

From Consultation to Co-Creation: How Five Universities Bridge the Student Voice Gap



This is the executive summary for the [What Matters to Students research project](#) (January - December 2024)

The UK higher education faces a "meaningful student voice" crisis, with abundant consultation mechanisms but limited genuine partnership between providers and students. The 'What Matters to Students?' project explored how five diverse providers are bridging this gap.

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Background and Context

The OfS's **comprehensive student engagement strategy** defines student engagement as "the strategic and impactful involvement of students or students' perspectives in the OfS's work". The strategy outlines three main objectives: learning about student experiences, working in partnership with students, and communicating with students in accessible ways. The principles behind this strategy are outlined in John Blake, the Director for Fair Access and Participation's, **speech at the 2024 students' union membership conference**. Omar Khan, TASO CEO's, **review of the 2025 TASO annual conference** explains the crucial links between student voice and experience and addressing inequality in the UK HE sector. Recent case studies, such as **the University of Winchester's work as part of TASO's 'Approaches to addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gap' project**, demonstrate the value of integrating student voice and engagement into broader institutional strategies to improve equality and student outcomes. The 'What Matters to Students?' project explored these areas in depth. A key research stream was these case studies from six providers that surface unique insights, common issues and best practice in embedding student voice.

This project's outputs represent the first cross-institutional analysis of innovative approaches that bridge the consultation-to-co-creation gap in student engagement. Effective student voice engagement requires methodological diversity, genuine partnership approaches, and demonstrable action on feedback, though specific mechanisms vary significantly by institutional context.

About this Analysis

This cross-institutional analysis synthesizes findings from five case studies conducted as part of the "What Matters to Students" research project between January and December 2024. The project examined how higher education institutions interpret and implement Office for Students guidance on student voice in access and participation work.

Participating Institutions:

- University of Oxford (large, internationally selective, research-intensive, tutorial system)
- Leeds Arts University (small, specialist arts provider with relatively few underrepresented students)
- University of Southampton (large, research university, domestically selective)
- Lancaster University (mid-sized, collegiate, homogeneous regional context)
- London School of Economics (highly selective, social sciences, international focus)

Analytical Approach

Rather than seeking universal solutions, this analysis identifies how effective student voice practices adapt to institutional context, student demographics, and organizational capacity. It examines cross-cutting themes while highlighting distinctive innovations that other institutions can adapt to their own circumstances.



Contemporary Relevance

The findings address current sector challenges including post-pandemic belonging issues, rising student poverty affecting engagement, and the need for concrete examples to populate new sector resources like TASO's **Higher Education Evaluation Library** (launching 2026). The analysis provides evidence-based alternatives to current over-reliance on student satisfaction surveys, offering practical guidance for institutions developing new Access and Participation Plans

Methodological Approach

The analysis draws on diverse data collection methods across institutions, including semi-structured interviews with institutional stakeholders, student focus groups, participant observation, survey responses, institutional documentation, and co-created outputs. This methodological diversity enables comparison across different institutional contexts while respecting the unique characteristics of each setting.



Intended Audience

These research notes serve practitioners, policymakers, and researchers seeking to understand how meaningful student voice operates across different higher education contexts, with particular relevance for Access and Participation Plan implementation, institutional evaluation strategies, and sector-wide knowledge sharing initiatives.





Sector-Level Insights and Challenges

Practice-Sharing and Collaboration

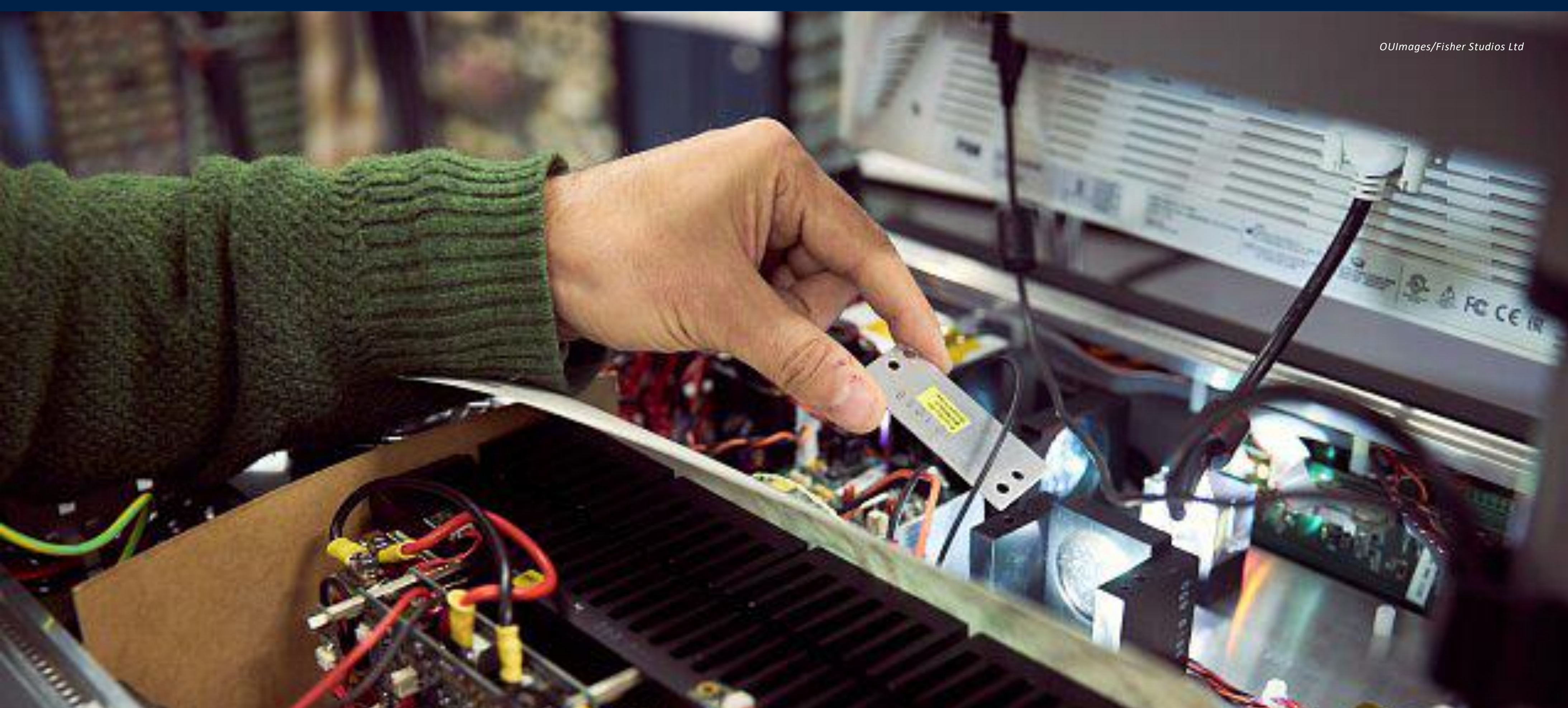
Common Concerns

Tension between sharing best practice and competitive recruitment concerns

- Leeds Arts University: Need for practical evaluation support beyond published guidelines
- Lancaster University: Preference for small practitioner-focused events over large academic conferences
- Across the study, a (welcome) proliferation of different forms of evaluation with different types of outcome were apparent, posing challenges in drawing together and communicating key themes and learning points

Solutions Emerging

- Southampton University: Informal networks within institutions providing regular practice-sharing
- Lancaster University: Team collaboration to address confidence/training gaps
- Building trust networks that enable sharing both successes and failure



Evaluation Quality and Sector Support

Common Concerns

Institutions without evaluation specialists struggle with capacity and resources

- Leeds Arts University: *"if you're not an evaluator and you're an institution without an evaluation specialism, you're really stuck"*
- Risk of poor-quality evaluations being taken as *"truth"* by inexperienced practitioners

Institutional Responses

- Lancaster University: Embedding evaluation as core practice rather than afterthought
- Southampton University: Multi-modal dissemination to reach different audiences
- Evidence-based pragmatism - moving forward with promising approaches rather than waiting for perfect evaluation



Diversity and representation

Common concerns

Guarding against tokenism while reflecting student diversity is a widespread challenge in different kinds of institution.

- University of Oxford: *"Blackness is not a monolith, it encompasses a wide range of identities and experiences"*
- This can be a particular risk at small or homogeneous institutions, although it appears as a common concern across all case studies.

Institutional Responses

- Lancaster University: Creative approaches to ensuring diverse student representation, and granting students more autonomy in how their voice is communicated, can be effective counter-measures to this issue
- Using student-led projects to help staff engage more effectively in issues unfamiliar to them

Unique Contributions to Sector Knowledge: Empirical Illustrations

Cross-Institutional Insights

- There is a **strong temporal dimension** to student experience. Multiple case studies found evidence of predictable phases requiring different support timing, an insight which is undetected by annual surveys.
- **Compensation is crucial** to partnership recognition. Monetary compensation is generally preferred, as it helps address financial pressures while granting students a sense of investment and value in the projects they contribute to.
- **Scale-appropriate strategies** are important in ensuring student voice initiatives are practically implementable. Moving beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to context-sensitive solutions requires thoughtful adaptation to institutional context, student demographics, organizational capacity.
- Staff across many institutions recognize the **need for informal practice-sharing forums** accessible to both practitioners and researchers, particularly in settings where existing institutional knowledge of research and evaluation is limited.

Large, Research-Intensive Institutions

Large, research-intensive institutions may have capacity to deploy multiple methods at once which complement each other. This methodological pluralism enables institutions to recognise intersectional complexity in their responses. However, they also need to ensure student voice is treated as central to their mission and ensure evaluation is embedded throughout their offerings to realise the benefits which such insights can offer.

- **University of Oxford (Large (26,000+), prestigious research university with tutorial system):** At the University of Oxford, deploying diverse forms of student voice engagement fosters student trust by enabling a wider variety of students to engage in different ways, and facilitates stronger institutional intelligence by allowing cross-validation of findings between data sources.
- **University of Southampton (Large (25,000+) research university, 70% domestic students):** At Southampton University, evaluation of student voice is a core focus, embedded through multiple methodological approaches and codified in a framework designed around core ideas of ‘Curriculum, Culture and Community’. Spaces where students control staff participation and agency also help foster a sense of fuller and more meaningful engagement. This approach is styled as leading with student input.

Small Institutions

In small institutions, agility is a benefit – it creates fewer siloes and means different members of staff understand more about the variety of issues affecting students. Informality creates rich data which might have been difficult to obtain otherwise and fosters more collaborative development.

- **Leeds Arts University (Small (2,500+ students) specialist arts university in North England):** At Leeds Arts University, there is limited staff time for large, complex interventions. Creating more responsive, flexible ways for students to engage in student voice discussions, such as through observational data collection during everyday interactions, allows staff to connect with student voice in a manageable way, and also to respond more quickly and effectively to emerging issues. Creative students’ communication strengths augment this approach, challenging the narrative that ‘bigger is always better’.

Selective Internationally-Focussed Institutions

At selective, internationally focussed institutions, ensuring students remain the focus of initiatives designed for them is vital. International students require specific strategies, and particularly in specialist institutions, non-participation should be recognised as a valid outcome that may be positive from an evaluation perspective.

- **LSE (Mid-sized (13,000+), selective social sciences university, central London, 2/3 international):** At the LSE, this is manifested in the philosophy of ‘talking TO students, not ABOUT them’. Student engagement is embedded in a multi-level strategic framework, and careful consideration is given to student voice activities to ensure all students can contribute, and that varying levels of engagement with the activity are possible.

Homogeneous institutions

At relatively homogeneous institutions, intersectional approaches to student voice remain as valuable as at more diverse ones. However, they may require more creative approaches, and greater levels of student autonomy, to ensure diverse voices are heard within these contexts.

- **Lancaster University (Mid-sized (14,000+) collegiate university in homogeneous region):** At Lancaster University, staff have avoided tokenising minoritised students by using computer-generated graphics in publicity material rather than depending on these students to ‘represent’ the groups they belong to. Adopting collaborative relationships such as reverse-mentoring practices has helped ensure students can build their capacity to contribute their voice.

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An institutional case study from the [What Matters to Students research project](#) (January - December 2024)

Lancaster University is a middle-sized university in a small, history city in the North of England.



Introduction

This poster presents as a case study the findings of the What Matters to Students research project at one of the participating institutions, Lancaster University. It brings together the findings of four research methodologies to offer insights on the institution's reflections on its practice in relation to student voices and evaluation.

How to read the poster: Each panel identifies a specific theme, explains its significance, and illustrates it with direct quotes from participants.

About the 'What Matters to Students' project

The What Matters to Students project examined the effective use of student voices in evaluating higher education. The project explored how six higher education institutions interpret the Office for Students' guidance on access and participation. Working with volunteer institutions, the project built evidence of good practice using ethnographic and participatory research methods to create a rich picture of diverse lived experiences.



Methodologies

This case study utilises data produced from:

- Six semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024
- Survey responses from institutional stakeholders
- The institution's Access and Participation Plan
- Public online reviews and institutional data

The themes highlighted are drawn from a synthesis of these research methods. Where possible, the specific source of each data point is provided. Core insights stem from intensive interviews with key practitioners, supplemented by broader institutional data and student-created materials, providing triangulation of findings.

Context and Challenge: Homogeneous Regional Setting

Regional Challenge: Lancaster is situated in a relatively homogeneous region, making it difficult to recruit student representatives from a genuinely diverse range of backgrounds.

