

Student Voices in Access and Participation: Survey Findings Report

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from surveys conducted as part of "[What Matters to Students: Embedding Student Voices in Evaluations to Improve Student Outcomes](#)," a [Public Policy Challenge Fund](#) project examining how UK higher education institutions (HEIs) respond to Office for Students (OfS) guidance on student voice in Access and Participation planning and evaluation.

The research surveyed 26 staff involved in Access and Participation work, and 74 students, across 13 UK institutions between May and November 2024. The surveys explored how HEIs engage students in evaluation processes, what forms of engagement students find meaningful, and where gaps exist between institutional approaches and student experience.

Across the findings, a central question emerges from student responses: **what changed because of my input?** While staff describe increasingly sophisticated systems for collecting and evidencing student voice, students consistently evaluate engagement based on whether it leads to visible, timely, and meaningful change.

The findings reveal significant variation in how student voice is implemented, both between and within institutions. Staff and student responses from the same institutional contexts often differed substantially, suggesting that student voice work operates less as a coherent institutional system and more through local team and departmental practices, individual professional approaches, and organisational cultures.

The research also identifies persistent structural tensions in current approaches to participation. Although institutions employ diverse engagement methods and demonstrate strong commitments to inclusion, students continue to identify barriers related to time, financial pressure, confidence, and lack of trust in institutional responsiveness and lack of communication of impact. In this context, methodological diversification alone may not address deeper inequalities in who is able to participate and whose contributions influence institutional decision-making.

Together, the findings suggest that effective student voice systems are defined not only by how well they collect student input, but by how clearly institutions can demonstrate that student contributions have shaped decisions, practices, and outcomes.

Key Insights for Policy and Practice

Access and Participation work remains distant from most students

Despite the importance of Access and Participation Plans (APP) within institutional strategy and regulation, student awareness of APP-related work was limited, including among some student representatives.

This suggests a disconnect between institutional processes and student understanding of how decisions about access, participation, and support are made.

Current participation models may reproduce existing inequalities

Both staff and students recognised ongoing difficulties engaging underrepresented groups. While institutions described increasingly diverse engagement methods, students emphasised barriers related to time, finances, confidence, and trust that participation would lead to change.

The findings suggest that expanding engagement opportunities alone may not address deeper inequalities in who is able to participate consistently and whose voices influence institutional decision-making.

Compensation reflects competing understandings of participation

Staff often framed compensation as recognition, partnership, or professional development, while students consistently framed it as primarily the practical recognition of time and labour alongside study and paid work. Guaranteed financial compensation was strongly preferred over prize draws or indirect incentives.

This reflects broader differences in how participation itself is understood institutionally and experienced by students.

Trust depends on visible responsiveness

Students were more likely to engage where institutions demonstrated clearly how feedback had informed decisions, policies, or changes in practice. Conversely, where outcomes were unclear, engagement was often perceived as tokenistic or ineffective.

The findings suggest that trust in student voice processes depends not only on opportunities to contribute, but on institutions' ability to communicate what changed as a result.

Methodological Finding

The concentration of responses from particular HEIs enabled comparison of staff and student perspectives within the same institutional context. This within-institution analysis proved more revealing than between-institution comparisons in demonstrating how student voice implementation depends heavily on individual professional approaches rather than institutional coordination.

Structural Implications

Both staff and students recognise that meaningful student voice work requires investment, transparent communication about impact, diverse engagement methods, and deliberate effort to reach underrepresented groups. However, these convergences may inadvertently mask deeper questions about whose voices achieve institutional recognition and influence within existing participatory frameworks.

The findings suggest that current student voice approaches, despite methodological sophistication and inclusive intentions, may systematically reproduce existing hierarchies of participation. The predominance of already-engaged students in responses indicates that underlying inequalities in who can afford, and who is confident enough, to participate remain unaddressed by diversified engagement strategies. This points toward the need for more fundamental transformation: recognising feedback students already generate, without being asked to do more, as evidence for institutional decision-making that is currently gathered but rarely seen to shape it.

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1.Introduction

This report presents findings from surveys conducted as part of the "[What Matters to Students: Embedding Student Voices in Evaluations to Improve Student Outcomes](#)" project, a Public Policy Challenge initiative by the University of Oxford's Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) and Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL).

The project examines how higher education institutions (HEIs) respond to Office for Students (OfS) guidance on student voice in Access and Participation planning (APP) and evaluation. Using a multi-method approach, the overall research project combined ethnographic documentation of sector meetings, interviews with HE professionals, focus groups, [institutional case studies](#), and surveys, to understand current practices and identify approaches effective in embedding student voices.

1.1 Analytical Approach

This report presents descriptive analysis of survey responses collected through purposive sampling via professional networks including the Evaluation Collective and the Russell Group, and other sector connections. The surveys were not designed for statistical generalisation but rather to capture diverse perspectives and practices across the higher education sector regarding student voice integration in Access and Participation work.

The analysis adopts an exploratory approach, using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and thematic analysis of open-ended responses to understand experiences and practices. Survey responses were also incorporated into the broader project's five institutional [case studies](#), providing additional context for interpreting findings.

Given the network-based distribution method and self-selected participation, the findings are presented as indicative of sector diversity rather than representative of the entire higher education landscape in England. The purpose is to map current approaches, identify variations in practice, and highlight insights that can inform policy development and institutional practice.

1.2 Survey Design and Question Refinement

Two surveys were developed: one for students and one for HEI staff involved in Access and Participation work. Survey development involved collaborative feedback from the Office for Students, TASO, and the Evaluation Collective to ensure questions would generate the insights needed for policy and practice development.

