. This raises questions about why the skills currently held by students, or in need of development, are going unrecognised by institutions. Furthermore, this highlights how identifying skills and knowledge gaps can play a vital role in the empowerment of student voices within university governance.

The challenge lies not in the absence of training but in its scope, timing and alignment. While university induction sessions and the Governor Development Programme provide training, much of this learning occurs in a short, concentrated period. Delivered alongside student union training, student governors, and in particular sabbatical officers, identify how the training process for the role is often 'information overload' and is not always aligned with the training provided by students' unions to incoming officers:

> *It was a lot and I didn't take a lot of it in because there was just so much training happening at that point. […] It felt like just another presentation.*

That is not to say that internal training is not key to student governor success; in fact, structured and well-ordered training is essential for ensuring governors are experienced, informed and able to engage effectively in decision-making. However, this type of training should be complemented by interactive and participatory approaches that recognise students' varying levels of governance experience and actively support the embedding of student voice. 'Passive training' – where governors are largely observers rather than participants – may be insufficient during a period of significant change and development for new officers. When training relies primarily on presentations or information delivery, with

limited opportunities for discussion or application, students are less likely to retain information or feel empowered to contribute.

The how is also just as important as the when. Interviewees highlight that in using generic training (a one-size-fits-all approach), interaction and opportunities for peer-to-peer learning are lacking, causing disengagement and misunderstanding. One student highlighted the training they received did not feel encouraging or empowering, due to passive training clearly not tailored to the governance experience of a student:

> *It just completely went in one ear and out the other and I think it's because those people didn't really know how to speak to students.*

Universities would benefit from collaborating with students and students' unions to ensure the creation of student-centred training and development opportunities, so training does not become 'just another presentation'.

To address these challenges, universities could adopt a more interactive and institution-specific approach to governor training. This might include spreading sessions over several weeks and integrating practical exercises. Embedding peer-to-peer learning via mentorship from experienced governors would allow student governors to engage actively with the material, rather than passively observe. Aligning university-led training with student union induction programmes can prevent overlap and information overload, ensuring students build confidence and competence incrementally. By combining knowledge transfer with active skills development, universities can better prepare student governors to contribute meaningfully, confidently and effectively to board discussions.

The importance of culture, relationships and power for student governors

Culture, relationships and power play an integral role in decision-making within board meetings. Not only does what is being said matter, but who speaks and listens is essential in understanding power dynamics within governance.[11] Established cultures and power structures significantly impact the entire board. Student governors, who are usually younger and less experienced, are particularly affected by these barriers.[12] With less understanding of board relationships and cultures, student governors are at a disadvantage. This section highlights both the positive and negative impacts of these factors, though cultures and perceptions of power can vary across the sector.

Board culture and student governor integration

Board culture, including power imbalance, was highlighted in interviews as one of the largest barriers to student governor empowerment.[13] Interviews with student governors show that experiences of 'lingo barriers' and unspoken rules affect their confidence. This impacts how students voice their opinions and how the board receives them. Board meeting rooms are commonly noted spaces for speaking 'legalese', with established board members having notable experience, therefore conforming to the highly formal yet inaccessible culture. This acts as a detrimental barrier to student engagement and their confidence to give opinions to the board. They know what they want to say, just not how to say it:

> *I don't think there's anything more frustrating than knowing that you disagree with something but not being able to articulate it in the language of a governing body, to a governing body. They're not always interested in the political or moral argument. They want the argument in legal terms or financially. And I, as a 20-year-old, was not a legal expert.* **Student governor (sabbatical officer), Russell Group institution**

Debate-style communication often uses complex language that many students find inaccessible, thereby diminishing their voices. This is not to say these cultures aim to weaken the student voice and not all institutions put these expectations on student governors. However, a lack of acknowledgement and a failure to address communication formats and norms risks decreasing student participation. Rather than simplifying information and communication to promote accessibility, boards sometimes set unspoken expectations for those who do not understand the complexities. This leads board members to act as if they understand discussions and arguments. Without the ability to acknowledge this barrier, they are not able to participate actively, impacting students' participation in high-level discussions. The notion among student governors that they will be 'penalised' for not understanding the established culture creates a 'sink or swim' challenge. Student governors can either disengage from the role or conform to exclusionary and sometimes elitist board cultures in order to make impactful contributions.

Interviewees also highlight that university governing boards often reinforce traditional corporate culture. Exclusionary cultures – practices or norms that unintentionally marginalise certain members – can be seen in activities like board dinners, which are intended to build relationships and foster informal dialogue, but can instead create barriers. For all members of the board – who are often time poor or may hold different religious or cultural values – these expectations can be particularly difficult to navigate. The expectation and normalisation of alcohol consumption at these events can alienate those who abstain. While such events need not be alcohol-free, attention should be given to how central alcohol is within these settings, and alternative networking opportunities should be provided to ensure inclusion. Similarly, expectations of attending events outside of working hours may be inaccessible to those with caregiving responsibilities, jobs or academic demands. These barriers limit opportunities for all governors, including students, to engage in the informal relationship-building that is often essential to establish influence and credibility within a board. Absence from these informal spaces can reinforce perceptions of student governors as outsiders, undermining their confidence and reducing their ability to contribute meaningfully to discussions.