Understanding Student Voice: Dialogue and Authentic Engagement

Student Voice as Continuous Dialogue

'I think we should actively try to hear them out throughout the process of education, and not just, you know, as an evaluation piece at the end of a module...what works for them and what doesn't work for them is often not the same as what the teachers or professors think will work...the students should be part of the conversation' (Interview 1)

Authenticity as Core Requirement

'in order to be an authentic programme that is fit for purpose, student voice is really important to us in order to be the best that we can be.' (Interview 4)

The Challenge of Representativeness

'you've got to be very careful between...the engaged and the non engaged?...the students who did engage in the focus groups, they were probably the ones who are most engaged on our access programme and our success programme....you're sort of preaching to the choir...the students you really want to engage with [are] those who are hard to reach' (Interview 5)



Strategic Innovation: Student-Led Research and Reverse Mentoring

Student Ambassador Model

'we've got 12 student ambassadors all from WP groups who we've employed. And we've been doing some coproduction workshops with them around what do they want to see and who do they think needs to see it' (Interview 2)

Student-Directed Approach

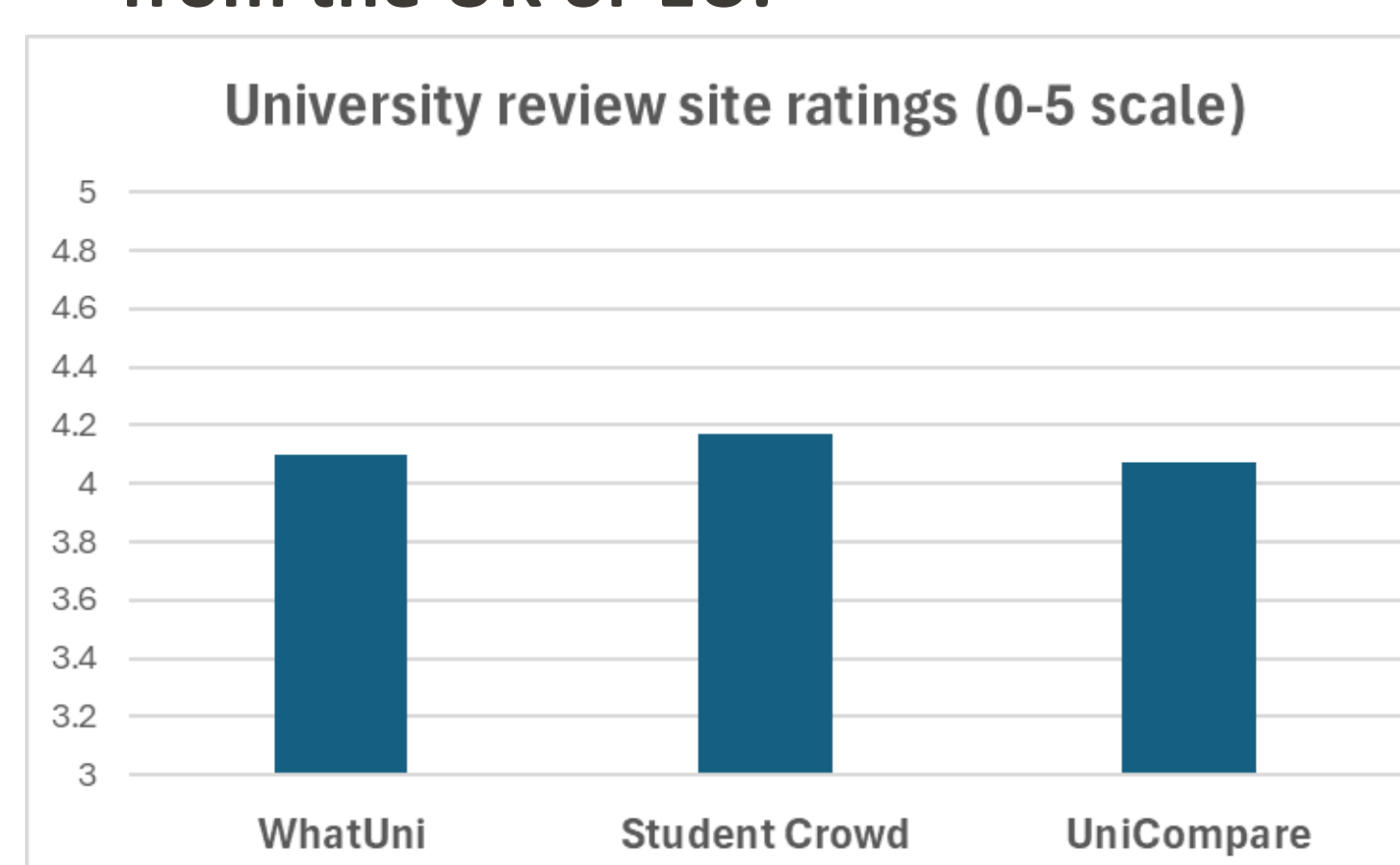
'I've never, ever sat down with them and gone "This is our strategic aims. Think of how you can meet these as a student". It's a "who do you want to be and what do you want to use the space for and how can we develop your skills with that?"' (Interview 4)

Long-Term Student Research Project

A proposal is being developed for a year-long student-led research project producing a report, ensuring student representation drives skill development with latitude to set their own direction to fill literature gaps.

Institution overview

Domestically selective institution in a small city, with just under 14,000 students. Over 75% are undergraduates, of whom over 90% are full-time, and over 70% of students are from the UK or EU.

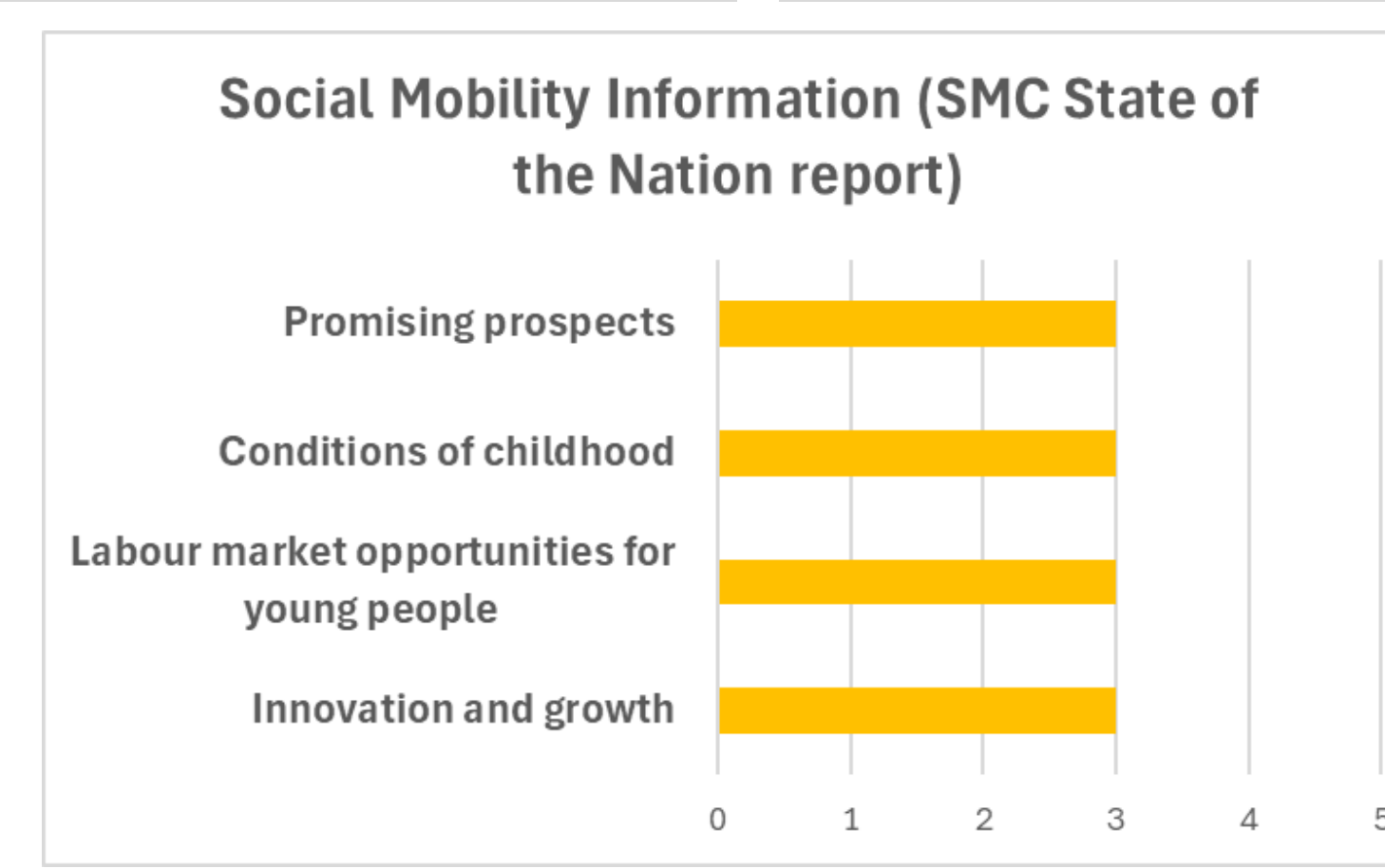
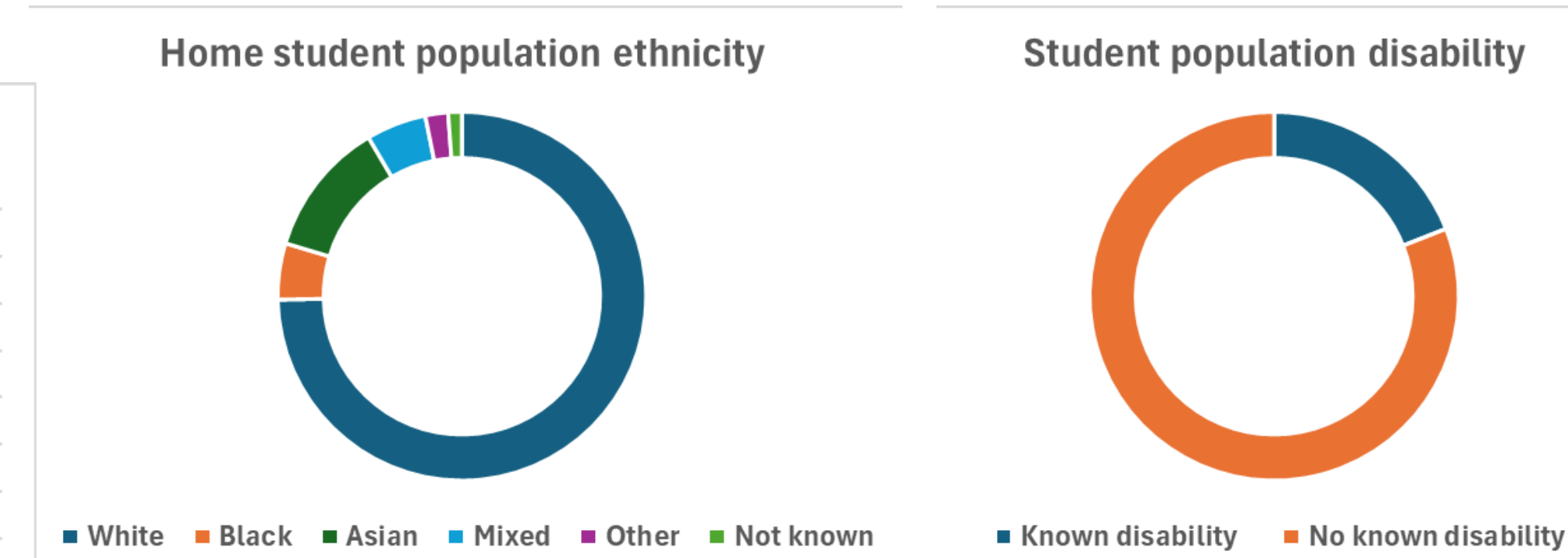


Positive comments and high ratings:

Community, campus, teaching and accommodation (WhatUni)

Campus, careers service, clubs and societies (Student Crowd)

Course quality, careers, and accommodation (Unicompare)





Building Trust through Relationships

Trust as Foundation for Rich Data

'[It's] 'all about how you build relationships between systems and people. And it's all about how you create the trust that's needed in order for things to happen...somebody's version of success might be to go and make friends at university and learn how to use the facilities and, you know, they might get a third or 2:1 or a first, you know, but that's not what is important for them....So yeah, I think actually sort of perversely taking the agenda out of it and taking the expectation out of it on both sides is probably a healthy place to start.' (Interview 2)

Responsive Teaching Approaches

'One of my module lecturers collected student feedback after each week and discussed it directly at the start of the next week. It was very motivating to give my feedback as it was clear that it was being listened to directly.' (Student survey response)

Creating Multiple Engagement Avenues

Lancaster attempts to create numerous potential avenues for student voice including student advocates, action learning, peer coaching, and multiple reporting mechanisms for student research.

Cultural Change: Creating Belonging

The Challenge of "Fitting In"

Students have raised that many minoritised groups want to fit in when arriving at university, creating a culture inherently less tolerant of difference.

Collaborative Working Relationships

Plans now include collaborative working relationships, including reverse mentoring, to ensure minoritised student groups get opportunities to acclimatise to different groups when they arrive at Lancaster.

Diverse Researcher Voices

Staff felt it would be valuable to have more diverse researcher voices, including practitioners, but lack of training and confidence made this difficult, with team collaboration suggested as a solution.

Addressing Representation Challenges in a Homogeneous Context

The Care Leavers Challenge

'with care leavers, for example, that's the one group that we find incredibly difficult to engage with. In my experience, a lot of students want to sort of shed that identity when they get here, and obviously they don't tick it on the UCAS box application...I think it's sort of trying to really navigate that fine line between being too on the nose and targeting certain groups. But just acknowledging that certain groups may face extra barriers and having that honest conversation too.' (Interview 5)

Intersectional Approaches

'I like the intersectionality side because you are almost treating everyone as an individual because, yeah, you're finding the information out that you need. You're not looking at a piece of paper and says this person is first-gen, so therefore, I'm presuming that they don't know anything about the graduate recruitment process. I'm kind of taking everyone at the same level and then working and getting to know them from that point' (Interview 3)

Visual Representation Strategy

To avoid tokenistic representation, the university uses system-generated graphics rather than singling out minoritised students for visual display.

Student Perspectives on Representatives

Mixed Views: *One student described representatives as 'All females and white', but felt that 'College JCR was really good especially as we had engaged members. Student staff committee...also good.'*

Compensation and Authentic Engagement

Strategic Approach to Compensation

Students are compensated through vouchers, prize draws, and employment contracts, with recognition that this demonstrates genuine value for their time:

'when you don't pay or reimburse, you are more likely to get students who already engage with you, whereas when you're paying, reimbursing, you might get those who haven't engaged. So I see that as a positive in some ways. But...you're still contacting those who have had some level of engagement with you' (Interview 3)

Student Preferences

'cash compensation because students will always be happy to make some money'; 'Incentives such as vouchers and snacks as they give students a feeling of satisfaction and reward that they're taking time out of their day to contribute.' (Student survey responses)



Evidence of Student Voices: Stories and Data Integration

Beyond Statistics to Stories

'talking to students, interviewing them, testimonials, it feels like anecdotes, but they also give us a glimpse of the world, the experience of these individuals, so having this statistical data and then trying to understand why these patterns are happening or why are we getting these responses to have an understanding of it...it's always helpful to complement with qualitative data' (Interview 1)

Learning from Adaptation

'thinking about it, were we a bit too reactive to try and please everyone at the beginning and change it too much from what it was? Maybe, but actually down the road we now have two really good activities' (Interview 4)

Widening Participation Advisory Group

Student voice data is captured and produced by the Widening Participation Advisory Group, with a long-term review of widening participation currently underway as part of strategic planning.





