Context Matters: responding to a reflexive student account of the methods and motivations for sharing student voice at Northumbria University

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Background and rationale

Engaging with student voice is more important than ever in shaping the experience of those studying and working in higher education settings. Providing new and effective mechanisms for elevating student voice, particularly those from underrepresented groups, has become a priority for many universities and Students' Unions. There is a growing expectation for providers to work in partnership with students to assure and enhance the quality of their provision. One of the Quality Assurance Agency's key practices for the principle of engaging students as partners states that: "Providers demonstrate effective engagement with students, ensuring any representative groups or panels reflect the diversity of the student body. Students understand that their voice has been listened to and are aware of how their views have impacted the assurance and enhancement of the student experience." (UK Quality Code for Higher Education, 2024, p.5).

Student insight offers a clear opportunity to better understand differences in retention, outcomes and satisfaction which benefits wider institutional activity. Through listening and responding to student voice, universities and Students' Unions gain a level of insight and accountability that would not otherwise be available, opening an understanding for the institution of "what students' lives are like and how changes of various sorts affect them" (Dunne & Owen, 2013, p. 35).

One mechanism for sharing student voice is via staff-student partnership working. These partnerships can have a positive impact on student success (Healey et al., 2014) and therefore, engaging underrepresented students in partnership approaches to enhance student success could have both a collective and individual benefit on student outcomes. Staff-student partnership does not come without its challenges, and a key consideration is how inclusive it can be (Felten et al., 2013; Trowler, 2015; Marquis et al., 2015). As Trowler (2015, p.306) suggests, "slapping on a coat of 'student partnership' without exploring the differing positionalities and interests of these students and their institutions is also unlikely to achieve much.''

This is particularly important in the voluntary environment of student representation where students face multiple demands on their extracurricular time, not least the need to engage in part time work of often more than 20 hours per week. Any frustrations or barriers to their experience can lead to disengagement and poor volunteer experience (Barton et al., 2017; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2019). There is a strong argument to suggest that engaging students in enhancement activities can have the dual benefit of increasing the sense of belonging of those in paid and voluntary roles (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017) but also have wider impact on belonging through co-creating inclusive environments for all students. This is underpinned by the development of new communities of practice. Two such examples at Northumbria University can be seen through the Community for Innovation in Teaching and Education (CITE) and the Student Inclusion Consultant (SIC) scheme.

CITE encompasses six Learning Circles (LC): Authentic enquiry-based learning; Generative Artificial Intelligence in education; Developing, supporting and recognising teaching and education; Co-enquiry and innovation with creative methods; Building inclusive cultures for confident student transitions into and through Higher Education; and Students as Partners in Higher Education. Focused on adventurous pedagogies (the promotion of deep learning through authentic and engaging experiences), the LCs work to thoughtfully integrate challenge and agency into educational practice to support personal growth (Beames & Brown, 2016). In doing so, CITE LCs offer interdisciplinary spaces for colleagues to collaborate around shared interests, tackle educational challenges, and showcase expertise. They aim to influence local and inter/national practice, contribute to University strategy, and support professional growth through activities such as sharing best practice, developing grant proposals, and publishing research. The 'Students as Partners in Higher Education' Learning Circle (SaP LC) supports the development of staff and student partnerships as an equitable mechanism of harnessing student voice.

The SIC scheme enables students with lived experience of being part of an underrepresented group to apply for flexible, paid employment, which is funded through the University's Access and Participation Plan (APP). The lived experience of SICs can include, but is not restricted to, being a mature student, having caring responsibilities or being a commuter. There is a strong thread of intersectionality amongst the SIC community, and amongst the Northumbria student community more broadly. The scheme goes some way towards enhancing the quality of our provision for all students, in particular to address differential outcomes and experiences of those from widening participation backgrounds. SIC insight is used to identify and address barriers to access and success in line with the objectives of the APP and SICs regularly attend the SaP LC meetings.

The context of how and where students are choosing to share their voice, and their reasons for doing so, matters. The decision to share insight and experiences via a Students' Union compared to the University; the decision to work in partnership with University staff rather than choosing to be a department representative; and the decision to apply for paid student voice opportunities over voluntary ones, are just some examples of how the context matters.

This case study sought to explore the methods and motivations for sharing student voice at Northumbria in more detail through a reflexive account from Marcus, a second-year student studying BA Entrepreneurship, who has been appointed as an intern to support the SaP LC. This role is new for the 2024-25 academic year.