To support student integration into the board, institutions such as Newcastle University co-create opportunities for student and lay governor collaboration through speed networking exercises.[14] Held within student spaces, the exercise provides an opportunity for relationship-building with a student-centred approach. Enabling informal discussions about student life further embeds the student voice and the role of students in governance structures. Such initiatives play a vital role in bridging the gap between students and institutional leaders, laying the groundwork for sustained relationships that enhance students' sense of belonging and ensure their perspectives are meaningfully integrated into governance. Structured sessions such as speed networking should therefore be considered a core mechanism for facilitating networking and relationship-building within boards, while events such as dinners can function as complementary activities that recognise members' contributions, rather than being relied upon as primary networking opportunities.

The importance of the chair

The chair of the board is the most important role within higher education governance. The role leads the governing body, ensures it governs the institution effectively and maintains a collaborative relationship with the vice-chancellor and executive team.[15] Alongside setting the tone for board culture and managing discussions, the chair also plays a significant role in supporting and advising new governors. Establishing a working relationship between the chair and student governors is therefore key to enabling active participation with the board.

Interviews with board chairs highlight the significant influence the role holds in establishing a culture that welcomes student perspectives and space for student development. An open and trusting relationship between student governors and chairs allows students to raise concerns privately. Chairs also highlight this offers them opportunities to adapt their own chairing style or to challenge the board culture. For example, one chair acknowledged that board cultures do not often encourage 'daft' questions. The chair used their influence to change the culture so all board members felt empowered to do so, leaving boards feeling able to seek clarification on matters without fear of ego or reaction.

In interviews with student governors, the role of the chair is viewed positively. Although the degree of strength in their working relationship varies, chairs are routinely seen as active collaborators in the induction of governors, and students feel supported:

> *If there were any questions that we didn't know how appropriate they were, we were always encouraged to raise them with the chair. […] They were always very good at making sure that our thoughts got brought in.*

This behaviour is especially important for students who lack the confidence to join discussions. Other examples of chairs supporting student voice on the board include student governors having an assigned seat opposite the chair during board meetings. This ensures students are at the heart of every meeting and allows chairs to easily acknowledge small gestures, such as body language, to bring student voice into discussions.

The chair's approach is therefore pivotal to ensure meaningful participation from student governors. By modelling openness, actively seeking student perspectives and providing informal guidance, chairs not only empower students to contribute but also enhance their own understanding of how board culture affects new and diverse members. A constructive relationship between the chair and student governors signals an expectation of working collaboratively with students as an integral part of governance, rather than a symbolic gesture.

The role of the students' union CEO

The role of the students' union CEO in supporting student governors is important; however, its success is highly dependent on the collaborative nature of the relationship between students' unions and institutions. The CEO acts as an adviser to student governors, specifically sabbatical officers, and often plays a key role in providing training and guidance. Interviews with students' union CEOs highlight their role in offering insights into the often-unspoken rules and cultures of higher education governance. CEOs regularly prepare student governors for the internal politics of governance,

including who holds power in the room, individual interests and expertise of board members and how to be heard.

One of the most important pieces of support provided by students' union CEOs is briefing student governors on board papers. This activity allows student governors to discuss their concerns, what approach to take in discussions and to gain professional insight on board topics. However, this varies across the sector due to different relationships between institutions and students' unions. Due to the highly sensitive nature of board papers, institutions are largely reluctant to allow student union CEOs to view them. Institutions that have a very close collaborative relationship with the students' union may permit some insight into papers and discussions, ranging from allowing student governors to discuss topics with the CEO without sharing papers, to CEOs being provided with their own board pack before each meeting (often under a non-disclosure agreement or Conflict of Interest policy). However, providing full access to board papers is rare, commonly due to confidentiality concerns, and leaves CEOs feeling stuck on how they can provide support. During interviews, CEOs who were provided with full access to papers highlighted that it helped to support student governors. While institutions expressed concerns that CEOs would use the support intervention as an opportunity to influence student governors on student union priorities, CEOs and students stated that the relationship between CEO and student governor is about strategically empowering students to decide what issues they bring to the board and how.

Diversity and identity: Who gets to belong?

Questions of diversity and identity are central to understanding the perspectives present in university governance.[16] While efforts to diversify boards have increased, student governors often find that markers of age, race, class and cultural background continue to shape their experiences and perceptions of legitimacy. Interviewees who perceived their time on the board as productive typically noted they had a level of privilege that supported them in establishing a sense of belonging within the board. Discussing relationships between student governors and the rest of the membership, one interviewee said:

> *It really does depend on the way that you present yourself. Which I think lends itself to a white, well–spoken person who knows how to navigate those situations. It doesn't lend itself so well to someone with a strong regional accent or a person of colour.*
> **Student governor (sabbatical officer), Russell Group institution**

The experiences of student governors – who are less likely to understand board cultures due to their age and lack of experience – show that these spaces often operate within an exclusive culture, favouring those whose characteristics complement the culture of the board. Professor Steven Jones argues that the recruitment of external board members remains largely secretive, insular and relies on membership networks to give the 'tap on the shoulder'.[17] Exclusive networking cultures – where relationships are shaped more by who you know than what you know – can present challenges for any new member, particularly those without prior experience in corporate or governance contexts. For student governors, who join without an established professional network or prior exposure to board environments, these challenges can feel especially pronounced:

> *It felt like all of the governors were already really good friends, and then I was coming in as this young person.*

While all new members may experience similar initial barriers, factors such as shared professional background, age or socio-economic experience with existing members can make it easier to navigate informal networks. For student governors, the lack of these shared experiences can contribute to feelings of isolation and disempowerment, limiting their ability to provide insight.