Evaluation Innovation: Embedded and Creative

Paradigm Shift to Embedded Evaluation

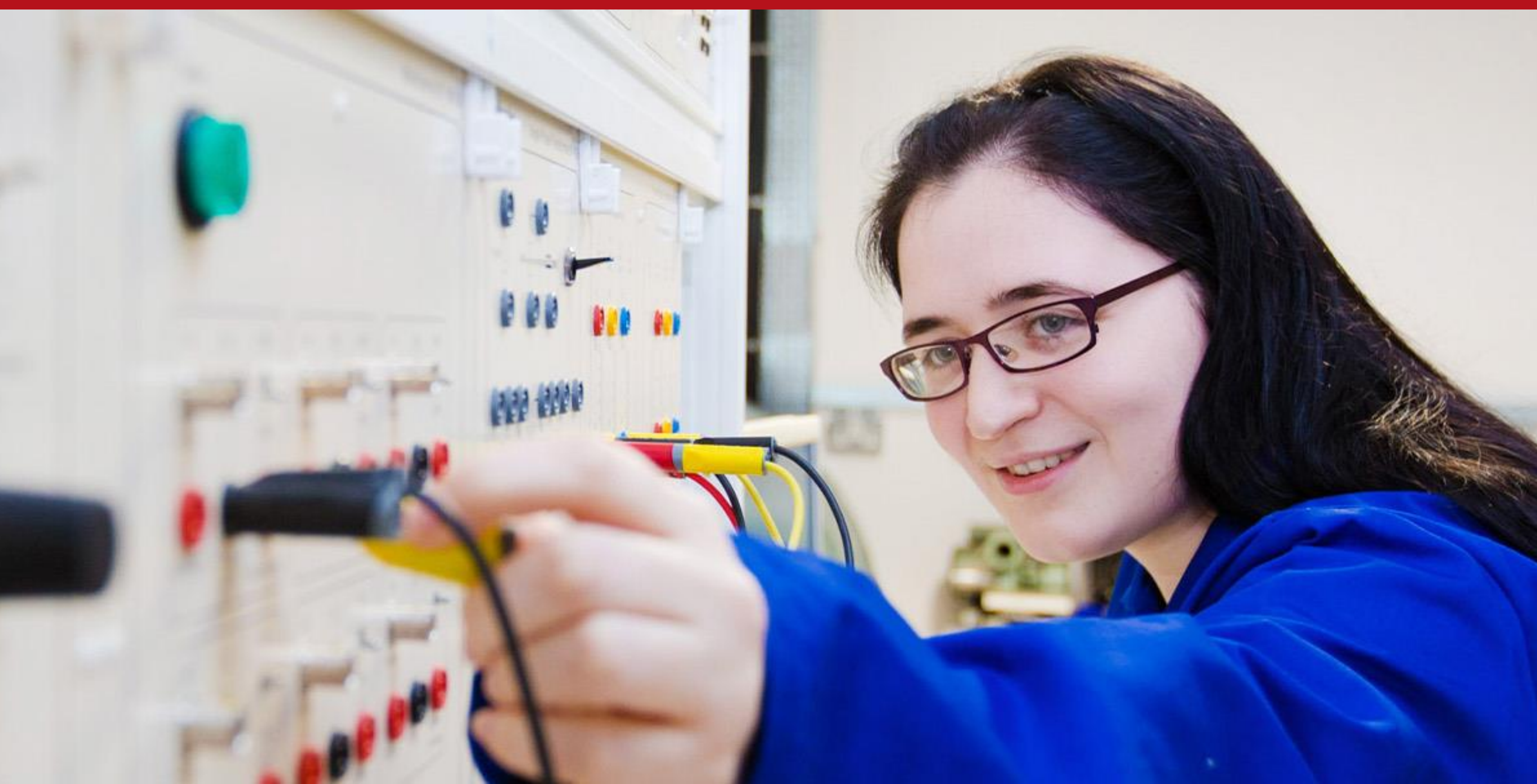
'Practitioners need to 'start making evaluations such an integral and embedded part of the process that it doesn't feel any more like it's an additional chore...This takes time and it takes creativity and critical thinking to do it...hopefully, we'll start to think of evaluation when we start planning a project, whether we are designing a program or a curriculum design instead of thinking evaluation is something at the end, something summative, we'll start to think of it as something that is part of the project itself' (Interview 1)

Creative Evaluation Methods

Lancaster developed an evaluation tool applicable to any project ensuring evaluation is considered from proposal through implementation to completion, using creative methods from the Little Book of Creative Evaluation.

Focus on Non-Linear Change

'a problem of evaluation then, because you know, evaluation works nicely where it's like you do X you get Y and you look at how is that effective. But actually that's not what we're talking about here. You know you're talking about action, people's ability to really get the most out of an environment and feel like that environment fits to them...that requires a completely different evaluative approach almost.' (Interview 2)



Student Support and Career Development

Distance Travelled Over Outcomes

'...a big bulk of the time is one-on-one with students providing that space to realise what their version of success is and gives them the toolkits to get it, those students from underrepresented backgrounds and linking in with that WP widening participation criteria that links in with the access and participation plan.' (Interview 4)

Industry-Specific Career Support

Careers support is varied and specific to industries students are interested in, with students able to access specific sessions without broader commitment.

Challenge of Vocational Background Integration

'...if they get the targeted support they need and are signposted to the right support mechanisms, then they tend to catch up and can sort of get similar outcomes to their A level equivalents, but I think the challenge is that there's always those who fall through the gaps. And it's hard to pick those up.' (Interview 5)

Publishing and Practice Sharing

Value of Informal Networks

'I think it's more about institutions themselves feeling empowered to share that information and practitioners feeling empowered to share that as well...it's all context basis and what worked well for one institution might not work well for another...I think it's all about taking a very bespoke approach institution by institution, but I think we need to feel more empowered to share and I think it's about creating the platforms to share, as well' (Interview 5)

Preference for Practitioner-Focused Events

'I find that the real sort of gold dust is in all the seminars, those smaller one day conferences, half day conferences...the ideas and support that's come out of that over the last 18 months has been far more useful than a big national conference where you sort of get lost in all of the details' (Interview 5)

Key Takeaways

1. Trust-Building Enables Authentic Voice

Taking agendas and expectations out of initial relationships creates space for genuine student direction.

2. Intersectional Approaches Treat Students as Individuals

Moving beyond categorical assumptions to understand individual circumstances and needs.

3. Embedded Evaluation from Project Inception

Evaluation as integral to project design rather than summative afterthought.

4. Student-Directed Research Builds Capacity

Allowing students to set their own research directions while providing support and skill development.

5. Homogeneous Contexts Require Creative Inclusion Strategies

System-generated graphics and careful targeting avoid tokenism while promoting representation.

6. Informal Practice-Sharing Networks Most Valuable

Small, practitioner-focused events more useful than large academic conferences.

Bottom Line: Universities can leverage their smaller scale and personal relationships to create trust-based student voice approaches, but must carefully navigate representation challenges in homogeneous regional contexts while embedding evaluation as a core practice rather than an afterthought.



James Robson (Department of Education)

Elizabeth Rahman (Centre for Teaching and Learning and
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Leeds Arts University

An institutional case study from the [What Matters to Students research project](#) (January - December 2024)

Leeds Arts University is the only specialist arts university in the North of England. It gained university status in 2017, and caters to a student body of around 2,500, the large majority of whom are undergraduates studying creative arts courses from a wide variety of disciplines.



Introduction

This poster presents as a case study the findings of the What Matters to Students research project at one of the participating institutions, Leeds Arts University. It brings together the findings of multiple research methodologies to offer insights on the institution's reflections on its practice in relation to student voices and evaluation.

How to read the poster: Each panel identifies a specific theme, explains its significance, and illustrates it with direct quotes from participants.

About the 'What Matters to Students' project

The What Matters to Students project examined the effective use of student voices in evaluating higher education. The project explored how six higher education institutions interpret the Office for Students' guidance on access and participation. Working with volunteer institutions, the project built evidence of good practice using ethnographic and participatory research methods to create a rich picture of diverse lived experiences.



Methodologies

This case study utilises data produced from:

- A semi-structured interview conducted in 2024 with an institutional stakeholder
- The institutions's Access and Participation Plan
- Public online reviews and institutional data

The themes highlighted here are drawn from a synthesis of these research methods. Where possible, the specific source of each data point is provided.

Student Voice in Small Institutions: Collaborative Development

The Small Institution Challenge: Limited staff time creates both constraints and opportunities for agile responses to student voice.

'we've got one member of staff on each course who has a particular amount of their time carved out for things...that often has a focus on widening participation...but also the completion, continuation, attainment...'

The Need for Collaborative Support: Student voice roles require ongoing development rather than simple committee membership:

'There should be an ongoing dialogue...having students on committees, but actually working with them so that they can fully engage in those committees...have they read the minutes? Do they understand the papers? What comes to mind when they see them?'

Balancing Expectations and Reality: Defining role parameters is challenging - students may be too malleable or not understand institutional constraints:

'Universities...don't have...limitless finance...So actually students voice is not just contributing their ideas to things, but also them developing this knowledge of how institutions work.'

Agility Through Constraint: Small staff capacity can sometimes enable more responsive institutional action, though resource limitations remain real.



Clothing designed by Daisy Budianto, BA (Hons) Fashion Design student

Strategic Approach: Access and Participation Integration

Leeds Arts University's access and participation strategy has been informed by student voice considerations across multiple areas:

Key Strategic Development Areas

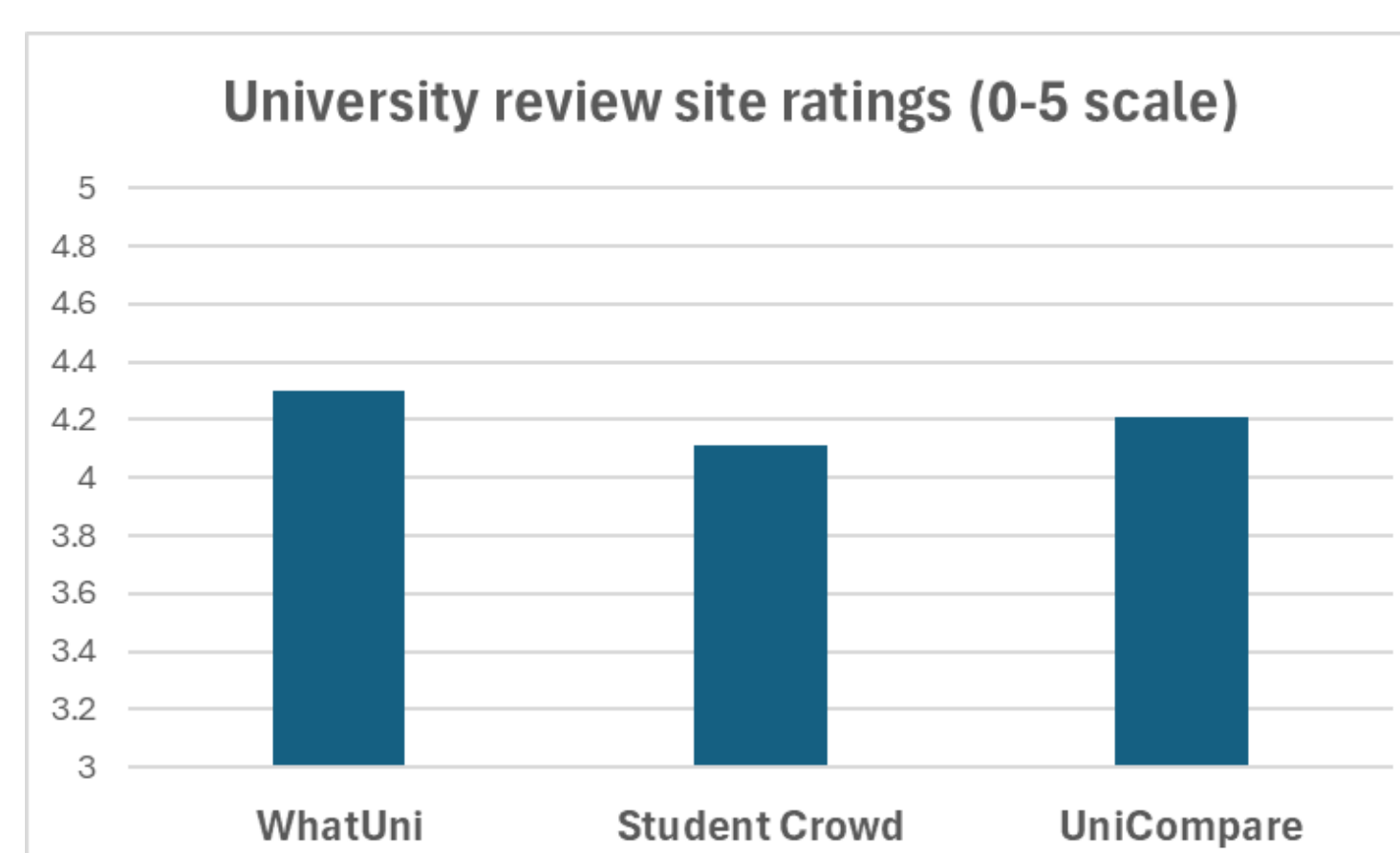
- Building and maintaining partnerships with schools and colleges, including through the Uni Connect programme
- Creating new positions to allow a more proactive approach to student support
- Enhancing mental health support
- Expanding support for care-experienced and estranged students
- Researching student destinations to support progression initiatives
- Working with TASO on evaluation pilot initiatives

Student Panel Implementation

'...as part of...implementing our new [Access and Participation Plan, we're]...having a student panel which is very much about access and participation. And so getting students from a wide range of different backgrounds who can have that more regular conversation with us as an institution.'

Institution overview

Specialist provider of arts education in the North of England. 93% of students are UK students, and 98% study full time; over 90% are undergraduates.