In addition to his role as a current student, Marcus is engaged in multiple paid and unpaid roles within the University and the Students' Union. He outlines his motivation for applying for the internship as well as sharing his insight on the importance of context. This is followed by reflections on key themes drawn from the account by staff who work closely with students to ensure that student voice is heard. Responses will be shared by the Chief Executive of Northumbria Students' Union, a Third Space practitioner working in student engagement and enhancement and an Applied Sciences academic with a strong background in students as partners ways of working.

Marcus

Engaging in academic and leadership roles as a student has provided me with valuable insights into the dynamics of student representation and collaborative work with faculty members. This paper reflects on my experiences as a student representative and as a participant in the Students as Partners internship, exploring the motivations behind these roles, the impact they have had on my personal and professional development, and the differences in power dynamics and responsibilities within these positions.

The Role of a Student Representative

The role of a student representative interested me primarily because it provided an opportunity to help people and share student voices. Additionally, when the position became available, no one else stepped forward, which further motivated me to take on the responsibility. My decision to apply was driven by a desire to create meaningful and actionable change that would benefit future generations of students.

Through this role, I have gained significant experience in facilitating communication between students and staff. One of the most rewarding aspects has been receiving feedback from both students and academics regarding the impact of our collaborative efforts. Understanding the reasons why some students choose to share their voices while others remain silent has been particularly enlightening. I conducted a survey into this in my class. The findings were interesting, with most responses stating that universities could be more attentive and have an anonymous method of reporting. This same survey also revealed that students are primarily motivated by financial incentives, career benefits and employability, personal development, and making change for others. This shows that in order to get more actionable or detailed feedback, students must have a gain for themselves, primarily a financial incentive.

In discussing these experiences with fellow representatives, I have found that many share my motivations and aspirations. There is a collective desire to make a tangible difference within our academic environment. However, while I have yet to see substantial changes resulting directly from my actions, I believe there is great potential for impact. To further assess and enhance this influence, I intend to gather more data through structured interviews and survey responses.

Key factors that have influenced my effectiveness in this role include the size of the student cohort: my class only has twenty people in it, and we are split in half for our coaching lessons (student-led sessions). A smaller cohort allows for more personal interactions which gives me the chance to gather detailed feedback and explore diverse perspectives. This has enabled me to engage in deeper discussions and gain a more comprehensive understanding of student concerns and expectations.

The Students as Partners Internship

My experience as a student representative played a significant role in my decision to apply for the Students as Partners internship. I was particularly interested in the opportunity to work closely with academics and gain insight into the collaborative processes that take place "behind the curtain." Observing how educators work together, particularly in partnership with students, was an area I had not previously explored.

My rep role provided a strong foundation for this internship, as it had already familiarised me with gathering and conveying student feedback. The ability to help others through my actions was a key motivator for my involvement in both roles. Additionally, the internship offered an opportunity to develop skills that are essential for running my own business in the lead generation and sales industry, such as data analysis, collaboration, and strategic planning.

One of the aspects that initially attracted me to the internship was the emphasis on collaboration. The idea of working alongside teachers as equals to discover new insights was particularly appealing. This experience has provided a unique perspective on academic work, giving me a new appreciation for the critical research students don't usually see or hear about.

Comparing the Roles: Structure and Power Dynamics

While both roles involve working with academics, there are notable differences in structure and power relations. As a student representative, I report to faculty members who hold decision-making authority. In contrast, the Students as Partners internship places students and academics on a more equal footing, with a defined direction provided by the academic, which is then collaboratively developed.

I have found that I thrive in structured environments where clear direction is provided, as seen in my rep role. However, the internship has exposed me to a more autonomous working style, which is more reflective of real-world business environments. Learning to build my own structure and

navigate less rigid frameworks has been an invaluable experience, as it aligns with the entrepreneurial skills I will need in the future.

Conclusion

My experiences as a student representative and a Students as Partners intern have significantly shaped my understanding of academic collaboration and leadership. Both roles have offered unique insights into student engagement, institutional dynamics, and personal growth. While the rep role has provided a structured framework for advocacy, the internship has allowed for greater autonomy and the development of skills crucial for my future career aspirations. These experiences have reinforced my commitment to making a difference within academic, personal and professional settings, and I look forward to further exploring how student voices can drive meaningful change.