The survey questions evolved through multiple iterations based on stakeholder feedback and pilot testing. Initial draft questions focused on five core areas for both institutions and students: ensuring diverse student voices, engagement strategies, communication of changes, integration with Access and Participation plans (APP), and the effectiveness of the OfS APP guidance.

Following feedback, questions became more specific and evidence-focused. The student survey expanded from the original concept to 17 questions in the pilot version, then to 18 questions in the final version, to incorporate student type classification, representative role identification, and enhanced questions about diversity in representation. The staff survey developed into a comprehensive 14 question instrument covering engagement mechanisms, evaluation processes, regulatory compliance, and implementation challenges. The full student and staff survey instruments are provided in Appendices A and B respectively.

Pilot testing with participating institutions, including Oxford, revealed varying response rates across question types. These findings informed final question selection and formatting decisions. The Oxford student pilot, involving over 50 responses, contributed to methodological development while remaining institution-specific rather than central to the broader sector analysis.

The staff survey was open between May and November 2024, with the student survey running from June to November 2024.

2. Staff Survey Results

The staff survey generated 26 individual responses from professionals involved in Access and Participation work across 13 UK HEIs. Four institutions contributed multiple responses (ranging from 2-8 respondents), while nine provided single responses. This variation in institutional representation means some internal contexts are more richly documented in the dataset, potentially affecting the balance of perspectives reflected in the analysis.

2.1 Student Engagement Mechanisms

All 26 respondents use student surveys, establishing this as the universal foundation. Focus groups are used by 24 respondents, making these the two dominant approaches across the sample.

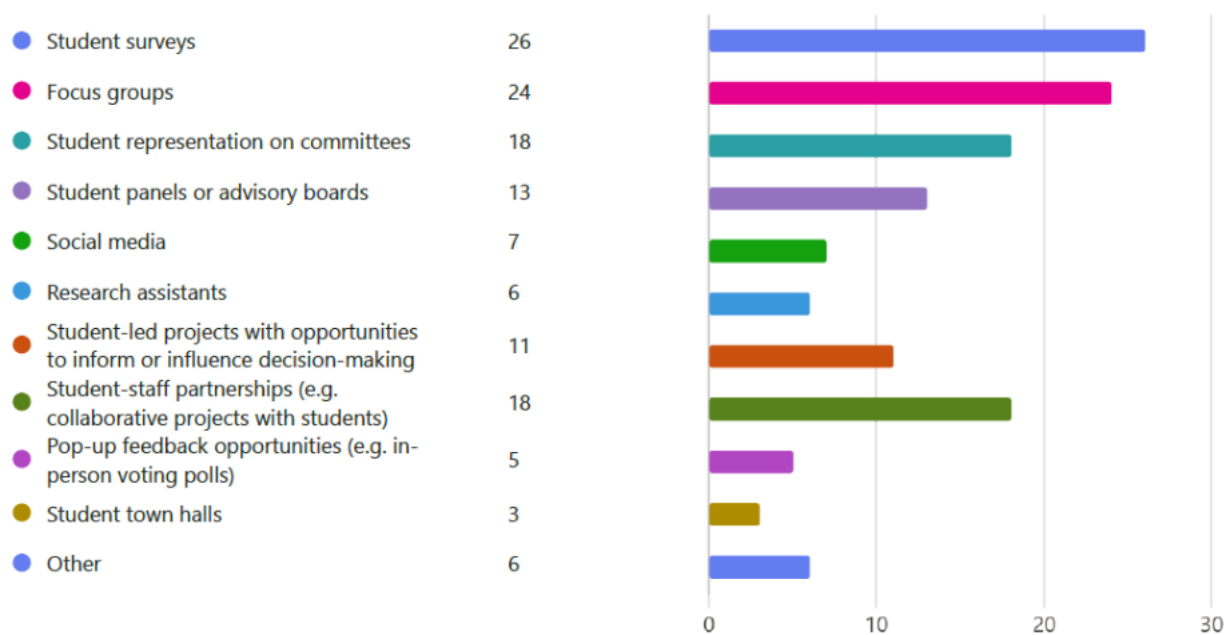


Figure 1: Student Engagement mechanisms identified by staff

However, respondents demonstrate significant innovation (student-led, multiple platforms) beyond these foundations. One HEI describes **"Student Focus group/ Salon events where we have had a theme. Recently the theme was belonging and we used a mentimeter to encourage in the room anonymous feedback and suggestions as well as a padlet with a QR code... the Salon event was facilitated by students and there was no staff present during their discussion sessions."**

Another reports using **"participatory student experience evaluation using Most Significant Change methodology,"** demonstrating adoption of evaluation approaches from international development contexts, now recommended in Higher Education by TASO.

Several HEIs emphasise long-term partnership models over transactional engagement. One respondent explains: **"We have found that longer term meaningful partnership with students, via our Student Research Team and associated...enhancement projects, gives us better engagement outputs than more ad-hoc engagement work."**

2.2 Measuring Successful Engagement: Beyond Response Rates

Responses reveal sophisticated thinking about engagement measurement that goes well beyond traditional metrics. One respondent notes: **"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."**

Several HEIs describe outcome-focused measurement approaches. One project measures success through: **"increased student engagement but also with the level of engagement and evaluated impact on the [project participants] themselves..."**

Others focus more squarely on the convergence between engagement and belonging: **"Success is measured through metrics such as increased numbers of students we work with and sense of belonging amongst students who do engage with us in this way."**

However, success indexed by participation rates may not necessarily mean wider impact. One respondent admits: **"There was no evaluation of how successful that initiative was. If it was evaluated based on the attendance of the conference and the use of the student common room, the initiative was a great success"** - highlighting differences in conceiving the measurement or evaluation of impact and success.

