

Case Study: Engaging Students, Elevating Voices: The Role of a Student Council in Education

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Abstract

In the evolving landscape of higher education, student engagement is critical for academic success. This case study examines a strategic initiative within a United Kingdom (UK) university's nursing programme to enhance student voice through a student council, fostering authentic co-production amid post-pandemic challenges and financial pressures. The council, with diverse representatives, shifted from traditional feedback methods like surveys to co-creation, engaging students in curriculum design, teaching methods, and assessment strategies via anonymous surveys and regular meetings. It addressed inclusivity for less vocal or non-traditional students, balanced student-staff expectations, and tackled challenges like sustaining engagement through hybrid models and transparent communication. Outcomes included increased student satisfaction, stronger tutor-student relationships, and enhanced leadership skills through peer mentoring and council-led events. This initiative offers a replicable model for other disciplines seeking inclusive, student-centred academic environments.

Background and Rationale

Student councils in United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a pivotal role in promoting student engagement, leadership, and democratic participation. They empower students to influence university governance, fostering a sense of ownership and community (Alderson, 2000). By providing a platform for students to voice their perspectives, shape institutional policies, and develop skills such as leadership, communication, and collaborative problem-solving, councils enhance the university climate through inclusivity and cooperation (Whitty & Wisby, 2007; Trolan, 2024). The National Union of Students (NUS, 2023) underscores their impact on cultivating leadership through structured representation, while a 2021 study highlights their role in strengthening civic awareness, preparing students for active societal engagement (Civic University Network, 2024).

In the rapidly evolving educational landscape, fostering student engagement and maintaining strong learner-tutor relationships are critical for academic success and student inspiration (Balalle, 2024; Bloch et al., 2021). However, capturing the voices of all students, particularly those less engaged, remains a challenge (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). Engaged students often dominate discussions, overshadowing others who may lack confidence or face external commitments such as part-time work (Crabtree, 2023; Mebert et al., 2020). Traditional feedback methods, such as surveys and the National Student Survey (NSS), often fail to capture diverse perspectives, limiting their effectiveness (Pitt & Quinlan, 2021). Student councils offer a contemporary solution by providing structured platforms for diverse representation, fostering co-creation, and addressing barriers to participation (Conner,

Posner, & Nsowaa, 2022; Heilporn, Lakhal, & Bélisle, 2021; Acosta-Gonzaga, 2023).

Despite their benefits, student councils face significant challenges in remaining embedded within university structures. Limited student commitment, driven by academic pressures and competing priorities, hinders consistent participation (Brooks, 2021). Academic staff, grappling with increasing administrative and teaching demands, often lack the capacity to support councils effectively (Whitty & Wisby, 2007). Additionally, the rise of alternative feedback methods, such as digital platforms and the NSS, sometimes overshadow formal council structures (Pitt & Quinlan, 2021). These challenges are surprising given the councils' alignment with the UK's emphasis on student voice in higher education frameworks (Trolan, 2024). Sustained institutional support is essential to integrate student councils as a core component of university governance (Messiou et al, 2024).

The challenges and benefits of student councils are exemplified in the establishment of a student council within a nursing programme. With growing student numbers and programme diversity, the academic team sought to strengthen student voice beyond sporadic consultations, feedback sessions, and surveys, which were often time-consuming and lacked a holistic approach. The nursing student council was initiated to create an inclusive, formalised platform for all students to contribute to programme development and university business, moving from traditional feedback to co-creation (Bols, 2017). This initiative addresses the limitations of conventional methods, fosters a collaborative, student-centred learning environment, and ensures genuine consensus between students and staff in a time-efficient manner. By embedding the council within the programme, the department aims to reflect the needs of a diverse student cohort and enhance engagement in a rapidly expanding academic context.

Context and Aim

The nursing programme at a large UK university served a diverse cohort of over 1,200 undergraduate students across multiple intakes annually. The student body was diverse in terms of age (18–55 years), ethnicity (with multiple ethnic groups represented, although the majority were white), and socioeconomic status (with students coming from opposite ends of the Index of Multiple Deprivation, but a large proportion from the poorest areas of a region, and an above-average number of care-experienced students). Many students juggled external commitments, such as part-time work or caring responsibilities, which hindered engagement. The programme comprised three distinct fields - Adult, Mental Health, and Child Nursing - each with unique professional identities and curricula, creating challenges in fostering a unified student voice.

The primary aim had been to establish a student council to facilitate authentic co-production between students and the programme team, ensuring inclusivity, partnership, and co-design. Secondary aims included enhancing participation, encouraging open dialogue, and improving the learning environment. Post-pandemic challenges, such as reduced campus attendance due to online learning, loss of learning communities, and financial pressures from the cost-of-living crisis, had underscored the need for innovative engagement strategies beyond traditional methods like student evaluations or “you said, we did”

campaigns. The council aimed to represent all students, particularly those less likely to engage, ensuring their perspectives shaped the programmes within the school.