To address these dynamics and promote a stronger sense of belonging among governors from diverse backgrounds, including students, some institutions facilitate board pairing schemes. These initiatives partner less experienced board members with more experienced governors, to support both skills development and social integration within the board. By creating structured opportunities for mentorship and informal

relationship-building, board pairing can help mitigate feelings of exclusion and reduce the impact of a lack of privilege on participation. In doing so, students from a wider range of identities and experiences are able to navigate governance spaces more confidently and contribute on a more equal footing.

To diversify governor recruitment, the remuneration of higher education governors has become a prominent debate as governor responsibilities have seemingly grown. While remuneration of higher education governors has not been widely implemented, institutions such as De Montfort University have recognised a responsibility to remunerate the board chair since 2015, at an annual rate of £25,000 in 2023/24, in recognition of the importance of recruiting and retaining good quality candidates.[18] Other institutions that remunerate their chairs include Leeds Beckett University beginning in 2007/08, Northumbria University since 2011/12, the University of Salford since 2014/15 and the University of Derby since 2018/19.[19] In Scotland, the Higher Education Governance Act (2016) enforces that board chairs should be paid (on request) remuneration and allowances as deemed reasonable in line with the nature and amount of work required by the role.[20] Although the decision to remunerate higher education chairs is closely aligned with the increase in responsibility and time dedicated to the role, remuneration for this role subsequently increases its accessibility to those from under-represented backgrounds who may not have the capacity for unpaid roles. Institutions such as those listed above broaden the pool of candidates by including a wider range of characteristics and life experiences, promoting more diverse and transparent recruitment.

As university staff and student populations become more diverse, there is growing recognition of the lack of diversity within higher education governance.[21] In 2023/24, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reported a lack of diversity in higher education governance – highlighting the prominence of white, able-bodied and older representation.[22] It could be argued that if governor demographics should represent the staff profile of higher education institutions, demographic data show that the make-up of academic staff within higher education and governors is fairly equal and therefore representative.[23] Equally, if demographics should be reflective of wider society, Census data also show equal representation between English

and Welsh populations and higher education governor demographics (see Figure 1).[24] It is important to note these figures reflect overall society in England, Scotland and Wales, with ethnic diversity varying by region. However, if the make-up of university boards is to be representative of student demographics, efforts to diversify board membership need significant attention, especially acknowledging disparities in disability status and ethnicity between governors and student populations (See Figures 2 and 3).[25]

Figure 1: Population in England and Wales (2021) versus higher education governors in England and Wales (2021/22)