2.3 Student Compensation: Financial Recognition as Standard Practice

Compensation practices among survey respondents show considerable variation and complexity. Fifteen respondents report using vouchers, 11 offer employment contracts, and 9 provide refreshments. However, compensation approaches often vary within individual practice, with some respondents indicating they provide no compensation for certain activities while compensating students for others.

Figure 2 examines compensation practices by correlating compensation types with the methods they are most associated with. Since some HEIs contributed multiple respondents, these figures represent professional perspectives on compensation practices rather than confirmed institutional strategies, acknowledging that compensation may vary within institutions depending on specific activities, departments, or the individuals carrying out this work.

Compensation type	Number of respondents	Method(s) most associated with
Contracts of employment	11	Strong correlation with student-staff partnerships (9/11) and advisory boards (8/9)
Skills development	6	Always appears with other compensation types (5/6 with contracts, 4/6 with vouchers), all 6 respondents also report using student-staff partnerships
Vouchers	15	Most versatile – commonly reported across all method types, often as part of mixed compensation approaches
Refreshments	9	Commonly paired with focus groups (8/9) and committee representation
No compensation	4	Limited to basic consultation methods (surveys, focus groups)

Figure 2: Compensation types correlated to method of engagement

Some HEIs provide detailed compensation rationales for different classes or modalities of engagement: One explains: **"Facilitators were paid"** while another notes: **"Students are usually compensated for face-to-face feedback, but not for filling in surveys."** This suggests strategic thinking about when compensation is appropriate. Several responses emphasise recognition beyond payment: **"Compensation and recognition of their time and sharing of their experiences with senior leadership demonstrates that we value their input."** Some respondents selected "No compensation" alongside other compensation types, indicating variable compensation across different activities within their practice.

Employment contracts show strong correlation with partnership-based engagement methods. Among the 11 respondents offering employment contracts, 9 also report using student-staff partnerships and 8 use advisory boards. In contrast, only 1 of the 4 respondents indicating no compensation reports using partnerships. This pattern suggests that formal recognition of

student contributions through employment correlates with collaborative rather than consultative approaches to student voice engagement.

2.4 Engaging Underrepresented Students: Honest Gaps and Innovative Strategies

Responses reveal significant variation in approaches to engaging marginalised students, with several acknowledging current limitations. One respondent candidly states: **"this is an area that we need to develop."**

Others describe targeted recruitment: **"In recruiting students, 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, draw on existing network eg of students from outreach programmes."**

Several HEIs emphasise peer-to-peer models: **"We often recruit (and pay) students from underrepresented or marginalised backgrounds to work with us to have conversations with their friend networks."**

However, challenges persist. One respondent notes: **"The biggest concern I have at the moment is of the lack of engagement from these groups to participate in paid opportunities due to their lack of confidence (anecdotally) that anything will change as a result of their contributions."**

2.5 Student Voices as Evidence: From Compliance to Institutional Learning

Institutional sophistication in using student voices as evidence varies considerably. At the foundational level, one respondent states: **"We always act upon student feedback."** Others describe more systematic integration: **"Student feedbacks are used not only to demonstrate why an outcome is achieved or not, but also how that happens. These feedbacks are also integrated in the planning of the next cycle of an intervention or programme."**

The most developed approaches describe comprehensive evidence frameworks: **"Building on existing student research, we conducted a systematic review of emerging themes across projects, shaping and validating APP priorities. Student voices are regularly involved in evaluation, though 'level' of engagement - from consultation to co-creation - varies a lot."**

One HEI provides detailed methodology: **"The Most Significant Change technique provides systematic collection and analysis of student narratives through: In-depth interviews capturing detailed accounts of change; Multiple levels of analysis (peer review, staff selection, stakeholder review); Triangulation of perspectives to validate findings."**

However, challenges in evidence utilisation remain: **"I think that student voice and feedback can provide a body of UK evidence to inform planning initiatives, but I think there is a risk involved in that evidence being weighed more favourably than other sources if the group of students consulted is not representative of the students being affected by the intervention."**

2.6 Regulatory Compliance: Knowledge Gaps and Implementation Challenges

Twenty HEIs confirmed the Office for Students as their regulator, with four uncertain and two reporting different arrangements. Familiarity with OfS student voice guidance varies significantly among respondents (Figure 3). Those claiming high familiarity provide sophisticated critiques: **"While the OfS framework claims the three levels (narrative, empirical, causal) are 'not hierarchical,' there is an implicit privileging of quantitative,**

causal evidence. This creates tension when trying to centre student voices, which often manifest most powerfully through qualitative narrative approaches." Among respondents, those moderately familiar with OfS guidance tended to use more diverse engagement portfolios than those with no familiarity.