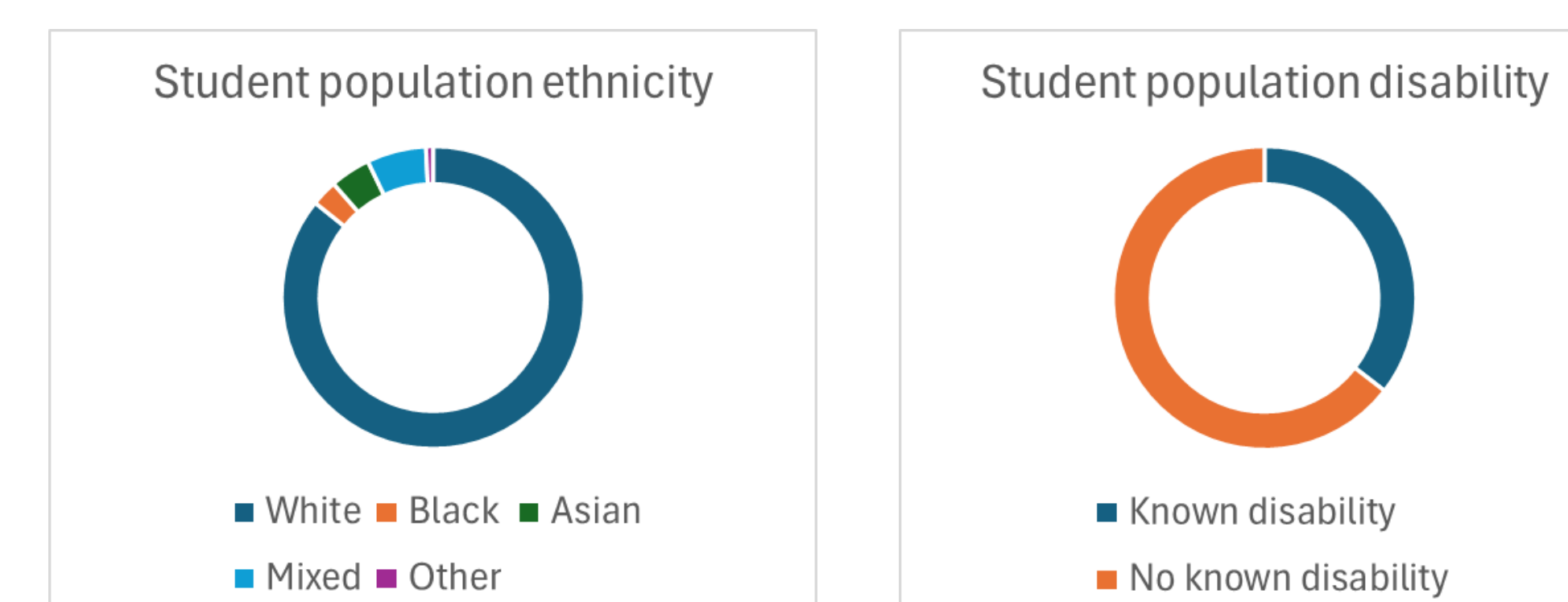


Positive comments and high ratings:

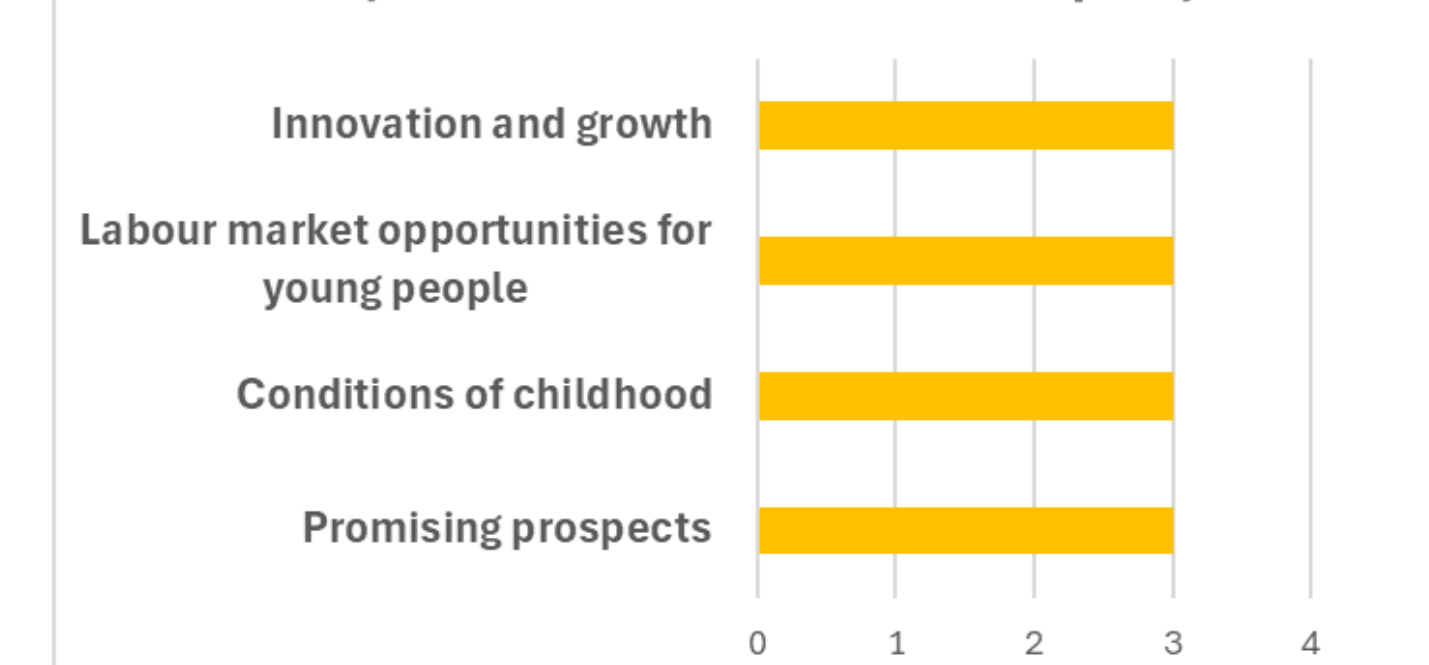
City, teaching and courses (WhatUni)

Campus and facilities, students' union and careers service (Student Crowd)

Graduate careers, course quality and social life (Unicompare)



Local Authority social mobility information (SMC State of the Nation report)





'Skin Deep' by BA (Hons) Comic and Concept Art graduate Flo Woolley

Evidence of Student Voice: Balancing Breadth and Depth

The Challenge of Data Integration

'...the stats give you this irrefutable evidence of the rates of continuation, et cetera, but the students' voices actually give you the experience that they're going through...if we did an in-depth focus group with 21 students over three sessions, how much weight will that have institutionally compared to a survey of 305 students who gave very little depth[?]'

Creative Student Perspectives

Arts students bring unique qualities to student voice work:

'Creative Arts students...are used to having to make unpopular decisions...they are very vocal. They express themselves and they are very honest.'

image by Imogen Argyle-Ross



clothsurgeon x bowled over collection
imogen-jade argyle-ross

Key Insight: What Works for Small Institutions

Compensating Students as Partners - Beyond Tokenistic Rewards: Finding proportionate and fair compensation methods

'I'm getting paid for it, [but] they're not in class. They could technically be creating their creative work that could go into a portfolio and be used for employment, or they could be working. So actually for them to engage in this it has become more of a compensate to communicate side of things.'

Authentic Engagement: Compensation doesn't distort honest feedback

'I feel like they sort of forget about the voucher...it's happening in a very civil way obviously, but they're saying things that, you know, we could be improving or things that haven't gone well...'

Observational Data Collection: Informal Settings Provide Rich Insights

'...there is...a creative activity and there's free lunch...you also hear them talking about things that are going on in the university or complaining about things...[you can] be a sponge and soak up all this information...you can see what the transition is like in a bit more of an observer perspective'



Allen by Charlie Ellis, BA (Hons) Comic and Concept Art

Addressing Representation and Inclusion

Engaging Non-Traditional Students - Digital Methods for Commuter Students: '...you need to think about the commitment that you're asking for...How long is it going to be? Have you thought about how short your survey can be so that they can actually feed in...? And you've got to be everywhere, so you need student ambassadors walking around with iPads...it's more like you're speaking to someone who's on the same level as you.'

The Reality of Temporary Issues: '...this often happens for students...I hear it through our students union all the time [-] "somebody came to us with this huge thing[,] or it was huge to them. But a few weeks later, it's not huge to them anymore and they've actually forgotten about it and it doesn't really matter".'

Creating Dedicated Spaces - Addressing Minority Status: '...if you're on a smaller course and you're the only person in your year... you really feel [your minority status]. So what the purpose of this is to sort of bring the students together and give them this space.'

Unexpected Engagement Success: '...we had run one of those sessions...directly after it was going to be an APP consultation that was open to all students and so they just decided not to leave. They just decided to stay and be part of the session. We would never have gotten that representation within an open call for students to participate.'

Evaluation Challenges and Sector Engagement

Quality Concerns in Sector-Wide Evaluation

'...what you're going to end up with is a huge variety of evaluations and they will all be of varying quality and a lot of it is not going to be great...if you're not used to evaluation and you read a bad analysis, then you will think that that's truth...obviously the thing that [TASO] often find is not enough evidence, or not strong enough evidence.'

Need for Practical Support

'I think they're great, actually, the Evaluation Collective...But what I think is missing in the sector...is that if you're not an evaluator and you're an institution without an evaluation specialism, you're really stuck...you're unlikely to have the resource to pay the external evaluation specialists...[TASO] don't have the capacity...could I do this? Should I be doing this analysis? Could I aim for this?'

Key Takeaways for Small Institutions

- 1. Collaborative Development is Essential**
Student representatives need ongoing support and training, not just committee seats.
- 2. Resource Constraints Can Enable Agility**
Small teams can sometimes respond more quickly, but require strategic priority-setting.
- 3. Creative Students Bring Unique Value**
Arts students' communication skills and honesty create opportunities for authentic feedback.
- 4. Compensation Demonstrates Genuine Partnership**
Paying students appropriately signals their value as partners, not just consultees.
- 5. Informal Observation Yields Rich Data**
Creating spaces for natural conversation provides insights formal methods might miss.
- 6. Sector Support Must Be Practical**
Small institutions need hands-on evaluation support, not just best practice guidelines.

Bottom Line: Small institutions can leverage their size for more personalized, responsive student voice work, but require sector support that recognizes their specific capacity constraints and resource needs.

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The London School of Economics and Political Science

An institutional case study from the [What Matters to Students research project](#) (January - December 2024)

The LSE is a selective social sciences university based in central London. It offers courses across the social sciences spectrum, with around 13,000 students split roughly evenly between undergraduate and postgraduate study. Roughly ⅓ of its students are classed as international students.



LSE/Maria Moore

Introduction

This poster presents as a case study the findings of the What Matters to Students research project at one of the participating institutions, the London School of Economics and Political Science. It brings together the findings of multiple research methodologies to offer insights on the institution's reflections on its practice in relation to student voices and evaluation.

How to read the poster: Each panel identifies a specific theme, explains its significance, and illustrates it with direct quotes from participants.

About the 'What Matters to Students' project

The What Matters to Students project examined the effective use of student voices in evaluating higher education. The project explored how six higher education institutions interpret the Office for Students' guidance on access and participation. Working with volunteer institutions, the project built evidence of good practice using ethnographic and participatory research methods to create a rich picture of diverse lived experiences.



LSE/Nigel Stead

Methodologies

This case study utilises data produced from:

- A semi-structured interview conducted in 2024 with an institutional stakeholder
- The institutions's Access and Participation Plan
- Public online reviews and institutional data
- Survey responses

The themes highlighted here are drawn from a synthesis of these research methods. Where possible, the specific source of each data point is provided.

The Challenge: Selective Social Sciences Institution

How to engage with student voices meaningfully in a selective, internationally diverse institution where traditional approaches may not capture the complexity of student experiences and backgrounds.

Understanding Student Voice: Talking TO Students Rather than ABOUT Them

Context-Dependent Approach

'It is useful to consider "...have you thought about just actually talking to your students or have you thought about how that lands with the students? ". Think about your theory of change and how that affects students in the first instance.'

Core Philosophy: At LSE, engaging with student voices means talking to students rather than about them. Projects focusing on preventing disengagement and ensuring take-up of support require student input to be effective.