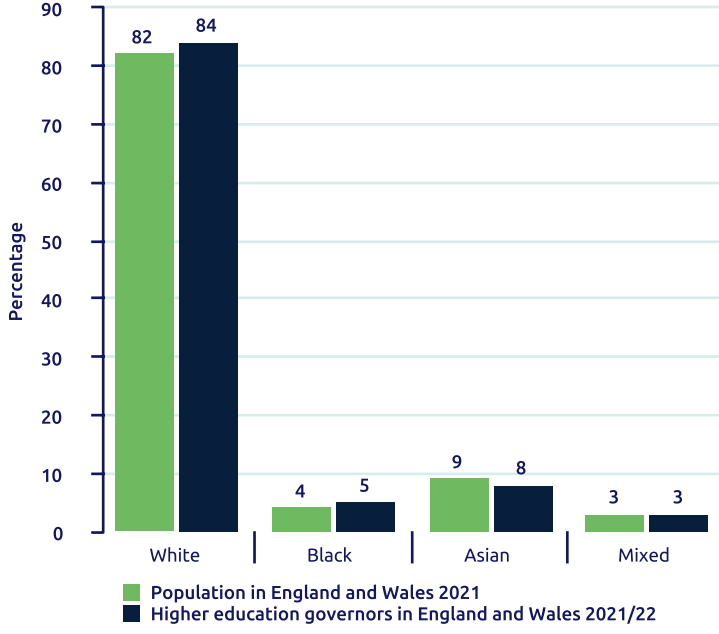


Figure 2: Ethnicity in England, Scotland and Wales higher education 2023/24

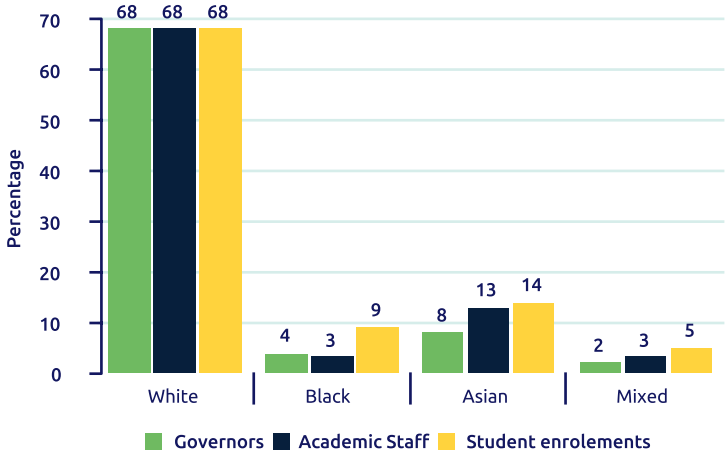
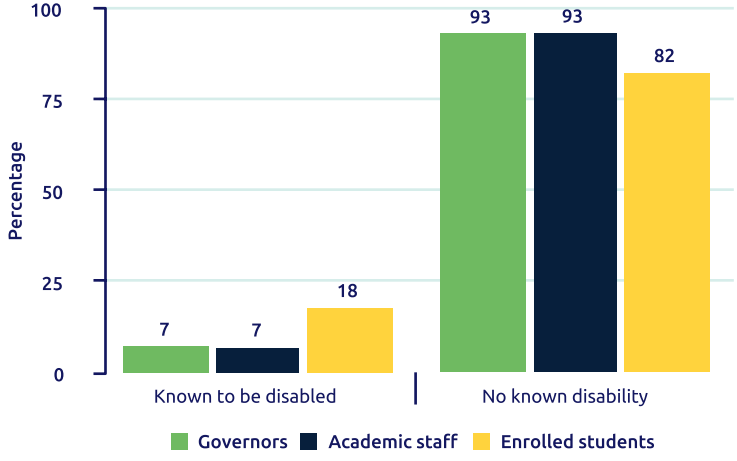
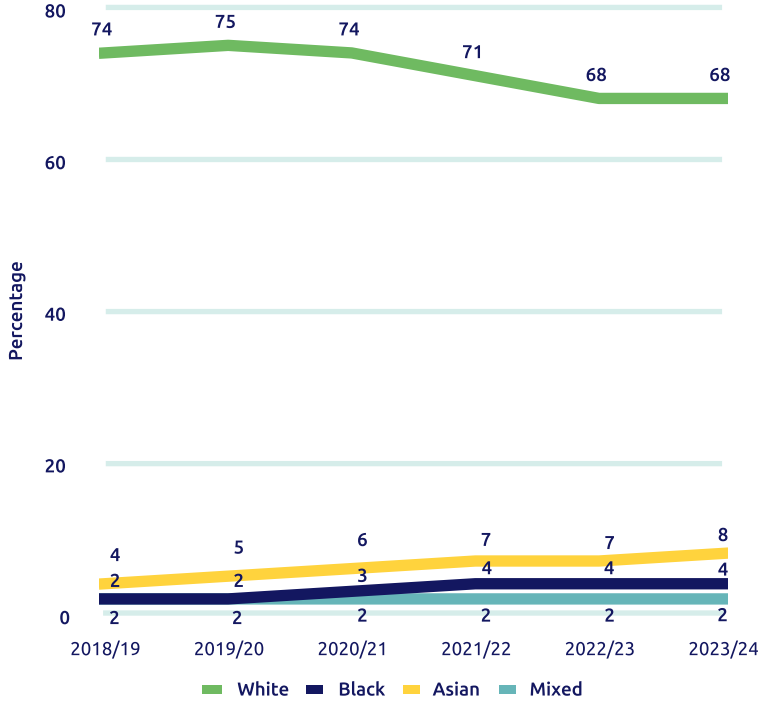


Figure 3: Disability status within England, Scotland and Wales higher education 2023/24



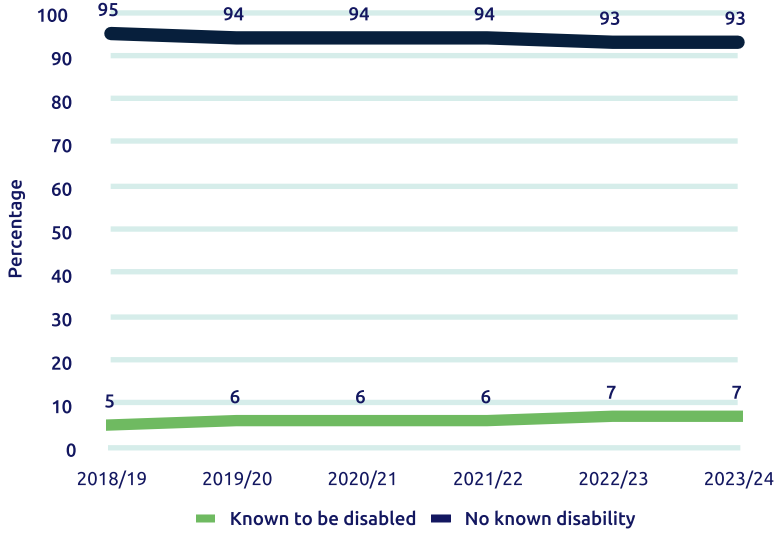
Although efforts to reflect the diversity of university communities need improvement, the sector has seen progress in the ethnic diversity of university governance. For example, since 2018/19 the percentage of black and Asian governors has doubled (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Growth of Black, Asian and Mixed governors in England, Scotland and Wales higher education