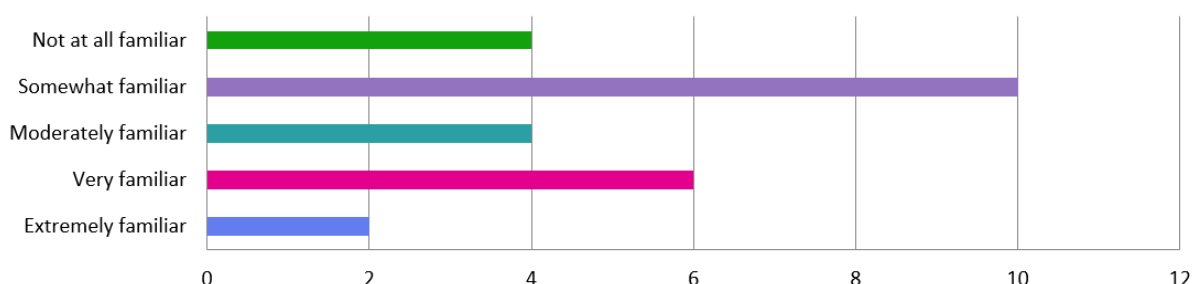


Figure 3: Familiarity with OfS Student Voice Guidance

Others identify structural challenges: "The main challenge we face is that of insufficient staff capacity to engage with students beyond sending out surveys. Staff don't see it as a priority because it isn't written into their contracts or expected of them."

2.7 Multiple Perspectives from Single Institutions

Where HEIs contributed multiple respondents, patterns reveal both convergence and divergence in reported practices. At one institution, respondents demonstrate varied approaches: one focuses exclusively on surveys stating "I use only surveys for my own students", while another describes comprehensive partnerships: "working alongside students to discuss the problems they want fixed and the barriers that staff face to fixing them and come up with a solution together is the best way to engage students."

At another multi-respondent HEI, responses show a focus on digital accessibility. One respondent reports the method and purpose: "Focus groups. Done one on Commuter students and BAME students access to digital accessibility which is being used to devise a digital accessibility plan for marginalised students." Another acknowledges perceived constraints affecting participation: "My focus has been on digital access which has been entirely focussed on marginalised and underrepresented students... The biggest concern I have at the moment is of the lack of engagement from these groups to participate in paid opportunities due to their lack of confidence."

A third multi-respondent HEI reveals more coordinated strategic approaches. Multiple respondents describe systematic student voice integration through Student Advisory Boards and structured projects, with one noting: "Student voice work is embedded throughout all of our projects and is a key part of our evaluative measures."

Variation within HEIs may indicate that student voice implementation operates differently across institutional structures, reflects differences in how individual professionals understand and describe their HEIs work, or reveals actual gaps in institutional policy coordination. Within-institution variation likely stems from some combination of the above, and the specifics were beyond the scope of this survey and may be of interest for an in-house follow up.

2.8 Implementation Challenges: Resources, Culture, and Structural Barriers

Resource constraints dominate implementation challenges, with multiple respondents citing "staff resource" as the primary barrier. More detailed responses reveal deeper structural issues.

One comprehensive response identifies multiple barriers: **"Challenges: 1. Hierarchical Reality vs. Claimed Equality While the OfS framework emphasises equality and student partnership, institutional hierarchies often undermine genuine equality... Consistency - there is a wide range of how student voices are valued and integrated across different departments and levels within the institution."**

Several responses highlight student fatigue: **"The student fatigue caused by asking for formal responses makes securing engagement with meaningful attempts to secure feedback much harder."** Another notes: **"Practicalities of engaging over-surveyed students who are already time poor (and often working considerable hours alongside their studies)."**

Quality concerns also emerge: **"Quality of design is another area where we can't expect students to be experts in robust social research methods, and yet want to balance that against participatory methods and methodologies."**

2.9 Institutional Context and Innovation

The responding HEIs demonstrate considerable diversity in approaches reflecting different organisational contexts, however innovation appears across all institution types rather than following predictable patterns based on institutional characteristics (such as size of institution, or the diversity of its student body).

Some institutions emphasise research-intensive methods, with one noting: **"Student led research is popular regarding student engagement (applications exceed available funding every year)."**

Other institutions show emphasis on practical partnerships, with one describing: **"We deliberately set the threshold for joining the Research Team quite low initially. We keep track of who is keen and reward engaged students with priority access to subsequent opportunities."**

Some, perhaps already student-facing, staff focus on direct relationship building: **"Directly speaking to small groups of students seems to work best and elicit the most useful and balanced feedback."**

3. Student Survey Results

The student survey generated 74 responses from students across participating HEIs. The concentration of responses from particular HEIs likely provides insight into variation in promotion of the survey between HEIs. There is also within-institution diversity in student responses, challenging assumptions about institutional coherence and echoing the varied responses from staff from the same HEI.

3.1 Student Representative Roles and Engagement Experience

Among the 74 respondents, 24 indicated they had acted as student representatives, providing perspectives from both sides of student voice processes. These representatives reported varied experiences, from meaningful engagement to frustration with institutional responsiveness.

One representative described positive engagement: **"Having a track record of listening and acting on students' concerns makes engagement seem more worthwhile."** However, others expressed limitations: **"I am a student representative, but I do not know what the university or my college's plan is for improving access and participation."**

Students who did not have roles representing other students also varied in their assessment of institutional responsiveness. The call was for: **"Making sure the student engagement is meaningful and not empty representation without actually taking student voices into account. [My institution] has a problem of asking for student voices and then not listening to students."** Direct and regular engagement was a standard ask: **"Talking directly to students, and often. Enough of this faceless online 'dialogue' malarkey."**

3.2 Engagement Methods and Compensation Preferences

Students demonstrated clear preferences for engagement approaches that provide tangible recognition of their time and contributions. Financial incentives dominated responses about effective engagement methods.