Multi-Level Strategic Framework

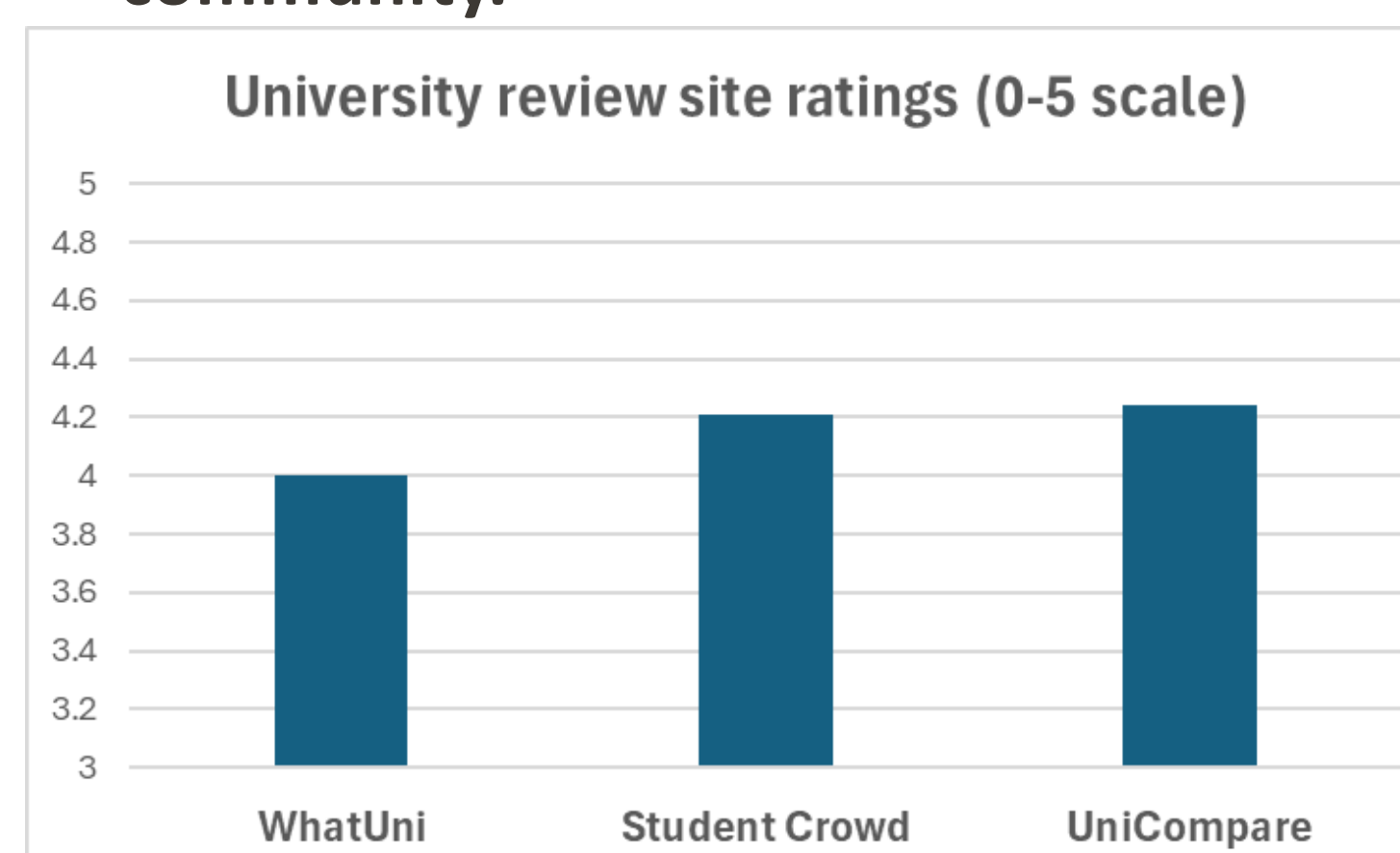
LSE's strategy works on three levels:

1. Student research projects into the educational experience
2. Student advisory work on projects across the university
3. Strategic input into the Access and Participation Plan, or working with academics to develop and implement an education evaluation framework

'...not just keeping it in the outreach space where the [widening participation] team historically had quite strong track record...conducting evaluation on that meso level and the strategic level, I think it's...encouraging others to think about the student perspective. And I think in evaluation in particular, there's often a tendency to sort of very myopically focus on structures and processes and forget it's for students.'

Institution overview

Highly selective social sciences institution in central London. Just under 50% of students are undergraduates, and 45% are taught postgraduates, with a small postgraduate research community.

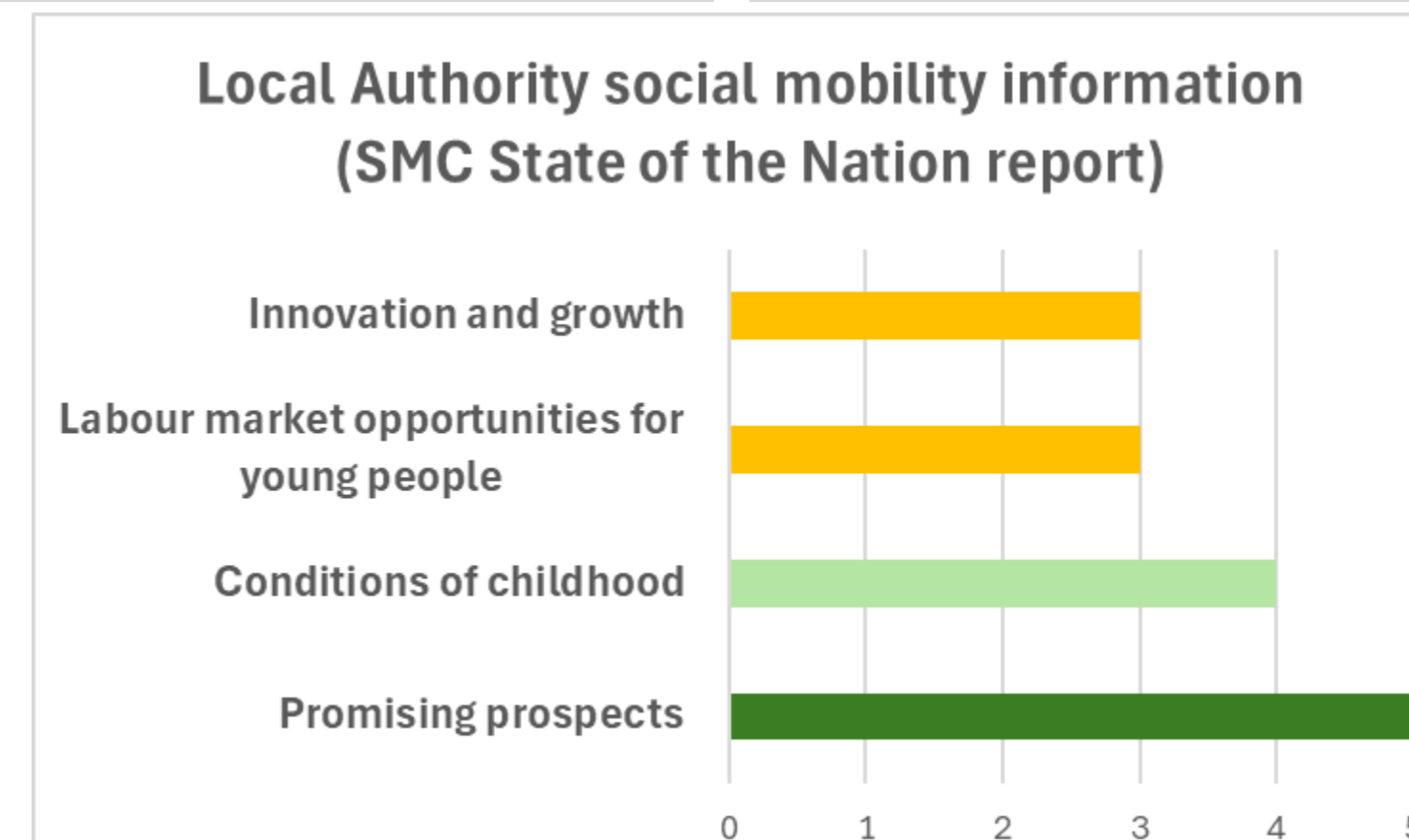
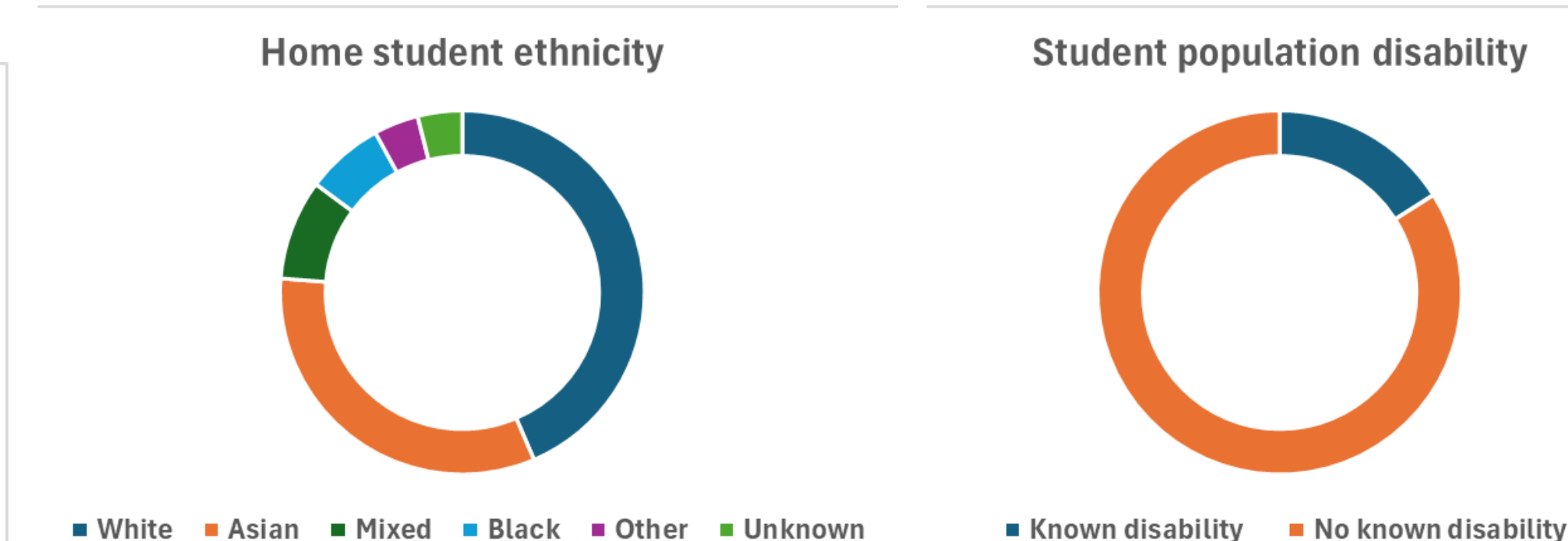


Positive comments and high ratings:

Courses, facilities and career prospects (WhatUni)

Campus and facilities, clubs and societies, and careers service (Student Crowd)

Environment, facilities, courses and careers (Unicompare)



LSE/Maria Moore



LSE/Maria Moore

Strategic Innovation: Co-Creating Theories of Change

Evaluating Change Project

Co-creating theories of change through the Evaluating Change project was an effective way of centering student voice in institutional strategy and documentation, ensuring student ideas shaped frameworks designed to evaluate programmes.

Critical Insight: It is important to consider whether students can contribute effectively within existing frameworks, or require alterations.

'I overwhelmed the students when I tried the sort of blank page approach...if we went backwards into the change mechanisms, it became really difficult for the students. And I think, quite excitedly, one of the students was like, "how am I supposed to know? Like, isn't this your job to work out how to design a pedagogic interventions?" I was like, fair point...This is somewhere it becomes our responsibility.'

Multi-Modal Dissemination Strategy

Project dissemination outcomes need to be available in multiple formats to reach all intended audiences:

'the more multimodal it can be the better...just a report on the website would probably never inspire me to really say 'Oh yeah, this is amazing. I want to do this.' I [would prefer it] coming much more from somebody who has done the work and can report on it and say, "yeah, it worked well for me and, you know, having that conversation...But I also totally acknowledge that there is a point of just having a good and structured literature resource somewhere where you can actually just go to and find examples of that work and how it worked, and why it may not work.'

Evidence of Student Voice: Balancing Scale and Depth

Small-Scale Qualitative Work and Reflexivity

Survey data highlighted multiple ways student voice is surfaced: student surveys, focus groups, committee representation, student panels, social media engagement, research assistant posts, student-led projects influencing decision-making, collaborative student-staff projects, and pop-up feedback opportunities.

Key Challenge: Many methods involve small-scale qualitative work, which is important but requires careful thought and design to ensure space for genuinely reflexive analysis. Very small-scale research sometimes gets rejected for lacking sufficient breadth across the student body.

Epistemic Limitations and Long-Term Work

'...are students immediately able to tell us why ethnicity awarding gaps exist? I think there's an epistemic limit to what we can expect students to know, which is not sort of insurmountable...that means we need to work with them longer term, we need to give them the tools, like we need to provide them the training and the opportunities to think through that to have those reflective spaces.'

Survey Success and Representation Challenges

Surveys are reasonably successful in response rate terms. Student-led research is popular with students, but staff engagement is harder to assess. Student representation on committees gets students 'into the room', but helping them engage meaningfully with discussion through scrutiny and decision-making is more challenging due to unfamiliarity with committee structures and processes.

Compensation and Representative Data

Thoughtful Compensation Approach

Students are compensated for survey participation through vouchers, refreshments, and offers of casual employment contracts.

Power Imbalance Awareness: Some staff are conscious of the possibility of bias or unrepresentative data created through power imbalances between staff and students. This can be partially overcome through working closely with student researchers, or hiring student researchers to carry out data production.

'I could see the tension...I think for the full 60 minutes focus group we give a £20 voucher which clearly exceeds London minimum wage, but I don't think it's enough to sort of give students a sense of they're being bought off.'

Positioning for Critical Engagement

'...in workshops...I keep on emphasising that we want critical opinion...that we're here to understand better if this scheme works, if this project works...we want them to be critical of us...Maybe it's biasing in the opposite direction of being overly critical.'

'I'm often positioning myself quite deliberately in these workshops, as I'm an outsider, I'm here to work with you and to understand, to be a safe space for you to voice concerns...'

Assessment: Most staff do not feel the risk of biasing data through compensation is unduly high.

Evaluation Innovation: Student-Centered Framework

Process-Focused Evaluation

Evaluation can often become focused on efficiency, administration and improving processes. It is important to ensure it ultimately remains focused on student experience.

'[W]orking with students and for students...through that evaluation framework, which obviously contains a lot of our resources, [I] try to encourage people to work more directly with students[—]by having examples, by having frameworks and resources that people can use and adapt in their own practice.'

Student Partnership in Evaluation Design

Co-creating theories of change was an effective way of centering student voice in institutional strategy and documentation, ensuring student ideas shaped frameworks designed to evaluate programmes. It was necessary to consider whether all students could access opportunity to contribute equally.

Responsibility Recognition:

'I overwhelmed the students when I tried the sort of blank page approach...if we went backwards into the change mechanisms, it became really difficult for the students. And I think, quite excitingly, one of the students was like, "how am I supposed to know? Like, isn't this your job to work out how to design a pedagogic interventions?" I was like, fair point. That's...yes. This is somewhere it becomes our responsibility.'

Multi-Format Dissemination Strategy

Project dissemination outcomes need available in multiple formats to reach all intended audiences - combining personal testimonials from practitioners with structured literature resources providing concrete examples of what works and what doesn't.



LSE/Adam Razvi
LSE/Adam Razvi



Support Systems: Structural Challenges and Student Innovation

Resource and Development Challenges

Resourcing issues can affect development of student research programmes in both design and implementation.

'there is a lot of discretion in terms of how much people engage with [supporting students]...The propensity to exercise the discretion, of course, goes back to structural factors...the time to sit down with the student...help them sort of develop a research programme that actually addresses their needs. And then...[to] increase the chances of them implementing it'

Transition and Accessibility Considerations

Staff wonder whether the widening participation team should also focus on student transition by working to make institutional structures more accessible for non-traditional students, but worry about workload this might create.

