Student Inclusion Consultants and Their Role Within Higher Education Facilities: Exploring Student Voice of Underrepresented Students and the Changes they can make in Higher Education

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Abstract

Every year, current Northumbria University students from underrepresented groups are offered flexible, paid opportunities to enhance the student experience by working as Student Inclusion Consultants (SIC).

Our lived experience is used to identify and address barriers to access, success and progression, as well as to ensure the student experience is accessible and inclusive for all students. Examples of underrepresented student groups who are employed as SICs include commuter students, student carers, disabled students, and mature students.

Since the scheme's inception in 2020, over 50 SICs have been appointed across all our campuses (Newcastle, London and Amsterdam) and across all faculties. The scheme is funded by the University's Access and Participation Plan (APP) and has, to date, provided students with over 1,500 hours of paid work and professional skills development.

The scheme is based on the principles of students as co-creators, working with university staff on a wide-reaching range of projects. In practice this can include the design and delivery of focus groups, researching and producing reports, and presenting at conferences. The key thread to all of this is the elevation of our underrepresented student voice.

As SIC's we'd like to share our insight and reflections on the scheme with you, having been involved with its design, development and delivery at various stages.

Shola Hughes - Senior SIC

I am the longest-serving member of the team, having joined the pilot in 2020. The key success of this pilot was acknowledging that the voice of underrepresented students had not previously been given a platform. By employing students and paying them for their insight and emotional labour, the university was able to lay the foundations for a

more inclusive and collaborative approach to addressing issues of equality, diversity and inclusion.

I joined the team because I wanted to promote accessibility and inclusion for those students who, like me, are disabled. I recognised barriers through my own experience of struggling to access Student Accessibility Plans (SAP) and general teaching, and I wanted to help bridge this gap for other students in a similar position. My lived experience also includes being a bisexual woman, a commuter and a first-generation student.

Since this time, I have acted as a vital consultant to a range of university staff members, offering my insight into their areas of practice through undertaking Student Reviews. One of the first examples of this was when I reviewed the inclusivity of Business and Law faculty modules with an aim to answer the question of '*How inclusive and diverse is the Business and Law curriculum?*'

Working with another SIC, we wrote a comprehensive report detailing why we conducted the review, how the review was carried out, potential flaws in methodology, and an in-depth review of each module looking across several criteria on the website, and in teaching material. Written and oral feedback was offered to module leaders to enhance their advice and allow them to ask for clarification.

This example embedded the importance of 'closing the loop' whereby SICs are informed by the staff member of the tangible impact that their insight has had. In this instance, those changes included changing course imagery and website descriptions based on the recommendations we made.

I have since been involved in a number of notable reviews, including addressing the university policy on short extensions and self-certifying illness, addressing the university policy in response to the cost of living crisis, and conducting a wide scale review on campus accessibility.

Since the pilot there have been many changes which I have helped to shape. The academic year 2022/23 saw the introduction of a new role within the scheme – the Senior SIC – which I was appointed to, along with three other SICs. This was intended as a professional development opportunity, since Seniors are recruited from the existing team of SICs. It also ensures the scheme continues to be directly informed by student voice in its strategy and operations.

I applied for this progression because I wanted to contribute to the development of the scheme in a more active capacity, having had years of experience and understanding of the scheme. In this role I have been involved with the recruitment and selection of subsequent SICs which has been a particular highlight. The Senior role serves as a pivotal intermediary, fostering collaboration and facilitating various initiatives between staff and other, often newer, SICs. The supportive presence of Senior SICs has encouraged open and constructive dialogue, enabling valuable exchanges of ideas and perspectives between the student body and university staff.

Through my consistent engagement in the scheme, I hope to continue making it as beneficial as possible for all stakeholders invested in the promotion of inclusion and accessibility. My aspiration is that one day there will be no underrepresented groups of students in Higher Education, and no 'typical' student experience, as there will be a recognition and inclusivity of all diverse characteristics.

Rian - Senior SIC

I applied to be a SIC in February 2022 as I was passionate about amplifying the voices of queer and working-class students at Northumbria. My lived experience consists of my identity as a queer man, and growing up working-class. I feel that both these groups are underrepresented within a Higher Education setting. I applied to be a Senior SIC in June 2022 as I wanted to directly shape and grow the scheme in a way that continues to build on our important work in enhancing inclusivity.

I am proud of the work I have done. One such example was when I worked with the Music department to develop strategies to try and encourage more underrepresented, non-Music students to take part in their extracurricular activities. I provided insight from my own perspective, as a SIC and as a Law student, as to how they could provide a more inclusive physical environment that diminished hierarchy. My feedback was listened to and positive changes in this area were implemented.