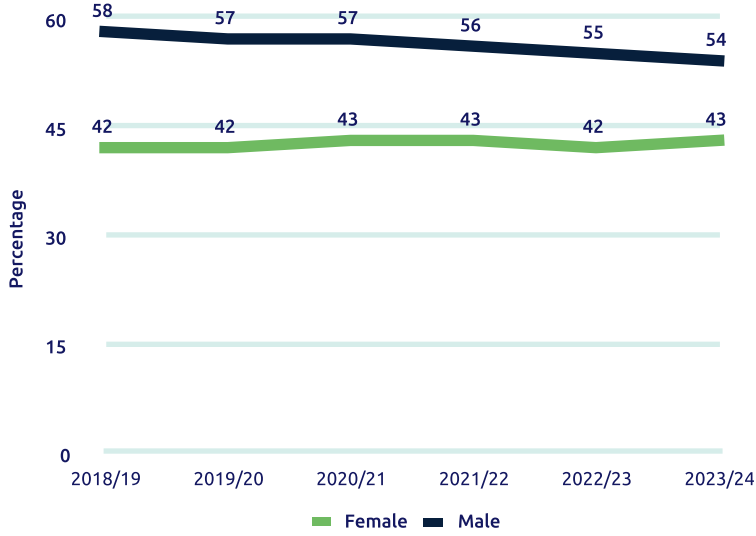
The percentage of governors with known disabilities has also seen a slow yet steady increase (see Figure 5). While demographic developments are not yet representative of student, staff and societal communities, evidence of consistent growth in under-represented groups shows sector efforts to develop diverse and inclusive governance.

Figure 5: Disability status of higher education governors in England, Scotland and Wales between 2018/19 and 2023/24



However, it should be noted that although better representation of minority groups is being made in some areas, such as ethnicity, since 2018/19 the percentage of females on higher education governing boards has remained static, ranging from 42 to 43 per cent year-on-year (see Figure 6). Although in comparison to other under-represented groups this figure may seem representative, it is important to consider that females and minority groups are also under-represented within board chair positions. In Scotland, just under 50 per cent of higher education governing body chairs are female, while figures for England have not been sourced since 2016, in which only 28 per cent of board chairs were female.[26] The number of board chairs from an ethnic minority background is not known. Notably, while HESA shares data for the number of governors from an ethnic minority background in England, Scotland and Wales, the number of board chairs from ethnic minority backgrounds is unreported.

Figure 6: Sex of governors in England, Scotland and Wales higher education between 2018/19 and 2023/24



The under-representation of key demographic groups within university governance has a significant impact on student governors' sense of belonging and overall empowerment. Despite the sector's aim to diversify university governance, boards remain disproportionately older, white and able-bodied. As age is often related to experience, it is therefore likely that boards tend to comprise older members due to the value placed on expertise. However, this mismatch in demographics can reinforce perceptions that governance is a space designed for and dominated by particular social groups and is disconnected from the lived experiences of the institutional community and wider geographical region.

A lack of diversity not only reinforces perceptions of exclusivity. A lack of visible representation can also cause heightened feelings of isolation and sense of belonging for students from under-represented backgrounds.[27] For student governors, who are often inexperienced, young and from marginalised backgrounds, the absence of peers and role models with

similar identities and experiences further disempowers their engagement with and integration into the board. For example, a student with little understanding of the 'unspoken rules' of board behaviours may be particularly overwhelmed by having no one of the same background to confide in and relate to. The lack of a safe space to highlight these barriers can lead to students making their voices or personalities smaller to fit in with the board: 'I think I tried to ensure their comfort more often than I should have'. This is exemplified by the feeling that, due to a lack of understanding of under-represented perspectives or lived experience, their voice may not be fully valued or understood at board meetings. Overall, this can further undermine the confidence of student governors to speak up, limit their influence in decision-making and reinforce power imbalances that may already exist between students and more senior board members.

However, a variety of institutions, including Cardiff University, the University of Bristol, Keele University, Sheffield Hallam University, the University of Sussex, the University of Cambridge and the University of Aberdeen, have made efforts to enable under-represented communities to access higher education governance, through comprehensive training and development programmes. These institutions are or have previously subscribed to the Governance Apprenticeship Programme (GAP), which works with institutions to provide a training programme to equip junior professionals with the skills and knowledge to become impactful governors.[28] Although the scheme is targeted towards professionals, it acts as a good example of how tailored support and long-term development can have impact for governor development. Subscribing to the GAP also shows a genuine commitment to the diversification of higher education governance and embeds a foundation for supporting governors from under-represented backgrounds.

Many voices, not enough ears: Rethinking how to hear student voices on governing boards

The role of the student governor is not just to represent students but to be an active influence on the discussions and decisions of the board from a student perspective. However, students consistently tell us they are not influencers within these spaces, rather, they are present ears and passive voices.[29] What happens when the loudest voices are in the room, yet no ears are listening?

When presence does not equal power

The Committee of University Chairs (CUC) *Code of Governance* highlights the responsibility of university governance in 'promoting a collegiate, collaborative and cooperative approach to liaison with students', which is intrinsically linked with the role and responsibilities of the student governor.[30] The inclusion of students within university governance portrays a symbolic message of collaboration with students at the highest decision-making level. But it must be questioned if this symbolic message truly enables student voice within university governance.