'...the student research, it captures student voice in a really I guess authentic format...[But] it brings with it its own challenges. If you try to reintegrate that into the institutional structure...there is a lot of work or translation work needed'

Student Identity and Belonging Investigation

The student-led Student Voices project investigates what identity and belonging mean to students, and how changes in students' feelings of attachment to the university can affect their experiences. Sense of belonging and importance of making connections through classes, societies, or other mechanisms were both identified as critical to students' identity formation during their higher education experience.

Survey Finding: There are attempts to recruit student advisors from wide range of backgrounds.

'we commonly work with relevant campus societies to amplify invitations/opportunities, specifically invite students self-identifying as belonging to underrepresented or marginalised groups to respond.'

Engagement and Representation: Outreach and Intersectionality

Hard-to-Reach Students Through Outreach

For LSE, engaging hard-to-reach students who are not yet at the institution is a key priority through outreach. Deciding not to apply on the basis of this engagement also needs to be seen as a valid and positive outcome.

'There is a sense that a student coming on an outreach programme, learning more about the LSE and realising this institution isn't for [them] is also a positive outcome... "thank you so much for the opportunity. But I realised I actually really want to do medicine"...I think it's difficult to argue that that isn't a good thing.'

Mixed Views on Tokenism Risk

Staff make active effort in implementing the APP to ensure diverse groups are represented in initiatives involving them:

'...the guidance says speak to students; if you talk about Black students[,] talk to Black students. So the only question for us was how do we sensitively reach out to Black students...and only Black students?...by recruiting from the pool of student mentors...we were guaranteed to only reach out to Black students.'

Representation Limitations and Intersectionality

There are always limitations to how representative any particular project can be, and issues sometimes impact the generalisability of data produced. Continuous work is in progress to ensure projects strike a balance between perfect representation and addressing intersectionally specific issues.

It is important to manage projects in a way which avoids unrepresentative projects *'with students coming with their completely unresearched questions...particular topics that really matter to them that they think are important and...should receive attention.'*

'...if you say, "well, the institution has plans and has strategies of saying well, these are the topics we want to develop in the next five years". And then if a student says "oh, by the way...there really should be this particular form of support" [that] makes it much harder to integrate...but at the same time it is really interesting'

Systematic Approach to Inclusion

Efforts to ensure inclusion are being embedded into institutional processes as well as individual staff members' actions.

'...sometimes people just have the students they know from the programme or the students that are the loudest come forward... we've moved to essentially advertising for RA roles to make sure they're really visible to anyone...'

Working with specific student groups on intersectional issues to incorporate their views, through collaboration with Students' Union, allowed LSE to consider the usefulness and feasibility of proposals being discussed for these groups.

Key Takeaways for Selective International Institutions

1. Context-Dependent Student Voice Definition

What student voice means depends entirely on context - consultation, partnership, or student-led initiatives all have validity in different situations.

2. Epistemic Limitations Require Long-Term Investment

Students need training, tools, and reflective spaces to engage with complex institutional challenges - quick consultation insufficient for meaningful engagement.

3. Co-Creation Requires Appropriate Scaffolding

"Blank page" approaches overwhelm students - effective co-creation provides structure while allowing student creativity and direction.

4. Outreach Success Includes Non-Participation

Students deciding institution "isn't for me" after engagement represents positive outcome, not failure - authentic choice-making.

5. Compensation Must Address Power Dynamics

Thoughtful compensation approaches recognize power imbalances while positioning students as critical partners, not bought-off participants.

6. International Student Engagement Requires Specific Strategies

Working with diverse international student body requires culturally sensitive approaches and recognition of different educational and social backgrounds.

7. Small-Scale Research Needs Institutional Integration

Authentic student voice often emerges from small-scale, qualitative work but requires "translation work" to integrate into institutional structures and decision-making.

Bottom Line: Even institutions with small but internationally diverse student populations can achieve meaningful student voice by recognizing epistemic limitations, providing appropriate scaffolding for co-creation, addressing power dynamics through thoughtful compensation, and investing in long-term capacity building that treats students as expert partners in their own educational experience while acknowledging the complexity of institutional change processes.

James Robson (Department of Education)

Elizabeth Rahman (Centre for Teaching and Learning and
Education Policy Support)

Liz Polding (Department of Education)

Ed Penn (Education Policy Support)

An institutional case study from the [What Matters to Students research project](#) (January - December 2024)

The University of Oxford is a large, internationally prestigious university in the South East of England. Over half its students are postgraduates, with a significant research focus. International students make up under 25% of the undergraduate body, but over 65% of the postgraduate body.

Context and methodological approach

This analysis uniquely combines:

New data collected for the What Matters to Students project:

- Survey responses from staff institutional stakeholders
- Survey responses from students (pilot and main project surveys)
- Participant-observation in SU APP working groups

Existing institutional research from Oxford's [Diversity of Student Experience project](#):

- Findings from participatory action research, narrative collection, demographic-specific focus groups, and autoethnographic diaries
- Participant observation in the project's workstreams

Methodological Strengths and Analytic Approach: This dual methodology provides both fresh external perspective through the new "What Matters to Students" data collection and deep institutional knowledge through Oxford's extensive research program. The themes presented here represent a synthesis across both new and existing data sources, allowing us to see how findings from Oxford's internal research align with or diverge from data collected specifically for this cross-institutional study.

Oxford's Multi-Method Approach to Student Voice

Oxford employs diverse student voice mechanisms: surveys, focus groups, committee representation, student panels, social media engagement, research assistant posts, student-led research projects, staff-student partnerships, Town Hall events, and third-party consultancy.

The Tutorial System as Unique Student Voice Channel

'The tutorial system offers the opportunity for me to voice my opinion to an expert in that field which feels very empowering. It encourages me to deeply consider my arguments as though my interpretation of the situation holds significance' (Student quote, Feedback Channel Report)

Methodological Diversity as Validation

Oxford's Diversity of Student Experience project revealed student voice operates across multiple temporal and relational dimensions through methodological plurality. The remarkable consistency of findings across participatory action research, open feedback channels, narrative collection, demographic-specific focus groups, and autoethnographic diaries suggests that the identified patterns reflect genuine structural issues rather than methodological artifacts.

Temporal Insights Impossible Through Single-Point Consultation

Student Diaries revealed predictable phases - early optimism to mid-term strain to late-term adaptation:

- *"Oxford terms feel like you give up weekends with your friends in order to spend more time with them during the holiday"* (Student Diaries Report)

These patterns were invisible to annual surveys but crucial for support timing.

Trust-Mediated Disclosure Enabling Sensitive Sharing

Staff-Student Enquiry relationships facilitated disclosures unlikely in formal consultation:

"Seeing a 57 on my collection [mock exam] score affirmed in my head I do not deserve my place here... It hurts because I want to be proud, as a first generation university student, but I don't feel proud." (Staff-Student Enquiry Report)

Introduction

This poster presents as a case study the findings of the What Matters to Students research project at one of the participating institutions, the University of Oxford. It brings together the findings of multiple research methodologies to offer insights on the institution's reflections on its practice in relation to student voices and evaluation.

How to read the poster: Each panel identifies a specific theme, explains its significance, and illustrates it with direct quotes from participants.

About the 'What Matters to Students' project

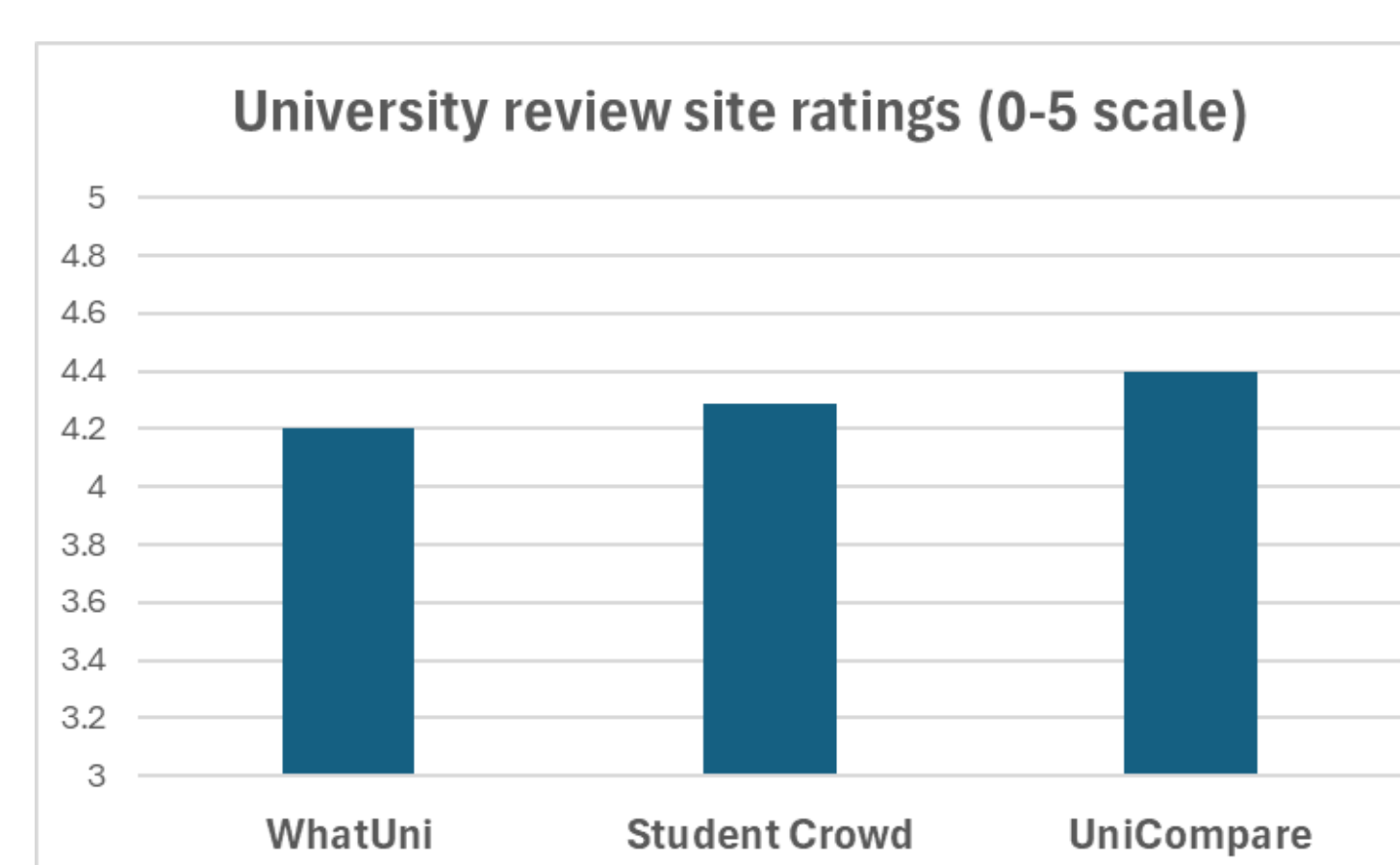
The What Matters to Students project examined the effective use of student voices in evaluating higher education. The project explored how six higher education institutions interpret the Office for Students' guidance on access and participation. Working with volunteer institutions, the project built evidence of good practice using ethnographic and participatory research methods to create a rich picture of diverse lived experiences.



