

Understanding perceptions of the student experience: Dot voting to identify perceived risks to equality of opportunity, a practice-based case study

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Abstract

England's higher education providers have embraced opportunities to develop Access and Participation Plans in response to regulatory requirement. How best to engage students meaningfully in this activity was carefully considered by an East-Midlands university, with advice from the respective students' union "don't use focus groups". This practice-based case study presents the rationale for ensuring student voice impactfully informs access and participation planning, and how one provider sought to engage students, staff and governors in an equitable approach to understanding perceptions of the student experience, to inform intervention and evaluation design and delivery.

Introduction

"Don't use focus groups", advice received from students' union leaders at an East-Midlands university when considering how best to engage students in the development of the university's Access and Participation Plan (APP). The challenge was set, avoid using the same tried and tested method, try something different, be innovative (Galbraith, 2021), if you really want to hear the student voice in an impactful way.

Student consultation is key when developing a university's APP (Office for Students, 2023a). The APP is a requirement of the Office for Students, England's higher education independent regulator. Universities are required to develop, deliver, and ensure improvements against targets addressing equality of opportunity for students, ensuring students access, succeed in, and progress from higher education. APPs should embrace a 'whole provider approach' and student consultation during development, delivery and evaluation is fundamental to the success of a plan.

The need for student representation in decision making is widely recognised (Luescher-Mamashela, 2012), especially if universities are to understand the experiences and support required by those from under-represented groups (Wainwright, et al., 2019); yet the challenge remains to ensure effective and impactful student representation. Menon (2021) notes the perceived 'passive' student stakeholder group, leading to limited input to important university decisions (Neave, 2000). Recognising an increasing lack of student engagement with focus groups, the university worked with its students' union to explore how best to meaningfully engage students in the development of the APP, particularly when seeking student views about the risks to equality of opportunity most pertinent within this university's context. The Office for Students' Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) lists twelve risks that may affect a student's opportunity to access, succeed in and beyond higher education (Office for Students, 2023b). These twelve risks provided a framework from which to explore participatory engagement methods such as voting.

The university, a post-92 provider with over 25,000 students, wanted to establish an understanding of the greatest risks to equality of opportunity as perceived by different stakeholder groups: students, staff, and the Board of Governors. It sought to develop a methodology for gathering stakeholder feedback consistently and equitably, facilitating the same activity repeatedly. The method would therefore need to be easily facilitated and articulated, present limited barriers to engagement, and stimulate stakeholders to respond. By understanding different perceptions the university would be able to develop a plan that responded to the risks identified by stakeholders and address differences in perception.

Methodology

Throughout 2023-2024 the university facilitated EORR engagement activities with the three stakeholder groups; students, staff, and governors. The engagement activity invited stakeholders to consider the EORR, using a dot voting technique to identify the priorities for collective groups of individuals (Dalton, 2019; Gibbons, 2019; Lucidspark, n.d.). Whilst research into the effectiveness of dot voting to engage higher education students in contributing to university decision-making is limited, the method itself was considered suitable in this scenario. As a method it could be facilitated across the

three stakeholder groups, and would ensure that students had “opportunities, circumstances, an environments which enable dialogue” (Lowe, 2023, 10), shaping their university experience (Fletcher, 2017).

The twelve risks, as identified for the Office for Students, through the EORR were presented on large boards, using the Office for Students definitions for each risk, with a facilitator positioned near the boards to respond to any points for clarification. Each participant was given three stickers and asked to identify the three risks that they considered to be the most pertinent to students at our university, sticking their stickers against the three risks that resonated the most with them.

The activity was facilitated in-person, at the university’s East-Midlands campus. Student engagement occurred in May 2024 across four different sessions, one in the Campus Centre building (home to the Students’ Union), and was organised with the Students’ Union. Two sessions were held in the entrance to the main campus library, a space that students visit throughout the year, and the final session was a Graduate Outcomes Student Advisory Group meeting. Staff engagement started in August 2023 with two stakeholder introduction to APP workshops, student representatives from the Students’ Union were present and participated. Academic members of the university’s community recognised for teaching excellence participated during a workshop in September 2023, and staff were also welcome to participate during the session held in the Campus Centre in May 2024. The Board of Governors engaged during a workshop in October 2023, in which the requirements of the APP were outlined alongside how the university was preparing its plan.

