University of Southampton

Student Voice toolkit

A collaboration between the University of Southampton Students' Union and the University of Southampton

Bringing students' voices into projects and initiatives.

This version is intended for circulation outside of the University of Southampton.

Introduction to the toolkit

The Student Voice toolkit is a collaboration between the University of Southampton Students' Union (SUSU) and the University of Southampton, and aims to support academic staff, professional services, and project teams to bring students' voices into their work across the institution.

The toolkit describes a number of ways in which staff may choose to bring students' voices into change projects and initiatives, and gives past examples.

Many initiatives may find they have a best-fit method of Student Voice, while others may use multiple methods throughout a project. Where possible, we encourage staff and teams to go beyond a top-down approach by creating an open dialogue, co-design, or partnership with students.

The toolkit does not discuss feedback alone as a method of Student Voice, as this can suggest a one-way process with no expectation for further communication or change. Instead the toolkit considers feedback within the wider method of dialogue, which indicates a two-way communication process.

Renumeration may encourage better engagement from students with your Student Voice work, such as Co-Design, partnership, and student-led work, where there is a significant time commitment and level of work involved.

Types of Student Voice: Dialogue with students

Definition: Students are consulted for their ideas, thoughts, and concerns after a project, process or change has already begun. This could be after the initial planning phase or after the initiative has been rolled out.

Feedback and insight is gathered in order to evaluate the success of a project, and to include students' voices in future phases or projects of a similar nature.

Dialogue indicates a two-way communication process and there is an expectation for outcomes to be shared with students after this consultation, and that the ideas, thoughts, and concerns given will be taken on board and carefully considered.

Examples within professional services

→ **Online surveys are used to collect insight.** Students are invited to complete a survey following events they attend hosted by the University. The University is transparent with the insight received, and the ideas, thoughts and concerns given are used to plan the next set of events.

→ **In-person insight is gathered.** In 2022, short surveys were taken across Southampton campuses to ask students their thoughts on the travel options available. Results were shared on the Your Voice SharePoint site, and the stakeholders have begun to make changes influenced by the ideas given in these surveys. These changes will also be communicated to students to share the impact of their contributions.

→ **Students are invited to take part in consultations.** Last summer (2022), students were invited to join an online call with key stakeholders directly responsible for University Strategic Plans to discuss and consult on the Education and Student Experience draft Strategic Plan in an open setting.

→ **SUSU's You Make Change Platform gives students the opportunity to raise new ideas.** The dialogue is two-way as the reasoning behind responses must be outlined on the platform, and students are able to respond.

→ SUSU runs multiple surveys throughout the year gathering insight on a variety of issues affecting students, including academic experience but also mental health, cost of living and financial situation. These surveys directly inform SUSU's offer to students throughout the year.

Examples within teaching and learning

→ **SUSU's Academic Reps are members of Student Staff Liaison Committee Meetings and the School/ Department Presidents sit as co-chairs.** These provide a forum for communication between students and academic staff within a Faculty and are a key mechanism for students to directly impact their academic experience at university.

→ **Students take part in intra-module dialogue.** In this new approach to mid-module feedback, a multi-stage process gives opportunity to respond to student insight whilst students are still on a course:

a. Students complete a survey

b. Module Lead reflects on responses

c. The students and Module Lead discuss comments and reflections together.

Types of Student Voice: Co-Design with students

Definition: Co-Design works with students close to the start of a new project or process to ensure their ideas, thoughts, and concerns are a part of the initial planning process. Students' contributions can influence and change the direction of a project. These projects and processes are designed with students in a way that is collaborative, rather than consultative.

Examples within professional services

→ **Strategic major change projects are brought to the Student Co-Design Panel**

The Student Co-Design Panel is a large focus group comprising around 100 students from all levels of study at the University. Strategic projects from across the university are brought to the panel in their early stages in order to collaborate with students, and to gather their ideas, thoughts, and concerns before the project is underway, so students' contributions can make real change.

The Panel provides colleagues with the chance to gather and record student insights that will then provide robust evidence for future decision making.

The Panel can also be used to validate and test ideas as a project progresses. It offers colleagues the opportunity to review students' suggestions then ask for further detail, or for examples of how initiatives might work well and what success would look like. It can also help to refine project objectives, deliverables and benefits and even change the scope of a project to align with student needs and expectations.

→ **Graduate Teaching Assistant Network**

The Centre for Higher Education Practice (CHEP) have recently recruited eight postgraduate research students (PGRs) to co-create the development of a community of practice for PGRs who teach, called the Graduate Teaching Assistant Network. The community will provide a forum for PGRs to share their experiences and knowledge / teaching practice, as well as supporting teaching practice development with workshops and resources.

Examples within teaching and learning

→ **Co-creation of the curriculum and/or programmes.** Programme teams work collaboratively with students to create curriculum, interpreting guidelines and fit to the context of the School and the learning needs of students.

→ **Co-creation of knowledge.** Staff engage students with research, ideas and concepts leading to new disciplinary knowledge.