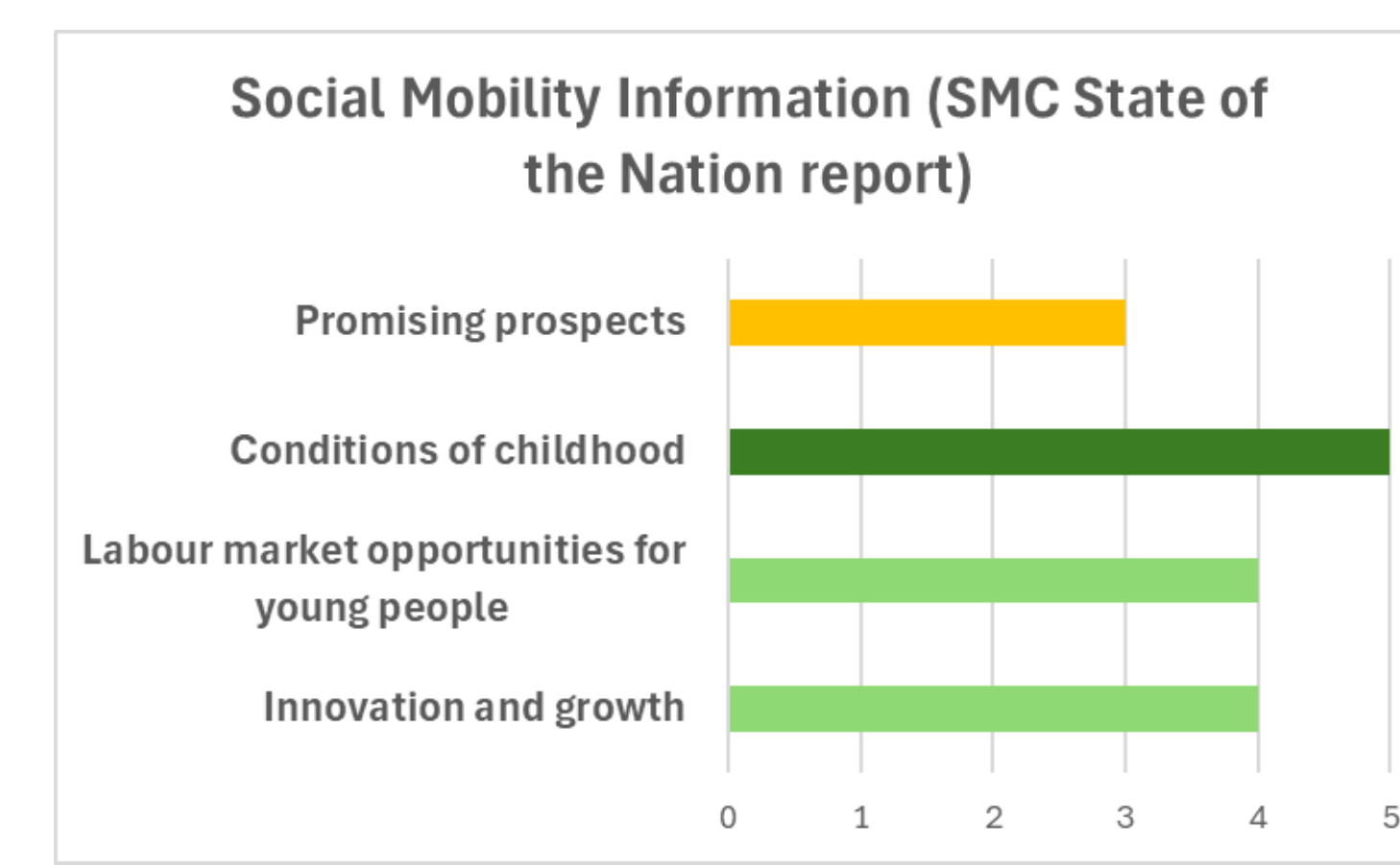
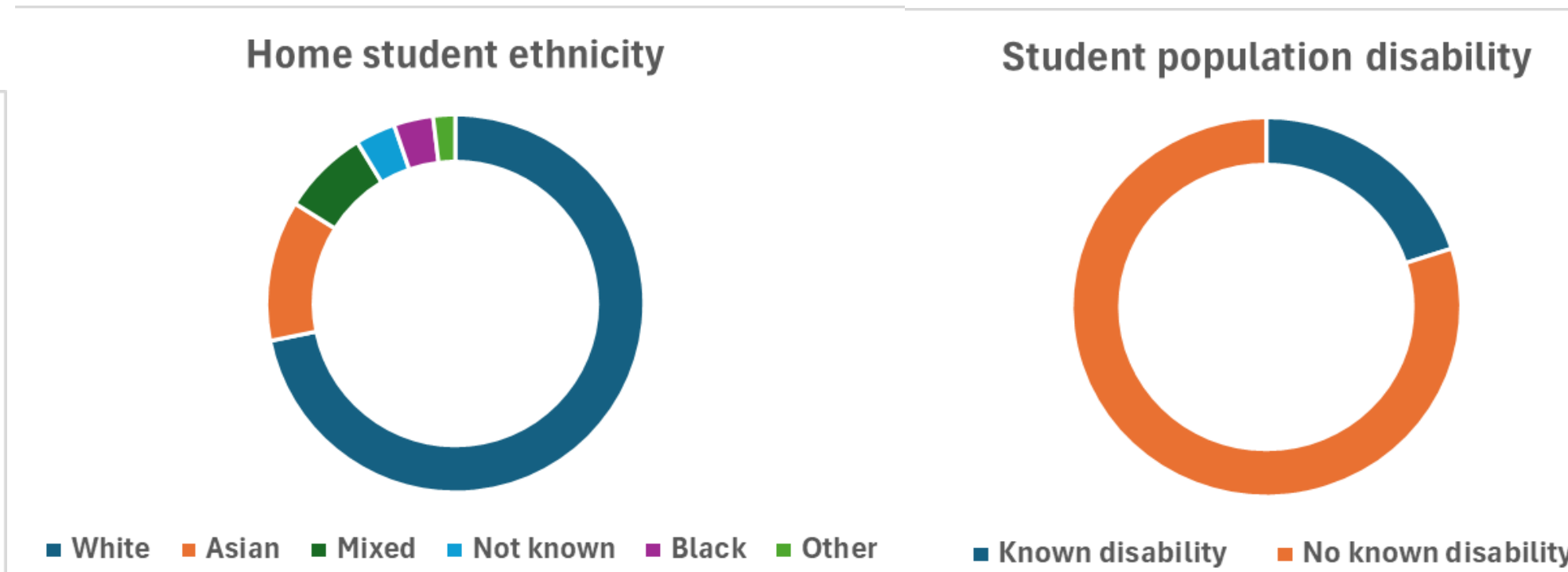
Institution overview

Internationally prestigious, research-focussed university with around 26,000 students.

Extremely selective, it's often the focus of research and scrutiny regarding its student make-up.



Positive comments and high ratings:
Accommodation and courses (WhatUni)
Campus, clubs and societies (Student Crowd)
Graduate careers and course quality (Unicompare)





Key Insights: When Student Voice Works

What drives effective engagement? Student feedback identified three critical success factors:

1. Remuneration Demonstrates Institutional Value

'Any project that entails remuneration for the student because it convinces them that their time is valued by the university, motivating them to give their 100% to the project in question.'

'Vouchers and compensation for a student's time I think is the best way to engage student as it allows students to want to carve out time in a busy schedule to offer valuable feedback.'

2. Interactive Spaces Enable Collaborative Thinking

'I think the student panels I attended were useful as you could discuss with others your perspectives'

'Focused groups are nice because we can build on to other people's opinion. Avoids repetition while at the same time increased details.'

3. Demonstrable Action Maintains Trust

'Actual improvements based on feedback - to ensure that feedback is not put to waste and students feel heard'

'the college and university need to present themselves as bodies that are willing to listen to feedback and work on it. A lot of feedback seems to be taken and not a lot of change seems to result.'

4. Sustained Engagement Builds Trust for Authentic Sharing

Longitudinal approaches that meet over weeks rather than one-off sessions create space for relationships to develop and for students to feel safe sharing sensitive experiences. Trust isn't instant—it requires demonstrated consistency, active listening, and visible responsiveness to feedback across multiple touchpoints.

Staff Perspectives on Surveys: While students preferred surveys for convenience, staff were more cautious:

'Surveys are great for staff - they get the data we are looking for - but, in my experience, they aren't a means to engage students. If anything, surveys disengage students by making them feel like surveys are the only way for them to contribute to improving their educational experiences.' (Staff survey response)

'Even more powerful than an aggregate set of data telling us what percent of students are 'satisfied', conversations with students tell us how our institutions are creating barriers for those students who are struggling.' (Staff survey response)

Strategic Framework: From Consultation to Co-Creation

Oxford's strategy employed methodological diversity as institutional intelligence, with each approach serving distinct analytical functions:

Co-Creation Partnerships in Action

Impact Example: The Black Student Voices workshop exemplified this approach, with participants co-creating a Theory of Change that directly informed Oxford's Race Intervention Strategy within the Access and Participation Plan.

Most Significant Change Methodology

"The Most Significant Change methodology was chosen specifically for its ability to centre student voices...The open-ended nature of story collection allowed students to share their experiences in their own words, with opportunities to verify and edit their stories to ensure accurate representation." (Staff survey response)

Participatory Ethics of Care

Making sure that that participants know where to get help and support if they need it, and being responsive to the challenges they face, is part of an ethics of care.

Compensating participants as experts in their own experiences, rather than volunteers, challenged traditional university research relationships and enabled engagement from students who might otherwise be excluded due to time constraints or financial pressures. *"Any project that entails remuneration for the student because it convinces them that their time is valued by the university, motivating them to give their 100% to the project in question."* (Student survey response).

Support Systems: Fragmented but Essential

The Reality of Fragmented Support

Challenge Identified: Support was "disjointed and sometimes difficult to access" (Staff-Student Enquiry Report), particularly affecting students who had interrupted or suspended studies.

Student-Developed Compensation Strategies

Student Innovation: Complex personal learning architectures emerge to navigate institutional demands: *"I use 'Super Productivity'... I can set estimates, and then track how much time I spend on each task (I've learnt that for philosophy reading I should estimate 3m/page)."* (Student Diaries Report)

Peer Networks as Essential Infrastructure: *"Me and my friends keep holding study sessions... It helps somewhat, as we can hold each other accountable"* (Student Diaries Report)

Institutional Support Ecosystem: Staff-Student Enquiry identified *"supportive staff, other students, college SUs and student clubs and societies, students' families, and financial and welfare support as useful support strategies"* (Staff-Student Enquiry Report)

Addressing Representation and Inclusion

The Challenge of "Majority Culture"

Key Finding: Trust-based relationships revealed systemic pressures on student authenticity: *"A key theme that emerged from the reviews was the challenge students face in maintaining their distinctive voices within Oxford's perceived 'majority culture.' Reviewers identified a prevailing perception that success at Oxford requires assimilation, particularly in 'imitating [the participation of] white males.'"* (Staff-Student Enquiry Report)

Moving Beyond Monolithic Categories

Intersectional Approach: evolving from umbrella terms to recognizing within-group diversity: *""Blackness is not a monolith,' it encompasses a wide range of identities and experiences, including those from various faiths, regions of the UK and countries of the world, cultural heritages, sexual orientations, and neurodiversities."* (Black Students Advisory Report)

Double Burden Recognition

Structural Challenge: Student networks face competing demands: *"student communities and networks play a pivotal role for Black students at Oxford, serving as vital spaces of collective action, advocacy, community, and support" while simultaneously experiencing "the 'double burden' that student communities and networks are under in being 'responsible of providing belonging,' whilst also being a student at the University."* (Black Students Advisory Report)

Deliberate Inclusion Strategies

Staff report intentional efforts to include marginalized voices: *'We often recruit (and pay) students from underrepresented or marginalised backgrounds to work with us to have conversations with their friend networks.'* (Staff survey response)





Student Activism and Collective Voice

Contemporary Relevance: Numerous comments in student survey responses called attention to Israeli military action in Gaza, demonstrating how current events shape student voice priorities:

"The MCR and JCR [individual college's student representative bodies] motions expressing solidarity with the Oxford Action for Palestine movement and the Pro-Palestine encampment has proved that student voice can be successful, and can highlight changes the university needs to make. This should not be forgotten, and should be channeled into similar campaigns."
(Student survey response)



From Voice to Action: Demonstrable Impact

Research-to-Policy Pipeline

Concrete Outcome: Student-developed theories of change directly informed institutional strategy, with Black Student Voices workshop outputs incorporated into Race Intervention Strategy.

Transferable Methodological Framework

"The multi-stage approach... allowed for increasingly nuanced insights... Each stage built upon the previous one, deepening the understanding of the challenges faced by diverse students." (Staff-Student Enquiry Report)

Student Engagement Principles

"Students are in the best position to say what matters to them and what needs to be changed, and so listening and engaging with them directly is the most successful way to (1) ensure positive change, and (2) make them feel as though they are heard so that they are more likely to engage." (Student survey response)



Key Takeaways for Practice

1. Methodological Diversity Validates Findings

Multiple approaches revealed consistent patterns, suggesting genuine structural issues rather than methodological artifacts.

2. Temporal Dimensions Matter

Student experiences change predictably over time in ways invisible when relying on single-point survey data. This is crucial for targeted support.

3. Trust Enables Authentic Voice

Relationship-based approaches facilitate disclosure of sensitive experiences unlikely in formal consultation.

4. From Consultation to Co-Creation

Moving beyond asking for input to genuine partnership in solution development increases impact and engagement.

5. Compensation Demonstrates Value

Paying students as experts challenges traditional power dynamics and enables broader participation.

6. Intersectional Complexity

Avoiding monolithic categories while recognizing shared experiences within demographic groups.

7. Action Drives Sustained Engagement

Visible outcomes from student feedback are essential for maintaining trust and continued participation.

Bottom Line: Effective student voice requires investment in diverse methodologies, genuine partnership approaches, and most critically - demonstrable action on student feedback to maintain trust and engagement.



An institutional case study from the [What Matters to Students research project](#) (January - December 2024)

The University of Southampton is a large university in a growing city on England’s south coast. Over 65% of students are undergraduates, and over 90% are full-time. The student population is just under 70% domestic.



Introduction

This poster presents as a case study the findings of the What Matters to Students research project at one of the participating institutions, the University of Southampton. The methodology combines five data sources to analyse the institution's reflections on its practice regarding student voices and evaluation.

How to read the poster: Each panel identifies a specific theme, explains its significance, and illustrates it with direct quotes from participants.

About the ‘What Matters to Students’ project

The What Matters to Students project examined the effective use of student voices in evaluating higher education. The project explored how six higher education institutions interpret the Office for Students' guidance on access and participation. Working with volunteer institutions, the project built evidence of good practice using ethnographic and participatory research methods to create a rich picture of diverse lived experiences.



Methodologies

- This case study utilises data produced from:
- Survey responses and interviews from institutional stakeholders
 - One student focus group
 - Observations and ethnographic reflections
 - A student-created fresher’s guide project
 - Co-created outputs from the University of Southampton

The themes highlighted here are drawn from a synthesis of these research methods. Where possible, the specific source of each data point is provided. The themes highlighted are drawn from a synthesis of these research methods, particularly emphasising how the institution's ‘leads with student input’ approach manifests across different contexts and initiatives.

Strategic Approach: Leading with Student Input

- Context-Dependent Student Voice Definition**
- 'Student voices 'can be informed in lots of different ways...[I]t can be student voices in a very...consultation feedback way, it could be student voice in a partnership, [or] it can be student[-]led...initiatives.'* (Interview 2)
- Cultural Shift to Student-Led Direction**
- Core Principle:** Building trust and confidence while developing students through paid university work, with evaluation embedded throughout rather than added retrospectively.
- Approach:** The culture emphasizes student voices and leads with student input where possible, rather than staff taking decisions about solutions and then asking students to agree.

- Theory of Change Integration**
- Strong emphasis on using theories of change to plan initiatives and undertake embedded evaluations throughout the project cycle, with longitudinal year-on-year evaluation and institutional focus on secondary data sources like podcast comments.