Marcus' account instigated discussion around student voice mechanisms and motivations, which Northumbria Students' Union and University staff have reflected on below in their own contexts and practices. The identified key themes of payment, partnership and power are explored in relation to the ways that we engage with student voice and the similarities and differences we have experienced therein.

Students' Union perspective – Niall and Lauren

Lauren is the Student Voice Coordinator at Northumbria Students' Union (NSU), working within the Students' Union and University's representation structure to support student representatives through delivering training and contributing to structural reviews.
Niall Sweby is the Chief Executive Officer at NSU, supporting Sabbatical Officers ensuring the representation structure supports student voice, delivering to the needs of students, NSU and the University.

Over the past two years, NSU has sought to change its approach. While remaining student-led, it has become evident that what is needed for student representation to flourish is close working relationships between Students' Union and University, particularly at the programme level, to jointly create an environment which supports student voice activities to take place.

Marcus' experiences highlight one of the challenges any Students' Union faces in supporting student representation – that the core relationship is that between the student representative and the academic, not necessarily the student and the Students' Union. This is due to many factors – the academics and the student representatives have the most frequent interactions and most meaningful ones in terms of what the student is looking to achieve, and with hundreds of student representatives and only a couple of staff in the Union, those Union-student representative relationships must often be fleeting and in some cases, as highlighted by absence in Marcus' reflection, may not be strong or exist at all. This in turn impacts the type of volunteering experience that can be offered to students.

As a Students' Union this is the context in which we operate with the question of how we add value to that academic-student representative relationship. Some of this is done through training and accreditation, through the relationship across years with academics and through providing mechanisms for student representatives to escalate matters if needed. This raises challenges for us in terms of how to effectively support hundreds of students across the institution as well as to be clear on the way we have impact.

It is notable that Marcus uses the term "reporting" to academics when describing his representative role compared to his relationship with academics as an intern and this is one of the areas the Union is working on with the University. What should be the nature of the relationship? Is reporting the correct term, and what does that imply for student representation and voice?

It is always the goal of the Students' Union to ensure that student representatives feel they are on equal footing with staff. Reps are trained to think of themselves as experts of the student experience who can contribute to finding solutions, rather than just feedback collectors: the institution generates huge amounts of data and feedback from students that can be of higher quality than individual student feedback, so we intend to move reps into a place where they can be consulted on why students have given the feedback they have. However, this is not the experience that all reps have. For many, their primary experience of engaging with the rep system is through Student-Staff Programme Committees (SSPCs), which are facilitated by University staff. While the feedback on SSPCs is largely positive, some students do not feel completely comfortable in these environments, suggesting a lingering power imbalance where staff members retain the authority and decision-making power.

Our representation system functions with the understanding that some students who put their names forward to be reps actually do not participate in the system much, or at all, while nominally a rep. It is frequently suggested that the easiest way to increase reps' engagement is through a financial incentive, but it has been our experience that money alone is often not an adequate incentive.

As an example, in the 2023-24 academic year, we trialled a feedback mechanism with our Leadership Reps, a group comprised of 26 Faculty and Department Reps and 16 Postgraduate Research (PGR) Reps. In April 2024, the reps were asked to fill out a survey about their rep experience, the issues that were most frequently raised to them, and whether they felt listened to by Students' Union and University staff. Reps who completed this survey were paid £140. Nineteen of the 26 Faculty and Department Reps (73%) and 13 of the 16 PGR Reps (81%) submitted a response. While this is a general improvement over the usual percentage of reps who fill out surveys for us, there remains a significant empty space for ten Leadership Reps who felt that filling out this report was not worth £140.

It is not entirely clear why this happened, especially because of the paradox of trying to understand why the non-engaged do not engage: a student who does not respond to requests to fill out a survey is extremely unlikely to respond to questions about why they chose not to do

this. However, it is worth noting that our PGR Reps work very closely with the Students' Union: they attend monthly meetings with the Vice President (VP) Postgraduate, and many have "colleague-like" relationships with Students' Union staff and have seen a high rate of their issues being addressed. The positive working relationship and frequent contact with the Students' Union may have made PGR Reps more likely to feel like these reports were worth their time. By contrast, the Faculty/Department Reps, while frequently offered one-to-one meetings with Students' Union staff to check in on their wellbeing, give almost all their feedback to University staff.