Compensation preferences strongly emphasised immediate, guaranteed rewards:

"Any sort of financial incentive, whether that is actual money or something equivalent (e.g. dining credit)"

"Surveys with rewards! Well, I am the prime example: if you didn't offer the voucher, I wouldn't be filling this out"

"Compensation! We are all busy students and so it is nice to know that our views are being heard and valued"

Multiple students specifically rejected prize draws in favour of guaranteed compensation: **"Surveys but with real compensation. I have never heard of anyone winning a prize draw."** Another noted: **"I think a good description of why the survey is important is enough to engage people tbh, most of the time i don't really care for a prize, if I think the survey is worth the time and effort then I will try to do it."**

3.3 Institutional Responsiveness and Student Voice Satisfaction

Student perceptions of institutional listening varied considerably, even within single HEIs. Using a five-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" regarding feeling heard by their institution, responses distributed across the spectrum.

Positive experiences emphasised genuine dialogue and visible action: **"The interpersonal element entices people to engage more and gives you a feeling of being taken seriously - 'you're worth our time'"**

"The best surveys give you the option to receive a summary of the information received and what they have presented to the uni and their response. This makes it clear my voice has been heard."

Negative experiences focused on institutional unresponsiveness: **"I think the [student] committee is not really listened to by college. Their participation in college committees is offered and though feedback is often passed on by the [student] committee members; the college rarely seems to address issues or make changes."**

"These students are speaking out, the university doesn't listen to them until the point the students are quiet because they know it doesn't matter."

3.4 Unheard Voices: Student Perspectives on Representation Gaps

Students identified multiple groups they perceived as underrepresented or unheard within their HEI. However, these perceptions varied significantly both between and within HEIs.

The most frequently mentioned unheard groups were:

- Postgraduate students, particularly in college-dominated environments
- Mature students and those with caring responsibilities
- Students from specific ethnic backgrounds or international students
- Students with disabilities or accessibility needs
- Financially constrained students unable to participate in unpaid activities

Perceptions also varied within institutions: one respondent felt their institution engaged different students well through the rep system, yet noted limited visibility of university-level activity and that some student campaigns struggled to gain traction. Taken together, these responses suggest that perceptions of who goes unheard are shaped less by a fixed set of excluded groups than by students' own vantage points, with the same institution seen as inclusive by some and exclusionary by others.

3.5 Access and Participation Plan Awareness

Student awareness of their institution's Access and Participation Plans remained limited across the sample. Among 74 respondents, only 8 indicated involvement in APP processes, with many expressing unfamiliarity: **"The Access and Participation Plan sounds new to me"** and **"I am not super aware of access and participation plans so don't feel I have a view on them."**

This limited awareness existed even among student representatives: **"I am a student representative but I do not know what the university or my college's plan is for improving access and participation."**

Where students were aware, their responses were ambivalent: **"I think the university is making good steps to widening the access of disadvantaged groups, however I still believe there is a lot more work to do"** to critical: **"They are often aware of a need to improve access or participation but do not really ever get to putting change into definite plans which the student base can see and know when those changes will occur."**

3.6 Representative Diversity: Student Assessments

Students expressed mixed views about whether their institutional representatives reflected student body diversity. Some provided positive assessments: **"My college encourages EVERYONE to be a student representative"** and **"There is a push for all groups to be represented, and this is shown in the objectives of the representative groups."**

Others identified representation gaps: **"Students who sign up to rep tend to have more disposable time. Those from WP backgrounds cannot afford the opportunity cost of being a rep"** and **"Generally, it's people who can take the time to either volunteer or not focus on their studies, which is going to skew to those well off and white."**

Several students noted demographic homogeneity in their contexts: **"My peer group is extremely homogenic when it comes to social class - it reflects the barrier certain income backgrounds have when it comes to accessing higher education."**

3.7 Effective Initiatives and Institutional Innovation

Students identified several examples of initiatives they found effective for amplifying voices:

Structured programs: One student described a targeted project: **"A pilot initiative was fantastic for gathering feedback and improvement on how to support access and participation from this demographic of students - similar projects with other minority communities would be excellent too."**

Direct engagement approaches: **"My department ran termly meetings for our cohort representatives to have direct contact with staff members... the scheme felt open and successful."**

Student-led research: **"My work with the student researcher programme has allowed student opinions about [current issues] to be heard by key staff in the university, which is influencing how the university is changing and updating its policy."**

However, students also noted that meaningful change often required sustained pressure: **"It seems student protest has been the most impactful"** and **"I was a student representative for [library services] and I thought their focus groups/student engagement worked really well. Student representatives were always provided with a lot of information and opportunities to engage."**

3.8 Response Patterns and Analytical Limitations

Among HEIs with multiple respondents, some showed greater consistency in positive engagement experiences, while others focused particularly on practical barriers to participation. However, these patterns reflect the specific students who chose to respond rather than comprehensive institutional differences or representative samples.

As with staff, this variation suggests student voice work operates simultaneously at institutional, departmental, and individual levels, producing diverse experiences even within single institutions. The self-selecting nature of participation means findings reflect students engaged enough to respond rather than the wider student population.

4. Cross Survey Analysis

Comparing staff and student perspectives reveals significant gaps between institutional practices and student experiences, alongside areas of convergence around effective engagement approaches. Direct comparison is possible for two institutions where both staff and students responded: one HEI contributed 8 staff and 38 student responses, while another provided 2 staff and 17 student responses.

4.1 Institutional-Level Comparisons: Staff Practice versus Student Experience

Institution A (8 staff, 38 students): Staff responses showed varied approaches ranging from survey-only methods to comprehensive partnership models. Student responses from the same

institution demonstrated equally varied experiences - from strong satisfaction ("**Talking directly to students, and often**") to significant frustration ("**asking for student voices and then not listening to students**").