Key Innovation: Embedded Evaluation and Student Development

- Evaluation as Core Activity**
- 'depending on which kind of initiative we're discussing, it would kind of depend slightly on how the evaluation takes hold. But it's very much, the evaluation...it's something that we think about the start of, the inception of the idea of the initiative. It's not something that we just kind of tag on at the end'* (Interview 2)

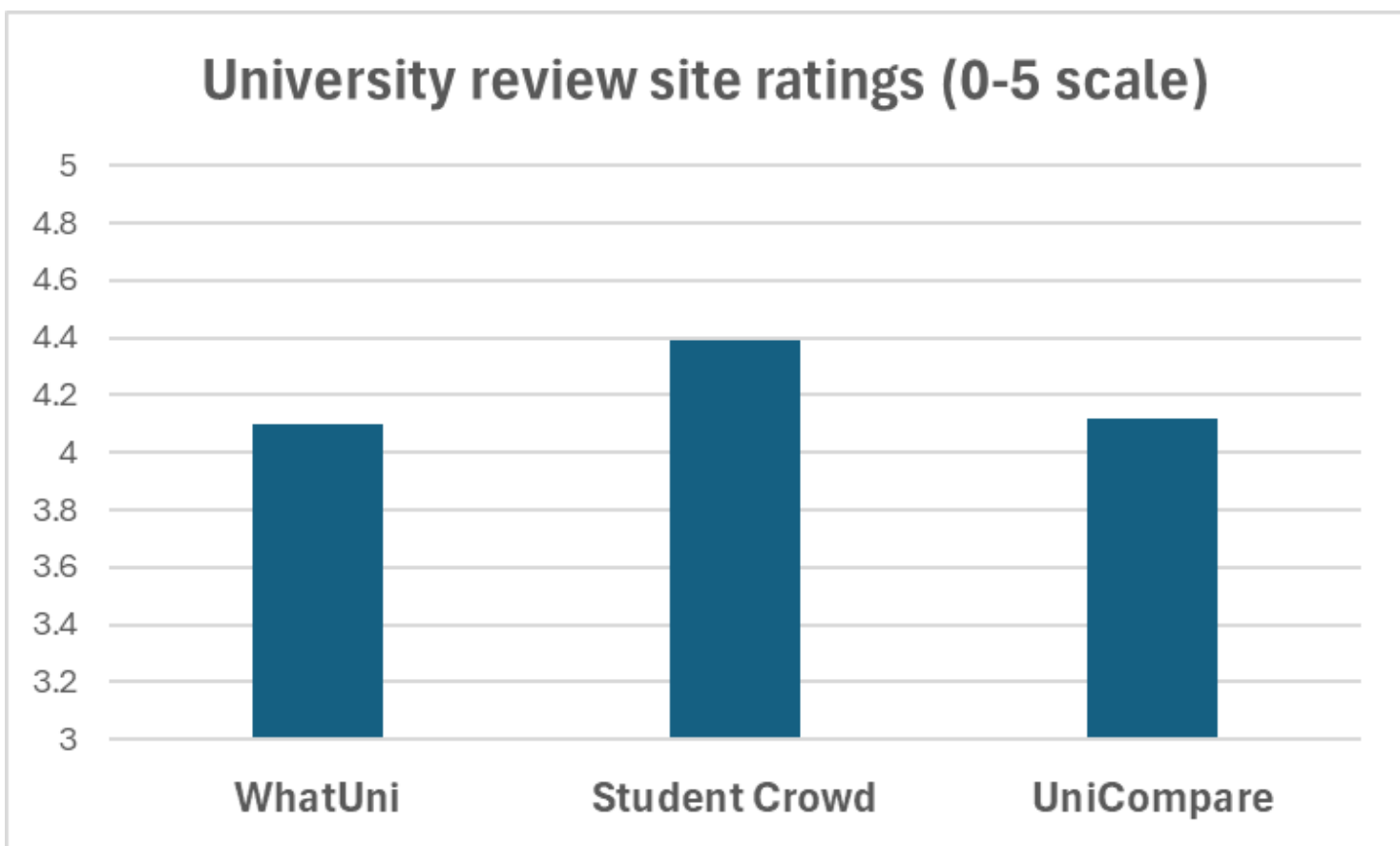
- Recognition of Student Expertise**
- 'there is a misconception that because we work in HE and we have all the lingo, and we know all the acronyms, that we are the experts and...understand it the best. Whereas when you provide students with the resources and the training and you tell them this is how these systems work, they very quickly adapt and they are great at creating and coming up with ideas that navigate that as well'* (Interview 1)

Student Development Through Partnership

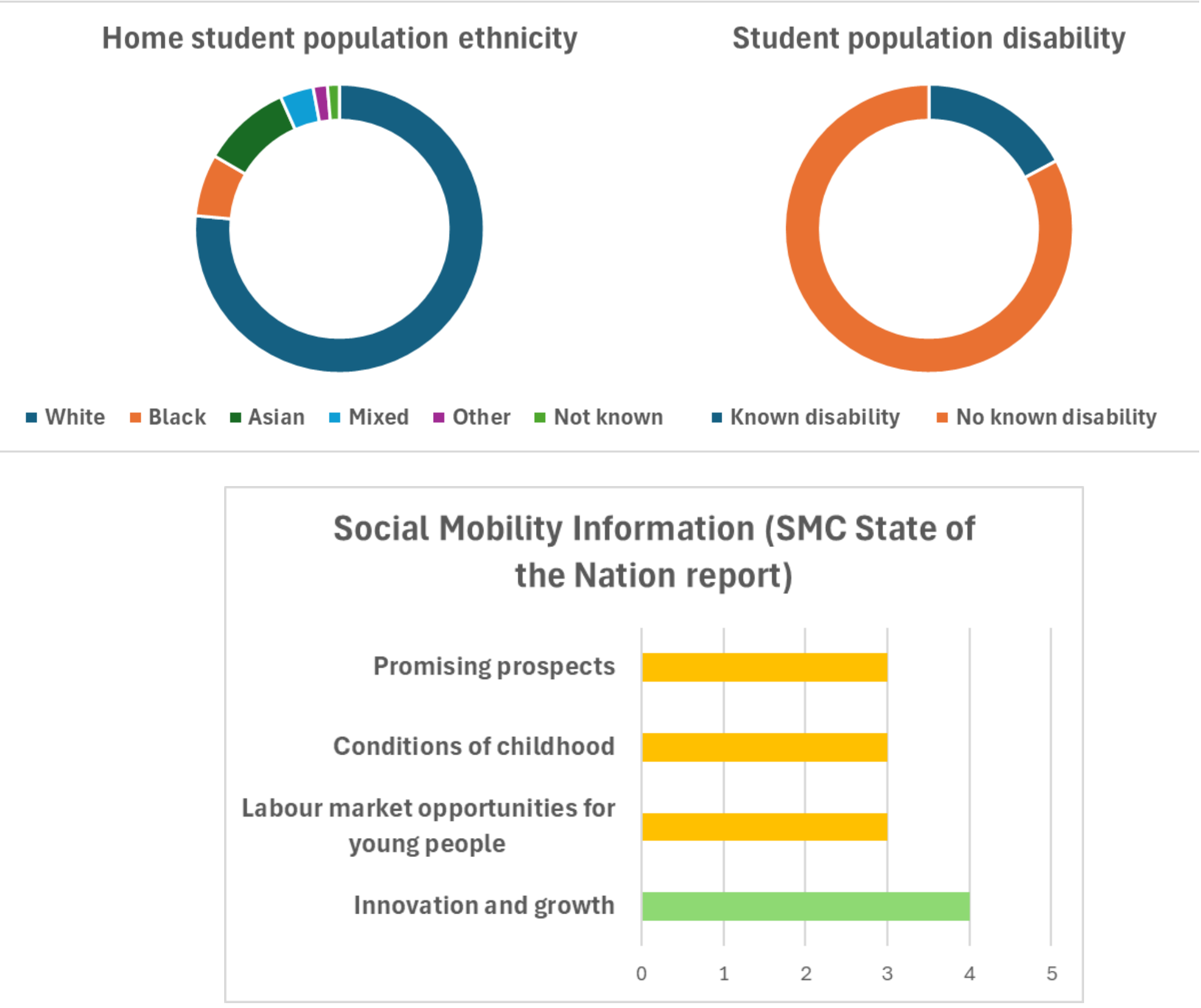
Students receive induction to help them navigate university systems, with focus on skill development and transferable experience rather than just feedback collection.

Institution overview

Domestically selective institution in a small city, with over 25,000 students.



Positive comments and high ratings:
Facilities, teaching, and campus (WhatUni)
Campus, facilities, and university services (Student Crowd)
Course quality, social life, careers, and campus (Unicompare)





Engagement, representation and tokenism

Balanced Approach to Student Activism

'[A]s a wider university, they want all groups to...[be part of a harmonious community where] people...feel comfortable and safe. So obviously there's a limit to...where [and] how that activism looks and how it goes, as long as it complies with...the university community [standards]. But I don't think that there's...I personally think it is a legitimate way of students sharing their voice.' (Interview 2)

Networks and Provision Integration

Student activism often coordinated through students' union, with students from widening participation backgrounds frequently becoming involved. Networks like LGBTQ+ have separate staff and student provision, while social mobility network involves both students and staff in collaborative projects.



Addressing Representation: Safe Spaces and Intersectional Approaches

Creating Student-Controlled Spaces

'[W]hat I found is the best thing has been having student spaces where students have made it very clear this is our space [-] we're welcoming you into the space[,] and I think that sets a precedent. They're welcome to express some of their concerns, but...I think that...dynamic...has been really interesting.' (Interview 1)

Managing Survey Fatigue and Demonstrating Impact

Key Insight: Avoiding 'survey fatigue' by ensuring students can see how their feedback makes a difference, with annual events where students invite senior leaders to discuss issues.

'We are also mindful that sometimes those things [for] students - not necessarily surveys, but the paid roles - can feel potentially [like] too much of a commitment during their time at university, so we try to...get in contact with them in more ad hoc ways, things which are...less of a commitment.' (Interview 2)

Intersectional Recognition and Coordination

'[I]t is a careful balance of...recognising those students [who have particular needs] and letting those students know that we recognise them and that they may need different support, but also not 'othering' them, not segregating them, not making them feel like they're not also part of the wider community.' (Interview 2)

Practical Approach: Focus on avoiding duplication of effort and ensuring coordinated student experience, recognizing that students' union must represent whole student body while acknowledging specific needs.

Compensation and Partnership Recognition

Money Rather Than Vouchers

Forms of compensation include lunches, vouchers, skills development opportunities, and paid employment through panel membership or internships.

'We want them to feel like they have that sense of, "OK, this is ours and we have the authority to be here and shape this". And it's, I think working with the staff as colleagues as well gives them that ability...for them, it's a nice experience to gain transferable skills.' (Interview 2)

Equal Partnership Approach

'I think giving them that payment and letting them know that you know it's not about us being staff and them being students, it's about working together. I think that really does help...the ultimate kind of output that we get from these things' (Interview 2)

'[W]hat's great...about this project...[is] that I'm able to see the students as equal contributors, which is why I also advocate for students being paid because I'm being paid to be there. Why shouldn't they?' (Interview 1)

Strategic Benefit: Payment and employment contracts help students feel more able to offer constructive criticism, while exposure to university workings helps them understand how change can most effectively be brought about.

Access and Participation Integration

Strategic Implementation of OfS Guidance

Staff very familiar with existing APP guidance implementation, with both staff and students offered opportunity to contribute lived experience while senior managers lead report drafting.

'I think it's a useful starting tool for you to be able to really think about what's going on? And it's a useful, like the risk register, for example, is a great tool for you to really think about the barriers that students are facing. However, as people tend to always say, like you have to go beyond the data or rather beyond just the guidance on paper and really think about context' (Survey response)

Implementation Challenges

'Challenges encountered in the course of implementing Office for Students guidance on student voices has mainly come from three factors:

- *Whole-institution implementation and buy-in;*
- *Visibility of initiatives targeted towards minority student populations;*
- *The challenges of communicating the different options and opportunities available in a large institution - [it is] a crowded market that makes engagement difficult.'* (Survey response)





Evaluation Innovation: Multi-Method Integration

Comprehensive Evaluation Approach

University aims to use variety of methods conducting evaluation, including combining qualitative and quantitative methods, and creating space for regular student feedback on initiatives.

Framework Focus: In context of awarding gap, evaluation framework used ideas of 'Curriculum, Culture, and Community' - building students' sense of belonging, creating visible community of minoritized students, improving lived experience of university study.



Institutional Strategy: Addressing Awarding Gaps

Multi-Dimensional Approach to Inequality

Challenge: Large awarding gap disparities between different groups requiring comprehensive response.

Strategy: Staff member appointed to oversee work with student-led pilot group who are paid for their work. Student team given brief to create intervention and campaign, which they then lead.

Asset-Based Rather Than Deficit Approach

'And it's really important for me that we're not operating from a deficit narrative...the issue is not your fault. It's the result of decades, centuries of systemic and structural inequalities. So that's part of the training as well, and it's also giving them the wordings or the vocabulary to be able to articulate some of the things that they are probably experiencing and also witnessing themselves' (Interview 1)

Skills Development Integration

'Students really want to use this as a work experience opportunity. We are trying to really ensure that they're getting and developing those transferable skills leadership skills, you know, public speaking, all these great skills, and obviously time management. So not only kind of work, corporate work-related skills, but also kind of I guess life skills.' (Interview 1)

Previous campaigns: Awareness raising, podcasts, and student information programmes, with projects having multiple roles requiring different commitment levels and specialized roles as initiatives grow.



Support Infrastructure: Elongated Transition Programme

Comprehensive Student Journey Support

Team Structure: *Dedicated team supporting underrepresented students throughout university experience, conducting outreach and transition support with different staff working on different student journey aspects.*

Widening Participation Integration

'we're looking to create equity across, you know, students from widening participation. We want to create actual experience for them...this is about giving them that network and giving them that opportunity to gain experience that they might not otherwise be able to tap into. And that was something that was kind of brought about by the students...' (Interview 2)

Access Programme as Extended Support

'if they take part in that programme and successfully attend a certain amount, they're eligible for a contextual admission, which means a slightly lower grade upon entry if they come' (Interview 2)

Approach: Access programme conceptualized as 'elongated transition programme into the university' with students entering via access programme funnelled into support initiatives addressing retention and progression, including pastoral support and student-led internships with third-party partners.

Student-Led Project Development

'we have a mature student project which is looking at...developing initiatives to support the mature student journey. And throughout that time we always have...a current mature student to come and work and kind of lead...they partner with us, just to ensure that...whatever we're coming up with is genuinely and authentically what they want and to give them some autonomy over that experience.' (Interview 2)

Key Takeaways for Large Research Universities

1. Leading with Student Input Transforms Culture

Shifting from staff-determined solutions to student-directed priorities changes power dynamics and improves outcomes.

2. Embedded Evaluation from Inception

Treating evaluation as core activity rather than afterthought enables responsive adaptation and continuous improvement.

3. Student Development Through Partnership

Combining student voice work with skills development and career preparation creates mutual benefit and sustainability.

4. Multi-Dimensional Approaches to Inequality

Asset-based rather than deficit approaches, combined with systems thinking, address root causes not just symptoms.

5. Intersectional Balance in Large Institutions

Recognizing specific needs while maintaining community belonging requires careful coordination and clear communication.

6. Student-Controlled Spaces Enable Authentic Voice

Allowing students to set terms of engagement produces more honest feedback and stronger partnership relationships.

Bottom Line: Large research universities can achieve meaningful student partnership by leading with student input, embedding evaluation throughout processes, and treating students as expert partners in institutional development while providing concrete skill development and career preparation opportunities.