→ **PAIR Partners**. This work in Politics and International Relations enables students to participate in improvement to assessment and feedback design. Through surveys and focus groups, dialogue is created which then informs improvements to the assessment and feedback on the programme. The work is now being rolled out in Maths as a pilot for scaling up across other academic units.

→ **Co-creation of policy.** In 2020, the University worked with SUSU's Faculty Officers (senior academic reps within a faculty) to co-design the no-detriment policy which would account for the lost teaching time as a result of the pandemic and the exceptional circumstances of lockdown.

→ **SBS Assessment and Feedback Champions.** Southampton Business School (SBS) assessment and feedback champions. Set-up using CHEP enhancement funding, a group of undergraduate and postgraduate taught students from various programmes acted as consultants in developing assessment and improving feedback. The group took part in a number of focus groups to explore aspects of assessment and made recommendations to the School. This included developing support resources for students, and three internships were created to produce these resources.

Types of Student Voice: Partnership with students

Definition: Students are involved with a new project, programme, or process throughout its entirety, helping to shape its plans and outcomes. Students work together with staff to bring their ideas, thoughts, and concerns to each aspect of a new project or process, from initial planning through to creation, delivery and evaluation. This process goes further than Co-Design, as students act as partners throughout the entire process rather than for the initial stages.

Examples within professional services

→ **Interns work on projects from initiation through to delivery**
Student interns are able to work within a team, owning and contributing to significant parts of a project or process from the outset through to delivery. For example, in 2022 the Student Engagement intern designed, led, and delivered a review into the travel across campuses, designing questions, organising logistics, and writing the final report.

→ **Postgraduate Research (PGR) Student Partners**
In May 2023, the Doctoral College secured funding to recruit PGR Student Partners for the summer term to co-lead on equality, diversity and inclusion related research projects. The outcome of this work will influence the Doctoral College's Recruitment Action Plan and shape the direction of activities seeking to support minoritised and under-represented PGR students.

Examples within teaching and learning

→ **Peer learning.** Originally developed in the Southampton Business School, this uses the supplemental instruction model of peer assisted learning.

Returning undergraduate students are trained to provide weekly workshops supporting first year transition and cover all aspects of the student learning experience. The sessions are student-led and co-created with the peer in the group. Peer Leaders regularly feedback on improvements and issues raised by the groups in debriefsessions and suggestions/improvements are reported back to module and programme leads.

This model has now been adopted by Widening Participation and Social Mobility to support student transitions across the university and programmes with low attainment/participation are being targeted for early development of Peer Learning.

Types of Student Voice: Student-led initiatives

Definition: Students propose a new project or process, and are owners of this initiative throughout. Staff contributions can influence and change the direction of a project, but ultimately the initiative is directed by the students.

Examples within professional services

→ **A programme of halls events are designed and delivered by Student Ambassadors with contributions from staff.** This year, Lead Student Ambassadors initiated a recurring book club aimed to encourage a sense of community in halls, which they designed, promoted and delivered, with low-level support from staff in the wider team.

Examples within teaching and learning

→ **Students led the creation of a new module**
Students within Medicine Faculty wanted to create a module called 'Faith in Medicine' and proposed this to one of their professors. The students collaborated on the content and structure of module. It is now an optional module for students studying BM5 and BM6.

→ **The Partnership for Education Reform**
This was set up by two Education students and aimed to improve how race was discussed within the undergraduate Education programmes. Students worked with staff to audit modules and produce a conference that looked at race, ethnicity and culture across the Education sector.

→ **Students led a change in the updating of a module**
In 2020, the SUSU Biological Sciences School President raised an issue with a module that all Biological Sciences students had to take in first year. The School President worked with their course reps and the committee of the Biological Sciences Society to capture students' voices on the module, and successfully campaigned for its removal on the programmes. This module was subsequently removed, and the key skills assessed in the old module were included in a new compulsory module.

→ **SUSU's Student-led academic societies**
These societies (for example University of Southampton Electronics and Computers Sciences Society, University of Southampton Medical Society) are student initiated and owned but have a relationship to the academic subject and may be supported by academics.

Why engage with the Student Voice?

Benefits for your project, programme, or process

→ Increases authenticity and overall student engagement with project if input from students is highlighted.

→ It could be considered ethical to involve students in change and/or significant projects which will directly concern or affect them.

Benefits for academic staff

→ Allows the opportunity for interaction with the student body to hear first-hand from students and engage on a human level and build a rapport.

Benefits for professional services staff

→ Engagement with service users.

→ Addresses lack of lived experience within staff.

→ Staff in these areas don't always work directly with students – this allows the opportunity for interaction with the student body. Hear firsthand from students and engage on a human level and build a rapport.

Benefits for students

→ Provides autonomy over their university experience.

→ Increases understanding of 'behind the scenes' work at the University, and helps prevent disillusionment.

→ Supports leadership development and increases employability.

→ Can increase sense of belonging.

→ Explains why actions can't be taken or moved forward with. Dialogue gives stakeholders a chance to explain to students why things may not be achievable, and students appreciate understanding why their suggestions cannot be implemented.