Student governors, especially those who are also sabbatical officers, are experts on the student experience. However, they sometimes feel their insights are glossed over or not viewed with the same importance as experienced board members. These are often the experiences of voices that do not conform to cultures that favour passive student representation. Passive student representation refers to student involvement that prioritises presence over influence, where students are expected to observe rather than actively shape decisions. Sector narratives and interviewees highlight the limitations of being a challenging voice within the board.[31] Students who are actively vocal within board meetings feel they are viewed as pushing ulterior motives or using meetings to lobby for political campaigns relating to their role as a sabbatical officer. However, as the

only – or one of the few – students in the room, the pressure to challenge while maintaining positive relationships weighs heavily:

> *My personality, values and ethics did not lend themselves to not advocating when I felt like I was able to, and in a space where I could and no other student was.*

This is a challenging position for sabbatical officers as governors. Sabbatical officers work closely with the university on student issues, often lobbying the university for change on behalf of their constituents. While they are encouraged to and ensure they are 'wearing the right hat' – not bringing their political views or student union priorities to the board – it often feels that other governors, including senior management, do not view them, or their motivations, differently in different spaces. Student governors who are activists or openly political can be seen by senior governors as 'lobbyists' within the boardroom, therefore leading to their opinions and insights being viewed as unrepresentative of the student body. This can cause student voices to become lost within university governance and student perspectives to be limited in decision-making. This is particularly a threat where boards rely on student governors as the sole provider of student insight.

The pressure of managing relationships between the university and student union also plays a large role in how student governors navigate challenging senior management within the board. Due to a heavy reliance on the university for financial support, sabbatical officers struggle to navigate the role of 'critical friend' – as often stated within their officer role – while representing the student body as a governor. Interviewees also highlighted this struggle was exemplified when the university had previously worked with officers that did not conform to the conservative nature of student representation the university preferred:

> *Where it was challenging for me is there had been officers who had a different way of doing things. I think there was a level of animosity between senior university figures and student union presidents.* ***Student governor (sabbatical officer) – Russell Group institution***

These dynamics raise important questions about whether student voice within university governance is genuinely embedded or merely symbolic. Without structural and cultural change to ensure student governors can speak freely, be taken seriously and challenge constructively without fear of repercussion, their presence risks serving more as a sign of inclusion than as a source of meaningful influence on institutional decision-making.

The cost of being heard: vulnerability as currency

A concerning yet common theme in interviews with student governors from under-represented backgrounds was the normalisation of students having to present themselves as 'vulnerable' in board spaces in order for their voices to be taken seriously. Although it is understood that students articulate on-the-ground experience, the line between providing insight and acting as a commodity for board members has become increasingly blurred. One student governor stressed that, although numerous statistics, news articles and reports across the sector provide a clear view of the experiences of under-represented students and the cost of living, in order to be truly heard, they were pressured to offer vulnerable insights to provide an institutional narrative to the board:

> *To get them to listen, I had to tell personal stories like 'I've had this horrendous experience'. It's kind of humiliating to have to sit in a room full of rich people and be like 'Look how poor I am'.*
> **Student governor (co-opted), Russell Group institution**

This raises concerns that boards are not only disengaged from sector discourse on student issues but also view student governors as 'token' students, especially those with experience from under-represented backgrounds or who have faced significant challenges during their studies. Student vulnerability, therefore, becomes a form of currency, something they feel they must offer in exchange for their contributions to the board to be viewed as meaningful. Student governors are undoubtedly key to ensuring student perspectives and experiences are accounted for; however, they are not on the board to act as a substitute for wider engagement with

the student body. Relying on students to offer private accounts of lived experience limits the board's perspective. Doing so further divides and isolates students from board membership, making the task of integration more difficult while being reminded of how 'different' the student is from the board. It is therefore crucial that governing boards take a wider approach to gaining student insights, particularly in relation to student experience. This is not to suggest that students should not bring personal experiences to the board. Having insights based on lived experience is important to ensure a person-centred approach to decision-making. However, institutions should complement personal insight from student governors with wider student engagement within decision-making. For example, engaging with the wider student community on topics such as student accommodation allows the board to make decisions within a wider context, rather than relying on one or two student governors' individual perspectives.

Proactively undertaking listening exercises with a varied pool of student groups and demographics not only ensures that insights are representative and provide context, but also makes sure student governors do not bear sole responsibility for providing students' personal experiences with a decision-making body that holds significant power and privilege. For example, to counteract the risk of reliance on student governors to educate the board on student issues, a small number of institutions, such as Hartpury University and the University of Westminster, operate a 'governor link scheme'. This connects each governor with an area of the university to learn about how it operates, including speaking with students, to gain their insights and perspectives. Often, what is learned by each governor is then formally recorded and circulated via board papers, with common themes throughout the institution discussed during board meetings. This encourages governors to seek their own insights, immerse themselves within the university community and be less reliant on student governors to represent a diverse range of students.

Lost voices – are students 'ghost governors'?

Building a relationship of trust and collaboration between students and the university enables students to seek further clarification and guidance

on how to frame questions or insights to ensure they have impact. For example, institutions may find it productive to guide students on what specific evidence to bring to the board to support their insights. The aim of this sort of activity is to provide students with the tools to build governance skills, rather than to control the student narrative. Pre-screening and controlling student input undermines transparency, inclusivity and strong debate. It also compromises the board's ability to make informed decisions based on authentic student experiences. To meet the standards set by the Committee of University Chairs, universities must foster an environment of trust and collaborative decision-making, including welcoming open dialogue with the student body:

> *5.4. An effective governing body has a culture where all members can question intelligently, debate constructively, challenge rigorously, decide dispassionately and be sensitive to the views of others both inside and outside governing body meetings.*[32]

However, repeated accounts of the 'stage management' of student voices contribute significantly to the suppression of student voice within university governance. Multiple accounts of student governors having their questions screened during informal pre-meets with university executives or chairs were highlighted by interviewees, with the outcome of a resolution agreed before the meeting occurred. While many student governors subject to this experience were told the practice was to aid efficacy within the boardroom, interviewees also felt there was an element of 'crowd control' to the exercise. Within boards that favour a passive membership and are directed by the desires of the university executive, screening the questions and insights of student governors acts as a method of diminishing voices with the closest experience to the student body. This means those with the most accurate experience of the effects of university decision-making are prevented from providing the board with insight into how the university behaves. This hinders student voice, disempowers student governors from challenging within the boardroom and opposes the standards of effective governance set by the Committee of University Chairs.