Many students tell us that they are reluctant to engage with feedback or representation processes because they feel that there is "no point": they often acknowledge that there is an effort to listen and take in feedback but suggest that nothing is ever done with it. This is the largest stress point for any feedback mechanism, as "if students do not see any action resulting from their feedback, they may become sceptical and unwilling to participate" (Leckey & Neill, 2001, p.25; see also Watson, 2003). This is especially important to consider when viewing students as "customers", where their role as fee-paying consumers theoretically gives them "a new position of power and expectation in relation to the education they receive" (Cardoso 2009; Little and Williams 2010 cited in Manuel et al., 2025, para. 4). In practice, however, motivation and purpose are perhaps more important elements of the rep experience than paying students for their time: money is not often enough of an incentive for a student to deem something worthy of their time, and we cannot answer, "Why should I bother?" with, "Because we will pay you" alone, if students do not also feel that their feedback will be listened to, understood, and tackled in good faith. This could be construed as the tyranny of student participation where students are expected to participate as active members of their academic community but the benefit of their effort will accrue to future generations and the University through subsequent improvements, perhaps hidden to the current students, which in turn can fuel survey fatigue (Mendes & Hammett, 2020).

The Third Space Perspective – Vicky

I work within the Student Library and Academic Services department where I predominantly work in partnership with students from underrepresented groups. I am also Deputy Lead of the SaP LC. My role occupies an environment that increasingly spans academic and professional services to provide an integrated and inclusive approach to teaching and learning both within, and outside of, the curriculum.

One of the ways I do this is via the Student Inclusion Consultant (SIC) scheme which provides flexible, paid partnership opportunities to current students from all entry points with the aim of enhancing inclusive practice informed by lived experiences. This is funded through, and aligned with, our Access and Participation Plan (APP) allowing students to share their voice and experience while contributing to a culture shift within the University. It is one of the interventions taken by Northumbria University to both better understand our student demographic and help create a sense of belonging.

I am particularly interested in two points that Marcus raises. When considering his internship, and comparing it to the rep role, he notes that the former allows 'a more autonomous working style, which is more reflective of real-world business environments'.

To me, this highlights a fundamental benefit of sharing student voice through an internship or similar role. This example of experiential, work-based learning enhances a student's post-University prospects by helping to build skills and social capital as well as develop networks. As an Entrepreneurship student, these benefits will be of particular note to Marcus who has plans to start his own business in future. Students recognise that, alongside a degree, they need to graduate with examples of extra-curricular engagement, however that may look. To an employer, the context of that engagement might not matter as much as the motivation for doing so.

Working within an internship, or in another paid role such as a SIC), allows a student to experience, and potentially be challenged by, that autonomous working style in a safe and supportive environment. As someone who regularly works with a team of SICs, I strive to create these conditions when working in partnership, however I recognise that not all colleagues feel equipped to do the same. One of the actions I have identified as a result of writing this collaborative piece is to work with the SICs, the SaP LC and Marcus as intern to design and develop resources to equip and enhance staff-student partnership working.

The second point that I'd like to respond on from Marcus' reflection was his conclusion that working in different roles has reinforced his 'commitment to making a difference'. This suggests that bringing positive change is the thread that motivates him to take part in all the roles he has engaged with so far. Regardless of the context, students need to know that the work they're doing, and the voice that they're sharing, is being listened to and acted upon. They want to know that a commitment to closing the feedback loop is alive and well. When done successfully, staff-student partnerships can enable this difference to be made.

Marcus' sentiments echo the voice of other students I have worked in partnership with. To explore this further I asked John Booth-Carey, one of the Senior SICs, to consider Marcus' reflections and identify where the differences and alignments were between their experiences.

John

"The points raised by Marcus are interesting. I have had similar experiences from being a student rep for my course with that role leading to my current position as a Senior Student Inclusion Consultant (SSIC). I initially became a rep for the same reasons that Marcus described, and it was this role that influenced my decision to apply for the SSIC role.

There is a main theme that runs throughout the paper – student motivations. A common reason why students often are driven by financial incentives (or at least why it has become more common) is due to the ongoing cost of living crisis or particular lived experiences compounded with the cost of living.