Staff responses ranged from basic approaches ("**I use only surveys for my own students**") to comprehensive partnership models ("**working alongside students to discuss the problems they want fixed and the barriers that staff face to fixing them and come up with a solution together**"). This variation among professionals within the same institution reveals how student voice implementation depends heavily on individual staff approaches rather than institutional coordination.

Student responses from the same institution showed equally dramatic variation - from those feeling genuinely engaged ("**Having a track record of listening and acting on students' concerns makes engagement seem more worthwhile**") to others expressing fundamental skepticism about institutional sincerity ("**[My institution] has a problem of asking for student voices and then not listening to students until the point the students are quiet because they know it doesn't matter**").

The contrast is particularly striking when considering these responses come from the same institutional context. Students identified specific barriers their institution creates: "**As many graduates are only at uni for a year or two, the delay in doing means the university/department/colleges can put off doing till the student base turns over again and the whole thing starts again.**" Meanwhile, staff from the same institution described sophisticated evaluation frameworks and evidence integration processes.

Institution B (2 staff, 17 students): Staff responses emphasised systematic engagement with formal recognition: "**Student-led projects, student-staff partnerships and student advisory boards tend to have high success in regard to engagement... students' voices are amplified and embedded throughout all of our projects.**" Students from the same institution showed greater consensus around practical engagement preferences but highlighted persistent challenges: "**vouchers as money incentives always work! also we love free food as you can never turn it down!**" and "**I can only speak from experience in my department but I feel as though the process is very slow.**"

The staff emphasis on systematic embedding contrasts with student emphasis on immediate, tangible recognition, even within an institution where staff describe comprehensive student voice integration.

4.2 Engagement Method Preferences: Different Perspectives on Same Practices

Staff respondents consistently emphasised surveys and focus groups as primary mechanisms. Students provided more critical assessments of these same methods. They acknowledged practical benefits - "**surveys are the most convenient as they require a lower level of commitment**" - while questioning their engagement value. Many preferred methods that demonstrated institutional commitment. The disconnect appears less about method choice and more about implementation quality and follow-through on student input.

4.3 Compensation Frameworks: Professional Recognition versus Practical Necessity

Staff discussions of compensation emphasised professional development and formal recognition through employment contracts and skills opportunities. Students consistently framed compensation as practical necessity and motivation recognition.

Students expressed clear preferences for immediate benefits: **"freelance style payment - any work done is submitted on a timesheet and then paid monthly"** and **"I think financial incentives, whether actual money or something equivalent, work best."**

4.4 Representativeness Challenges: Systemic versus Individual Barriers

Both staff and students identified engaging underrepresented groups as challenging but emphasised different barrier types. Staff responses focused on methodological solutions - targeted recruitment, working with societies, compensation strategies.

Students highlighted structural exclusions that methods alone cannot address: **"People who don't have time due to finances and course commitments"** and **"Those from WP backgrounds cannot afford the opportunity cost of being a rep."**

Where HEIs had multiple responses, this tension appeared within single institutional contexts - staff describing inclusive recruitment while students from the same institutions noted systemic barriers to participation.

4.5 Access and Participation Plan Integration: Professional Domain versus Student Awareness

As one might expect, staff demonstrated substantial APP engagement across familiarity levels, with detailed discussions of regulatory compliance and evaluation frameworks, while students responses revealed minimal APP awareness. Even student representatives reported limited knowledge: **"I am excited for these plans"** (undergraduate) contrasted with **"I am not familiar with the specific plans"** from another respondent.

4.6 Resource Constraints: Shared Challenge, Different Impacts

Both groups identified resource limitations, though they experienced them differently. Staff cited capacity constraints and competing priorities, while students described participation barriers and time conflicts.

Students noted how resource constraints create engagement inequalities: **"students are already time poor (and often working considerable hours alongside their studies)"** while **"making students feel more valued"** offered as a solution.

4.7 Communication and Feedback Loops: Process versus Impact

Staff described systematic feedback integration and evidence frameworks. Students emphasised wanting visible outcomes and transparent communication about change implementation.

The gap appears in communication about process versus communication about results: **"the absolute sure perspective that their responses will tangibly change something"** and **"showing that input is used and matters, in a timely and responsive way."**

4.8 Convergence Areas: Shared Principles Despite Different Emphases

Despite significant gaps, both staff and students recognised several common principles: meaningful recognition for student contributions, transparent communication about impact,

acknowledgment that different students require different engagement approaches, and the challenge of achieving genuine representativeness.

Both staff and students also recognised engagement fatigue as a significant barrier, though they described it differently - staff noting that over-surveying creates barriers to meaningful engagement, while students emphasised needing either financial compensation or genuine confidence that their input **"will tangibly change something."**

4.9 Note on Analytical Limitations

These comparisons reflect engaged professionals and motivated students rather than comprehensive institutional or student populations. The institutional-level analysis is limited to two institutions with different response patterns, preventing broader conclusions about institutional approaches to student voice work.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 Implementation Reality: Beyond Policy to Practice

The survey findings reveal that student voice implementation may operate more through individual professional practices than coherent institutional strategies. This finding has significant implications for regulatory expectations that treat institutions as unified actors in student engagement work.

The variation within single institutions suggests that effective student voice work requires both institutional policy support and deliberate attention to implementation consistency across organisational levels. Current approaches that rely on institutional commitments may miss the reality of how student engagement actually occurs.