The presence of a student governor on a university board is often presented as evidence of meaningful student participation in decision-making. Yet, as discussed, visibility does not always equate to influence. Even those who enter the boardroom with confidence and a willingness to challenge can find their contributions diluted, redirected or quietly set aside. In these cases, student governors risk becoming 'ghost governors' – present in name but absent in impact. This raises serious questions about whether current governance practices genuinely integrate student perspectives or simply perform inclusion. While this report has discussed the barriers in enacting effective student representation for those with 'quieter' voices, barriers persist even for those with 'louder' voices. There must be mechanisms and cultures in place to enable louder voices not to get lost.

The importance of board committees is emphasised as being an integral aspect of university governance. A board serves as an essential forum for detailed discussions, deliberations and decisions on key institutional matters to take place. Both student governors and university executives highlight that 'committees are where the discussions are had, and decisions are made', with the board seen as a space for 'rubber stamping'. However, while students are present at board meetings, they sometimes risk being left out of committee spaces. This exclusion poses a greater risk for student governors, whose shorter terms of office limit their time to build influence and understanding within governance structures, meaning that missing committee engagement can significantly reduce their overall impact and learning.

The exclusion of student governors from university governing board committees significantly hampers their ability to represent the student voice. Without access to detailed conversations and reasoning behind decisions, student governors' ability to provide meaningful insight from a student perspective or to challenge proposals is limited. Marginalisation can reduce student governors to a symbolic presence, positioned to endorse decisions already shaped elsewhere, rather than acting as active participants in outcomes. The result is a shift from genuine collaboration to procedural compliance, cementing student governors' roles as 'rubber stampers' rather than influential decision-makers. This dynamic undermines the stated purpose of including students in governance.

Student governors who sit on board committees highlight the impact of doing so on both student voice and personal development. Student governors feel they have most impact when they can engage in meaningful discussion and see the effects of their inputs on decision-making. In institutions such as the University of York, students are not only on committees but also active contributors to the agenda and co-lead discussions.[33] These students are helped by 'focus slots' in which they work in partnership with relevant university teams to lead discussions on key institutional issues, such as accommodation and free speech. In doing so, students are not only present to make decisions, but are active leaders and voices in institutional decision-making. Additionally, during interviews, university executives highlighted how engagement within smaller group spaces, such as committees, supports students who lack confidence in board settings. Therefore, not only does including students in board committees ensure effective student representation at all stages of decision-making, but also ensures the provision of alternative and accessible platforms for providing student representation.

Embedding the importance of student governors within higher education governance can have a profound impact. For example, the evolution of Hartpury University from a further education provider to one offering both further and higher education is rooted in student governance. The institution's transition to university status in 2018 was initiated by a student governor at the college, highlighting their dedication to the college, claiming their personal connection with the institution led to them wanting to earn a 'Hartpury degree' rather than a University of the West of England (UWE)-validated degree. This illustrates how embedding the role of student governors within higher education governance can drive meaningful institutional transformation. When students are positioned as active contributors rather than passive representatives, their insights can shape strategic direction and foster a stronger sense of shared purpose. Hartpury University's transition to university status exemplifies the power of authentic student engagement, demonstrating that student voice, when genuinely valued, can influence institutional milestones. By prioritising student participation at governance levels, institutions not only strengthen

their decision-making processes but also cultivate a culture where students are recognised as vital partners in shaping their educational landscape.

Series of recommendations

Building on the barriers and opportunities identified throughout this report, the following recommendations outline practical steps for rethinking and strengthening student voice in university governance. The evidence presented in this report highlights the pre-existing and potential challenges of embedding meaningful student voice within university governance. While the presence and development of student governor practice signals a commitment to inclusion, structural, cultural and procedural barriers limit student influence on decision-making. The following recommendations aim to move the sector beyond symbolic representation towards governance practices that value, empower and integrate student perspectives in institutional decision-making.

Recruitment and appointment

- To support ever-changing institutional and student demographics and priorities, governing boards should regularly assess the effectiveness of their existing recruitment methods and remain open to alternative approaches. Doing so supports institutions to ensure effective student representation within governance while acknowledging challenges such as capacity within financially unstable climates.
- Alongside regular assessment of student governor recruitment methods, universities should ensure transparency and accessibility throughout the process, including publishing clear selection criteria, expectations of the role and rationale for preferred appointment routes. This allows institutions to be held to account by the student body in the recruitment of student governors.
- To aid in enabling a transparent and accessible process, institutions should work in close partnership with students' unions in marketing and communicating the student governor role. This ensures that those running for elected student governor positions are fully informed on the responsibilities they hold, allowing them the opportunity to undertake personal and professional learning before entering the role.