→ Evolution of the student experience – keeps us up to date with the lived experience of students.

→ Immediacy of feedback – we can deal with issues students are facing faster. Topical dialogue.

→ Paid opportunities.

When to engage with students

Each method of Student Voice outlined within the toolkit will require **different timelines** for engagement with students, and including this work in **good time** ensures that the input can make **genuine change** and avoid being tokenistic.

A general suggestion is that the **more student voices** you wish to include in your project, the **earlier** you should **initiate engagement**.

It's important to be mindful of particular pinch points in the student journey, e.g., assessment periods and term dates, when planning.

Listed below are a number of suggested timelines for input:

Dialogue with students

Dialogue with students one of the most flexible methods of Student Voice, as it can be used in a number of ways throughout your project.

Co-design with students

The principles of co-design mean that this method of Student Voice should always be engaged with towards the start of your project. This helps ensure alignment between the student priorities and the project outcomes.

Partnership with students

Partnership with students requires students to be engaged at the beginning of the project. This means they have influence on the scope, aims and priorities of the project.

Authentic partnership can also extend beyond the lifecycle of a project e.g., students are kept updated on the project/activity/initiative or are invited to co-present outcomes of the partnership in internal spaces e.g., committees or external spaces e.g., conferences.

Student-led initiatives

Student-led initiatives will have students involved right from the beginning. Other groups of students, particularly those who are underrepresented across HE, might be brought on at a later stage in the project to help with accessibility and inclusivity if not already included in the development.

Engaging with students from under-represented backgrounds

When developing a Student Voice intervention, it is important to seek insight from our under-represented student groups. These groups of students are more likely to be overlooked in some of our service designs, and it is important that we amplify their voices to ensure that their lived experiences are taken into consideration.

There are numerous benefits to engaging with our under-represented student groups. Many of these students may have differential experiences of university than their counterparts, as highlighted by the National Student Survey and our access, awarding and progression gaps. As an institution, it is paramount that we identify and reduce these experiences, to ensure that all our students received the same, high quality university experience.

Under-represented students' voices are also important in project design or delivery, as broad lived experience may not be represented within your team. For example, if you are designing an intervention to support students with disabilities, it is important that their voice is incorporated as a key stakeholder. Even if you do hold lived experience in your team, viewing this from a student perspective is vital.

When seeking under-represented students' voices, consider a variety of methods to identify students. It can be damaging to label these student groups as 'hard to reach', and there are many ways to flag opportunities. For example, try putting in a data request to provide targeted communications to key groups. Or, get in touch with student groups via your Students' Union to reach the organically grown communities.

Groups currently under-represented at the University of Southampton

The University hold data relating to Access and Participation (APP), and a broad overview can be found through the Office for Students APP Data Dashboard. According to our more recent data, core under-represented student groups at Southampton include:

→ Students from Low Participation Neighbourhoods

→ Students from Indices of Multiple Deprivation Quintile 1 (the 25% most disadvantaged postcodes in the country)

→ Mature students (students starting undergraduate aged 21+)

→ Black and minoritized ethnic students

→ Students with a declared disability

→ Students previously in receipt of free school meals

Examples of how to gain Student Voice

→ Consider diverse methods of promoting internal opportunities, such as University internships

→ Work with your Widening Participation unit at your institution to reach under-represented groups

→ Talk to your faculty Widening Participation link about the Action and Research Fund for additional budget to compensate students for Student Voice work

Evaluating your Student Voice work

It's important to consider how you might go about evaluating the impact of your Student Voice work throughout your project.

Considering why you're undertaking this work, and what you're hoping to achieve. This can also give you a good starting point for later evaluation.

Your aims could include:

→ To give better autonomy to students over their experience at University

→ To help support gaps in knowledge that may exist as a staff member

→ To provide a job opportunity

Understanding your aims helps you to explore what impact are you trying to have and how you will be able achieve this.

After you've undertaken a project, timely evaluation will help you to **understand the impact** of your Student Voice work.

You might choose to consider:

→ How has this Student Voice work impacted the planning and delivery of your project?

→ To what extent was your project guided by Student Voice?

→ Were you able to make changes from the insight gained?

→ How has your Student Voice work supported students?

→ Has this Student Voice work increased trust or buy-in to your project?

Further information

For more information about the toolkit, and to get in touch with the team at Southampton, please contact us on:

studentcodesign@soton.ac.uk

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This toolkit has been created through our staff and students sharing their experiences.

Southampton students have contributed to the creation of this toolkit in a number of ways. It was co-authored with the VP for Education and Democracy (2022/23), and the Widening Participation and Social Mobility team's Student Advisory Board were consulted for their thoughts and ideas.

With thanks to the staff and students who contributed their time, thoughts, and ideas.

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A number of other institutions have useful resources which share more principles, ideas, and examples of Student Voice. A few are highlighted below for reference.

↗ **Westminster Student Partnership Framework**

↗ **Advance HE: Essential Frameworks For Enhancing Student Success: Student Engagement Through Partnership**

↗ **University of Reading: Student Voice and Partnership**

↗ **QAA resources on Student Engagement**