5.2 Professional Development and Resource Allocation

Staff responses highlight resource constraints and competing priorities as primary barriers to meaningful engagement. However, student responses suggest that current resource allocation may not align with student preferences and needs. The emphasis on systematic evaluation processes may divert resources from the transparent communication and guaranteed compensation that students value most.

This misalignment indicates need for professional development that focuses less on methodological sophistication and more on understanding student motivations and implementing responsive feedback mechanisms.

5.3 Regulatory Guidance and Practice Integration

The gap between professional APP engagement and student awareness suggests regulatory guidance may not effectively bridge policy development and student-facing implementation. Current approaches that emphasise institutional compliance may inadequately address how student voice work actually occurs across diverse professional contexts.

Future guidance might benefit from acknowledging implementation variation and providing frameworks that support consistency across different professional roles and contexts rather than assuming institutional coherence.

5.4 Student Engagement and Participation Equity

Students identified fundamental structural inequities that transcend methodological refinements and diversified engagement strategies—namely, representational frameworks that paradoxically marginalise the constituencies they purport to centre. While expanding participatory mechanisms may broaden nominal inclusion, persistent material and symbolic barriers determine whose voices achieve institutional legibility and influence.

The predominance of already-engaged students in survey responses reveals a recursive logic whereby existing participation structures reproduce rather than challenge established hierarchies of student agency. This suggests that current approaches to student voice, despite their sophistication or authenticity and commitment to inclusive practices, remain embedded within institutional logics that systematically privilege students who already possess the cultural, social, and economic capital necessary for meaningful participation.

These findings point toward a more fundamental critique: that authentic equity in student voice requires reconceptualising the relationship between institutional authority and student agency, rather than layering participatory mechanisms onto existing structures. One route is already visible in the evidence. Several institutions here describe student engagement and evaluation activity—Most Significant Change narratives, student research teams, feedback "integrated in the planning of the next cycle of an intervention"—treated not as episodic consultation but as systematic evidence shaping institutional priorities and APP decisions. The transformation this points to is less about the methods used than about the status granted to what students contribute: whether engagement is treated as genuine evidence for governance, or as a democratic gesture layered onto decisions made elsewhere.

This is what students in the survey ask for. Their recurring question—what changed because of my input?—is a demand that contributions be legible in institutional decisions, and that the route from voice to change be visible. Respondents valued most the processes that make "it clear my voice has been heard" by showing what was presented to the institution and how it responded.

A further step, beyond what these findings directly evidence, would extend this logic from dedicated engagement activity into the educational experience itself—not teaching and assessment as data to be mined, but students' own feedback on that experience treated as a standing source of evidence for governance. Much of what institutions need in order to understand their students is already expressed in the ordinary course of course evaluation and module feedback—currently channelled, if anywhere, into quality assurance rather than recognised as student voice. Treating this routine feedback as evidence for institutional decision-making would move student voice from something periodically solicited toward something continuously present, and would do so through a channel every student can access, rather than one that favours those with the time and confidence to take on representative roles. This is less a new method than a shift in what already counts as evidence—consonant with the sector's growing interest in embedding evaluation within business as usual, and lightening the participation burden on the very students least able to afford it.

Such transformation requires interrogating not merely how students are included, but the very terms under which inclusion is defined, measured, and valued.

Acknowledgements

The surveys on which this report is based were developed with input on the survey questions from members of the Evaluation Collective, the Office for Students, and TASO. A draft of the report was circulated to all respondents who requested a copy prior to publication; no comments were received.



Appendix A – Student Survey

Student Voices Project - Survey of Students

About this survey

This UK wide survey asks for your views on how student voices are recognised at your university or college, and how they influence policy. This is driven by new impetus by the Office for Students to engage students in Higher Education. This survey is for all students, including students who represent other students. There are 13 questions in four sections, and the first 100 individual respondents who provide an email address will receive a £10 e-voucher.

The survey is part of the Public Policy Challenge project 'What Matters to Students'. You can find more information about the project here. <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/what-matters-to-students-embedding-student-voices-in-evaluations-to-improve-student-outcomes/>

The data collected through this survey will be stored securely and only used for the purpose of this research project. No individual responses will be attributed to any specific person, university or college, and all your responses will be de-identified.

Although we ask for the name of your university or college, this is used only to collate responses, and your answers will be anonymised before they are used in any outputs from the project. These may include reports, conference presentations, and other publications such as journal articles.

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason.

If you have any concerns or questions regarding data protection and the handling of your responses, please do not hesitate to contact policychallenge@education.ox.ac.uk

Consent [section 1]

1. I have read the information provided and consent to you using my responses for the purposes outlined above.
 - Yes
 - no
2. I am
 - An undergraduate student
 - A postgraduate student
 - A sabbatical officer

Student engagement and feedback mechanisms [section 2]

3. I am/have acted as a student representative
 - Yes
 - No

4. How does your university or college ask for your feedback? Please select all that apply.
- Student sruveys
 - Focus groups
 - Student representation on committees
 - Student panels or advisory boards
 - Social media
 - Research assistants
 - Student-led research projects
 - Student-staff partnerships
5. Please let us know if or how you have been compensated for your time in any of the ways shown below. Select as many as apply.
- Not compensated
 - Entered into a prize draw
 - Lunch, snack, tea/coffee
 - Voucher
 - Skills development (for CV)
 - Contract of employment
 - Other (enter)
6. Which methods do you think are the most successful in engaging students and why? Please provide examples.