Induction, training and development

- To establish a cohesive and thorough approach to student governor training, institutions should maintain a collaborative relationship with students' unions – ensuring aligned expectations of the role and the facilitation of student-centred training.
- To aid the development of governors and to understand the skills and experience present within the board, institutions should complete a skills matrix of all governors, including students. Incorporating students within skills matrix exercises offers a structured and accessible approach to implement skills and knowledge development throughout students' time on the board.
- To support the development needs of student governors, boards should facilitate ongoing support, with measured development targets and success measures. Programmes such as the Governor Apprenticeship Programme can be examined as a foundational tool to create tailored support and long-term development. By doing so, institutions show that supporting student development is key to ensuring effective student representation within the board.
- To enable students to fully integrate into the board, institutions should regularly examine the culture of the board and whether it may act as a barrier to inclusion, including unspoken rules, inaccessible language and exclusive social norms. This also includes taking proactive steps to remove barriers created by inaccessible jargon, formal debate styles and unwritten codes of behaviour. To do so, boards can encourage board papers to be written in accessible language, provide briefings to allow space to explain complex policies and procedures and create a safe environment where all members feel able to question and learn. When doing so does not support good governance, institutions should collaborate with board members – especially those from under-represented backgrounds – to identify participation barriers and provide targeted developmental support.
- Boards should further limit barriers to integration by ensuring equal opportunities for all members to engage in both formal and informal

settings. Attention should be given to the role of alcohol in informal board networking, ensuring that such gatherings are inclusive, voluntary and serve as gestures of appreciation rather than the primary means of networking. This is not to suggest that alcohol or board dinners should be banned, but rather that these events should complement, not replace, structured and accessible networking opportunities, such as speed networking.

- Use of mentoring among experienced and student governors is widely used as a support tool within higher education governance. Institutions should be encouraged to embed structured mentorship programmes, ensuring supportive – not supervisory – relationships.

Representation and influence

- As full members of the board, student governors should be included within committee membership, with access to spaces where decisions are shaped and detailed discussions take place. This allows students to be active partners in creating institutional change, promoting governance that is done with students rather than to students.
- Students should be viewed as active collaborators within higher education governance. This includes embedding structured opportunities for students to lead discussions on key issues and topics.
- To ensure representation of diverse student bodies, boards should proactively engage in exercises such as speed-networking and link-schemes to enable governors to engage with a wide variety of student perspectives. Engaging with wider communities limits the responsibility of student governors to be the sole student perspective in institutional decision-making.
- Boards should promote transparency and accountability in decision-making. Therefore, institutions should avoid practices that pre-screen or filter student governors' questions before they reach the board. However, student governors should still have the opportunity to raise issues or seek clarification ahead of meetings through appropriate channels, ensuring they are well-prepared and supported. This process

should focus on guidance and mentoring to help student governors present their insights and questions effectively in open debate, without compromising the integrity or independence of board discussions.

Diversity and equity in governance

- Higher education boards should set clear, measurable goals for increasing the diversity of their governing boards, with specific attention to ethnicity, disability status, socio-economic background and other under-represented characteristics. This should be supported with internal recruitment and engaging in sector interventions to support the diversification of higher education governance, such as the Governance Apprenticeship Programme. Targets should aim to ensure representation of varied demographics, possibly reflecting the demographic of the institution or the local community the university is serving, to ensure the presence of representative voices.
- Supporting the diversification of governing boards should not stop at recruiting a wider range of governor profiles. Institutions should provide tailored support – such as internal or external mentorship, peer networks or training opportunities – to help build confidence, influence decision-making and navigate board cultures and unwritten rules. Ongoing support for board members should also ensure that the perspectives of student board members are actively sought and valued, ensuring inclusivity rather than sole representation.
- In supporting the diversification of higher education governance, institutions, with the support of organisations such as Advance HE and the Committee of University Chairs, need to explore the remuneration of higher education governors. Remuneration helps to address the structural barriers that can exclude those without the financial flexibility to volunteer their time, such as early-career professionals, students or individuals with caring responsibilities. By recognising the time, expertise and labour involved in governance, remuneration demonstrates that all contributions are valued equally and helps attract a broader, more representative pool of governors. This, in turn,

enhances the quality of decision-making by bringing a wider range of lived experiences and perspectives to the board.

- To drive meaningful progress in diversifying higher education governance, sector bodies such as Advance HE should set clear expectations and benchmarks for diversity within governing boards. This should be supported by the Higher Education Statistics Agency expanding its governor data to include indicators such as socio-economic background. Governors from lower socio-economic backgrounds remain under-represented and often face additional barriers to access and participation, including exclusionary or informal recruitment practices. Improved data collection and transparent diversity targets would enable institutions to identify gaps, track progress and develop evidence-based interventions to create more equitable and representative governance structures.

Conclusion of recommendations

The recommendations outlined in this section provide practical steps for moving beyond symbolic student representation towards a model of governance where student governors are informed, empowered and able to contribute meaningfully to institutional direction. Strengthening recruitment processes, improving training, embedding student governance into board culture, ensuring student representation and influence at every stage of governance and addressing diversity and equity are all essential to achieving this goal. These measures will help ensure that student voice is not only present but actively shaping discussions and decisions that define the direction and future of institutions.

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Report

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This report, by former HEPI Intern Darcie Jones, uses research from a series of semi-structured interviews with former student governors, student union CEOs, higher education staff, senior management and board chairs, to identify and highlight the barriers and challenges student governors often face. The report suggests a number of practical steps higher education institutions can take to strengthen student representation on governing boards, ensuring fair and inclusive governance practices for all.

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