As a SIC team, we are currently in a place where internal awareness and visibility of the work that we do has been achieved to a much higher degree than when I first joined. The scheme now has clear alignment with our Education Strategy and therefore benefits from senior buy-in, including from our Faculty Pro-VC who I worked closely with on a reciprocal insight scheme. As well as increasing numbers of staff across the breadth and depth of the University applying to work with SICs, we also have increasing numbers of students applying to join the team year-on-year.

As the scheme progresses, there is a shared vision to further develop the Senior SIC role. One key aspect is to facilitate engagement in scholarly endeavours, such as contributing to journal articles. This would not only recognise Senior SICs' expertise and insights but will also contribute to the growing body of research in the field of student inclusion within Higher Education. The opportunity to become a published author is not something I would have foreseen for myself, and I owe my participation in the scheme to achieving this.

John – SIC

I'm one of the newest members of the team, having joined in October 2023. I would like to share my motivations for applying and my expectations of being a SIC.

I didn't initially have a positive experience when applying for support within the university. In the first year of my degree, I had two exams to sit in May which I required a Student Accessibility Plan (SAP) for. I applied for the SAP in February, expecting everything to be confirmed well in advance of my exams. At this point I had no knowledge of what was needed to set up an SAP or how long it would take. While the deadline for SAPs is in March, it takes 12 weeks to receive an assessment and have the application processed before a meeting takes place to discuss what exam arrangements are needed.

Closer to my exams I was worried that I would not get an SAP in time and contacted the Student Accessibility Team to discuss the situation. Within this meeting, I provided feedback on the unclear deadline and the ways in which the application was confusing due to the way it was set out online. I also explained how I was concerned that there were other people in a similar situation to me and that there would continue to be in future years if there was no improvement.

It was then that I found out about the SIC role and the work that they do. The staff member I was meeting with explained that the team may be looking for candidates like me who value the improvement and accessibility of the university experience. I ultimately ended up not being able to have my SAP implemented before I sat my exams, which was a driving factor behind me applying to join the SIC scheme. If I had been aware of what I needed to do sooner, the situation would have been avoidable and so I wanted increase awareness of what help and support the university offers to students.

I have since found out that SICs do much more than simply deal with feedback and accessibility issues. Before becoming an SIC, I would have said that inclusivity in a university environment is simply ensuring that all students have access to everything they needed both on campus and online. However, since undergoing training and hearing more about what other SICs have been doing, it is clear to see that inclusivity is much more than just accessibility. It is community, education, and a vital part of the university experience. I have already gained so much from being an SIC, however, I hope to continue to gain a further understanding of what our university community needs and how to improve the university experience for everyone.

Ellie - SIC

I'm a final year Sociology student but this is my first year as a SIC, having joined the team in October 2023. I believe the SIC scheme is important to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. When reading how the scheme impacted students, I was particularly drawn to how there was a major focus on accessibility as well as helping students to get the most out of university. The SIC scheme is an essential part of Northumbria University, as it ensures every student is provided with the same chance of success.

The SIC scheme sits within the University's Student Inclusion team. Before I became a SIC, I benefited from the support of the Student Inclusion team when my mum became ill. I was late for, and sometimes missed, lectures due to hospital appointments. I sometimes struggled to get essays in on time. The Student Inclusion team were so helpful in showing me ways to manage my attendance as well as allowing extensions when I needed them most. This shows that university can be an inclusive setting that helps students facing varying difficulties in their lives. It was a member of the Student Inclusion team who signposted me to the SIC job opportunity when it was advertised and suggested I apply.

To me, inclusivity is an essential part of university culture that creates a welcoming and supportive atmosphere for all students, no matter their backgrounds. This is crucial because it fosters a sense of belonging, promotes diverse perspectives, and enhances the overall learning experience by preparing students for a world where they will collaborate with people who have a range of lived experiences.

Although I am new to the team, I have been involved with a range of reviews and activities already. One such example includes user-testing a new system for students to apply for extensions, in which they are now able to self-certify twice a year and get a five-day extension. The impact of this will allow students to get on top of their work if they have fallen behind due to circumstances out of their control.

I have also began work on a project, along with other SICs, to provide my feedback on the accessibility of the enrolment content is that is provided to new and returning students. The impact of this will be far reaching as we need to ensure that all Home and International students understand this important information.

The SIC scheme allows you to develop skills that are essential for the working world while also gaining a deeper understanding of the people around you. I am excited to be working with likeminded people who wish for Northumbria to provide the best student experience possible. As I develop as a SIC, I hope to implement positive changes around Northumbria University which will enhance student experiences, from their everyday encounters on campus, to online support while they're away.