The Role of the Student Council

The student council had been designed to shift from consultation to co-creation, positioning students as active contributors to their educational journey. Contemporary engagement involved students in curriculum development, quality assurance, and decision-making (Lu & Cutumisu, 2022; Lucander & Christersson, 2020). The council, comprised of representatives elected from each cohort and nursing field, reflected the programme's diversity, with students bringing perspectives as ethnic minorities, mature students, those with caring responsibilities, care-experienced individuals, and diverse genders. The council had 52 members across the nursing programmes and was representative of the wider student community. As this was a new initiative, and it was possible that students might join and then leave due to the commitment required, the aim was to over-recruit. Students were recommended to join by academic staff who felt they were a good fit, both for their potential contributions and for the skills they could develop through the council. Additionally, advertisements allowed students to nominate themselves, with endorsements from their personal tutors to ensure their programme or well-being would not be compromised. Students were recruited through advertisements via email, virtual learning platforms, and in-class announcements.

Contemporary Student Engagement

The council bridged students and the programme, facilitating real-time feedback and regular interactions. Unlike end-of-term surveys, it enabled ongoing dialogue on issues like clinical placement schedules and academic policies. Its diverse membership ensured representation of non-traditional and distance learners, addressing challenges like childcare or commuting costs.

Mechanisms of Engagement

- **Feedback Channels:** The council utilised multiple feedback channels, including anonymous online surveys, wider cohort feedback sessions (with council members gathering feedback from their peers), and direct representation through council members at meetings. Anonymous surveys were particularly effective for less vocal students, with council members reporting increased confidence in sharing feedback anonymously. Focus groups allowed in-depth discussions on issues like assessment workload, though participation was lower among distance learners.
- **Action-Oriented Dialogue:** The council met quarterly with the leadership team and bi-monthly with the programme team, alternating between in-person and virtual formats. These meetings ensured student input translated into tangible changes. For example, feedback from students experiencing menopause led to changes in policy and placement uniforms. An academic noted, "We would never have had the

dialogue with students about issues such as uniforms with people experiencing menopause without the student council; the feedback since the implementation was great” (Nurse academic, 2023).

Challenges and Solutions

Setting up the council required significant time investment from the programme team, but its value outweighed logistical challenges. Key challenges included:

- **Inclusivity:** Engaging disconnected students, such as online learners, was difficult. Hybrid meeting models and anonymous feedback platforms increased participation.
- **Balancing Expectations:** Constraints like budget or curriculum structure limited some changes. Transparent communication, explaining decision rationales, maintained trust.
- **Sustaining Engagement:** Maintaining student involvement over time was challenging. Regular events, such as workshops and socials, and rotating council membership every 12 months sustained engagement, with the majority of members remaining active throughout their term. Throughout the first term 4 students left the council, citing various reasons such as family and academic commitments.

Impact and Outcomes

- **Improved Tutor-Student Relationships:** Students reported a new respect for academics, as they themselves operated in a different space and developed skills and had experiences they had not previously encountered, such as reading reports, reviewing minutes and setting agendas.
- **Curriculum Adjustments:** Changes included revised assessment schedules benefiting students, enhanced placement support, and peer-to-peer learning sessions. Assessment pass rates and first-time pass rates increased, attributed not only to curriculum adjustments but also to students being more engaged and creating more networks within the student community.

Benefits

The council significantly enhanced student experience and engagement:

- **Representation and Advocacy:** The council ensured diverse voices shaped decisions, with council members reporting a sense of empowerment. A student noted, “The council gave me a platform to share my struggles as a mature student” (Student A, 2023).

- **Promoting Engagement:** Council-led events, such as workshops and charity drives, increased extracurricular participation, which had previously been sporadic. The Nursing Society, initiated by the council, organised guest lectures, boosting engagement for attendees.
- **Enhancing Communication:** The council's feedback loop improved staff responsiveness, with students reporting faster resolution of concerns.
- **Leadership Development:** Council members developed skills in leadership and problem-solving, with all reporting increased confidence in managing difficult situations. Peer mentoring programmes supported 100 students annually, enhancing academic resilience.
- **Sense of Ownership:** Students reported an increased sense of ownership over their education, motivating academic engagement.
- **Social and Cultural Activities:** Events like cultural festivals fostered camaraderie, with attendees reporting stronger peer connections.
- **Peer Support:** Peer mentoring reduced academic stress for participants, strengthening the student community.

Conclusion

The student council bridged the gap between students and the programme, ensuring voices were heard and acted upon. By fostering co-creation, inclusivity, and transparency, it created a dynamic, student-centred learning environment. The council's success in improving satisfaction, relationships, and curriculum flexibility highlighted its transformative potential. Challenges like sustaining engagement and balancing expectations were addressed through innovative solutions, ensuring continued progress. This initiative offered a replicable model for other disciplines, emphasising the value of active student participation in shaping education. By moving beyond passive feedback to meaningful partnerships, the council enriched the nursing programme, promoting collaboration, ownership, and shared responsibility.

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