Listening to diverse student voices [section 3]

7. I feel that my institution hears my voice and listens to me.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Somewhat agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Somewhat disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
8. Which student voices, if any, do you feel are not being heard at your university or college?
9. If you consider that there are students at your university or college whose voices are not being heard, what do you think might be the best way to engage them?

Access and Participation [section 4]

10. Have you been involved in your university or college's Access and Participation Plan, or its evaluation processes?
- Yes
 - No
11. What is your view of your university or college's plans for improving access and participation?
12. Do you believe that the student representatives at your university or college reflect the diversity of the student population?

13. Please tell us the reasons for your answer to **question 11**. If you are a student representative, please include examples from your own experiences.

Examples and final comments [section 5]

14. If you have an example of an initiative that was helpful in making your voice, or others, heard at your university or college, and you are willing to share it with us, please provide details below.
15. If you have any other comments on how student voices have impact at your university or college, please note them in the box below.

And finally...[section 6]

16. Would you be interested in participating in a student panel to review outputs for this project? We would use your email address to contact you if you indicate that you would be interested
- Yes
 - no
17. Please provide your email address so that we may send you an e-voucher if yours is one of the first 100 individual responses, and to allow us to contact you if you selected 'yes' to express an interest in further participation above.
18. Please could you provide the name of your university or college so that we can collate your responses, and so ensure a range of voices across the country.



Appendix B – Staff Survey

What Matters to Students: Student Voices in Access and Participation Policy and Practice

About you

You are a professional services staff member or academic who has worked on the Access and Participation Plan or is otherwise involved in evaluation and/or student engagement. If this does not describe you, please forward this onto a relevant colleague. More than one person can answer the survey.

About the survey

The University of Oxford's Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) and the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) are investigating the role of student voices in evaluation as part of the What Matters to Students Public Policy project.

See project website: <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/what-matters-to-students-embedding-student-voices-in-evaluations-to-improve-student-outcomes/>

The survey questions enquire into mechanisms to engage students, the ways in which you incorporate student feedback and evidence, and your reflections on aligning your practices with guidance from regulatory bodies such as the Office for Students. Your responses will help us gain valuable insights that can inform future strategies and initiatives to engage student voices in higher education.

Data Protection and Anonymity

We recognise the sensitive nature of the information we are requesting, and we assure you that all responses will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

The data collected through this survey will be stored securely and only used for the purposes of this research project. No individual responses will be attributed to any specific person or institution and all your responses will be de-identified.

More than one person can answer this survey. Please skip questions that you cannot answer and share the survey with relevant colleagues. We collect your email address and your university or college's name solely for the purpose of collating multiple responses from institutions.

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason.

All reporting or publication of the survey findings will ensure the anonymity of participants and will not include any information that could potentially identify individuals or specific institutions. You will be sent a copy of the survey's findings for comment before publication if you choose to provide your email address.

If you have any concerns or questions regarding data protection and the handling of your responses, please do not hesitate to contact policychallenge@education.ox.ac.uk.

Completing the survey [section 1]

The survey consists of nine questions across four sections (Student Engagement and Feedback Mechanisms, Access and Participation, Regulatory Guidance and And Finally...; which asks for your final comments and suggestions). We estimate that the full survey will take most respondents 15 minutes to complete, depending on the level of detail provided in your responses. Please note that the survey is designed to gather comprehensive insights, so we appreciate you taking the time to thoughtfully answer the questions and to consult with colleagues as required. Your participation is invaluable in helping us understand the role of student voices in higher education.

1. I have read the information provided and consent to you using my responses for the purposes outlined above
 - YES

Student Engagement and Feedback Mechanisms [section 2]

2. Please select all channels or platforms you currently use to engage students and capture their feedback
 - Student surveys
 - Focus groups
 - Student representation on committees
 - Student panels or advisory boards
 - Social media
 - Research assistants
 - Student-led projects with opportunities to inform or influence decision-making
 - Student-staff partnerships (e.g. collaborative projects with students)
 - Pop-up feedback opportunities (e.g. in-person voting polls)
 - Student town halls
 - Other (enter)
3. Which methods do you think are the most successful in engaging students, and how have you measured successful engagement? Please provide examples.
4. In what ways are students compensated for their time? Please select all that apply.
 - No compensation offered
 - Lunch, snack, tea/coffee
 - Voucher
 - Skills development (For CV)
 - Contract of employment
 - Other (enter)

Access, Participation and Evidence [section 3]

5. What strategies do you employ to actively engage underrepresented or marginalized students in providing feedback and shaping access and participation initiatives? Please provide examples.
6. To what extent can student voices be used to create or inform evidence? Please provide examples.

Regulatory Guidance [section 4]

7. Is the Office for Students your regulator? <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/>
 - Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
8. How familiar are you with the guidance and expectations set forth by the Office for Students (or other regulatory body) regarding the role of student voices in higher education?
 - Not at all familiar
 - Somewhat familiar
 - Moderately familiar
 - Very familiar
 - Extremely familiar
9. What challenges or opportunities have you encountered in implementing the Office for Students' (or other) guidance on student voices in your institution? Please provide examples.
10. Do you have any final comments? Please include suggestions or recommendations for policy makers and those who produce guidance to support policy or any ideas for sharing best practices in the HE sector.

And Finally... [section 5]

11. I consent to you contacting me about the responses provided in this survey to clarify any points, or to invite me to participate further in the study, for example by giving an interview. There is no obligation to participate further.
 - Yes
 - No
12. Please send me a copy of the survey findings prior to publication
 - Yes
 - No
13. Please enter your email address
14. For the purpose of collating multiple responses from different institutions, please provide the name of your university or college.