To reduce influence between data collection activities, the boards containing the risks were counted and photographed to ensure accurate capturing of responses, and all stickers removed after each session, ensuring participants were not influenced by previous responses. All feedback was invited and received anonymously, beyond being able to identify the participant group, there was no identification of individuals by response. Whilst engaging in the activity some students offered additional information about their programme of study, level of study, and particular risks or challenges they faced, this was recorded (without attribution to individual response) to ensure a range of student voices had been heard.

One-hundred and eighteen students, representing Home and International students, across levels 4-7 of study and a wide range of academic disciplines participated, sharing their views and making their voices heard. Forty staff, again representing a broad cross-section of the university's staff base including academic and professional services, and sixteen members of the Board of Governors participated.

Results

Students identified costs pressures, insufficient academic support, and progression from higher education as the top three risks to equality of opportunity within our university context. Responses from the Board of Governors and staff varied from those of students, highlighting the importance of undertaking this type of activity to understand current perceptions. Staff also identified cost pressures as one of the three greatest risks to equality of opportunity, alongside insufficient personal support and mental health. Both students and the governors identified insufficient academic support, staff and governors identified insufficient personal support, and the third greatest risk as perceived by governors was around knowledge and skills prior to commencing the higher education journey.

Combining responses from the three stakeholder groups, the student voice comes through strongly, with the three risks students' perceived as most relevant to students within our university being the three recognised collectively: costs pressures, insufficient academic support, and progression from higher education. Having identified these risks, the university continued working with students to develop the interventions and associated evaluation plans required within an APP. Addressing cost pressures and insufficient academic support, the university will continue to develop proactive, targeted interventions that maintain a dialogue with students at greatest risk; facilitating opportunities to further understand current student experiences and needs, and to signpost and support appropriately. Programmes of activity better preparing students for progression beyond higher education will be facilitated. On-going co-creation is included in interventions addressing health and wellbeing, and transition and belonging. The university and its students are committed

to collaboration throughout the APP, through implementation and delivery of interventions and evaluation of impact.

Limitations/Challenges

In reviewing responses the university was mindful that the time and space in which these activities occurred may have impacted the outcomes, for example, student participation took place towards the end of the academic session, many students indicating whilst participating that they were revising for examinations, preparing final assessments, and considering next steps beyond higher education. The staff and Board of Governors sessions occurred much earlier in the academic session, and between this and student engagement there was an increase in national media attention around the 'cost of living crisis' which may have influenced responses.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Having used the dot voting technique, combined stakeholder responses identified the three perceived greatest risks to equality of opportunity within the university's context as costs pressures, insufficient academic support, and progression from higher, echoing those identified by students. This activity was designed to ensure that the corresponding data analysis activity to determine areas to target within the APP was supported by contextualised stakeholder perceptions of the risks to equality of opportunity. The findings influenced the development of the university's APP and associated ongoing communications, adapting messaging in response to the original responses from the different stakeholder groups.

This alternative method for gathering the student voice was effective and efficient, capturing the views of one-hundred and eighteen students, their collective responses influencing the university's approach to addressing risks to equality of opportunity. Replicating the same method with students, staff and governors validated the approach, although on reflection the difference in time between the feedback events may have influenced some responses. Feedback from participants about the method was positive, and recognised the inclusive nature of the approach that welcomed everyone to engage as the task could be adapted in response to the needs of

individuals, responding effectively to those with physical disabilities (Lord, et al., 2014). Students commented on the perception of ease and speed with which they were able to engage in providing feedback to shape university activity, and appreciated the same method being used by staff and governors as this added elements of consistency and equity.

The challenge was set and met. The long-established method of focus groups for student engagement was questioned and avoided. The dot voting technique had positive impacts on engagement and response, and authentically shaped university activity and decision-making. Those exploring alternative formats for engaging students and effectively capturing the student voice to inform university strategic decision-making should consider this method, which facilitated effective engagement with little resourcing, and was perceived as a consistent and equitable method for replication across stakeholder groups.

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