Many students, including many SICs, are not driven by financial incentives but instead are driven by impact and development, whether that be personal or wider reaching throughout the University. This is not often something that can be achieved in an unpaid role, such as a rep role, and so it is the students who are not necessarily driven by financial incentives who end up in paid roles like the SIC team. That is why student-staff partnership opportunities work so well. This leads to a shift in power dynamic where the student is treated as an equal, which has very much been my experience as an SSIC. The same cannot be said for my role as a rep, in which I fully concur with Marcus' analysis."

The Academic Perspective - Stephany

I am an Associate Professor in Education at Northumbria University, serving as Teaching Excellence Lead and Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in the Department of Applied Sciences. I have led projects to develop innovative, inclusive practices through a "students as partners" (SaP) framework. I founded and lead the SaP LC which seeks to develop innovations that support equality of participation and positive outcomes for all.

As an academic, it is all too easy to agree to the sentiment that student perspectives provide real world relevance that enrich teaching practices. However, there are multiple models and varied approaches to our understanding of what we really mean when we say that we are engaging with student voice. In my experience, and reflecting on Marcus' account, student voice is often driven by personal, academic, and social motivations including a desire for leadership experience, peer influence through a sense of responsibility or a passion to make a difference. Done well, this highlights the advantages of engaging with student voice. However, why and when students choose to share their voice is nuanced and therefore a one size approach does not fit all. A student may not feel confident or motivated to advocate for their cohort as a representative but relish the opportunity to work closely with a member of staff to co-create a project and its outputs. This emphasises the importance of the Northumbria SIC scheme as it enables student voice that may otherwise be overlooked, to be listened to. This can include, but is not restricted to, the voice of commuter students, student carers, disabled students, and mature students.

I have often had conversations with academic staff about the SaP philosophy and come away feeling I hadn't made the points I wanted to make. This highlights a challenge – do staff understand what this approach entails and are they empowered to do so? On reflection, staff were often interpreting what I was saying about SaP from a formal 'them and us' model where a select few students contribute to improving the experiences of the cohort by expressing opinions at committees. SaP is reciprocal and calls into question traditional dynamics of how learning and teaching occurs in HE. It goes beyond listening to the student voice. Both models are valuable but different, as Marcus considers in his account. Both amplify student voice but require different approaches and crucially, have different student-academic dynamics as well as distinct impacts on institutional culture and student engagement.

As Marcus and the Students' Union discuss, existing roles within the structures of HE institutions can be limited by the formalities of governance structures leading to disengagement as students perceive a lack of meaningful opportunity for influence. Mindful not to diminish the value of existing student voice initiatives but to provide clarity over the types of partnership models we are seeking to put into practice, I developed the Northumbria CITE SaP LC. This seeks to enable both staff and students to feel equipped to use an appropriate approach depending on their context. For example, working with Marcus as a student partner, we are collating and showcasing examples of best practice from across the University to foreground the importance of involving students with academics and professional service staff in SaP collaborative initiatives.

We ran a poll asking students with roles across the University what they think the key principles of working in partnership should be. The most frequent responses were equity, inclusivity, collaboration and respect alongside trust, empowerment and reciprocity. The SaP LC has active membership from both staff and students, however, academic engagement has been hard to achieve and maintain. Rather than viewing this as a resistance to embracing the SaP concept, we hope to bring more academic staff on board by developing a set of good practice principles for SaP aligned with Northumbria pedagogy so that staff and students understand what SaP is, are able to recognise the work they do and feel empowered to engage with it.

When considering whether students can work in this way, both a benefit and a criticism of the approach are the greater freedom and autonomy afforded to the student. Further challenges of overburdening the student, power dynamics and the potential for tokenism mean it is important to set expectations and agree ways of working at the outset. This enables everyone to make a meaningful contribution whilst balancing student voice with educational goals. One way that I have found helps to achieve this is through an open conversation at the outset using the POWER (power, openness, willingness, ethnocentrism, and reflexivity) Reflective Framework for Students-as-Partners Practices and Processes (Smith et al., 2019). This allows partners to nurture power-sharing relationships by reflecting on areas of power within the project and to actively engage in the negotiation of ideas and sharing of responsibilities and challenges (Hayman et al., 2024).

Conclusions

The student voice approach offers numerous benefits that go beyond simply improving institutional policies. It empowers students, fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, improves culture, and promotes more relevant and responsive educational practices. When done thoughtfully and authentically, student voice can lead to a more engaged, motivated, and inclusive learning environment that supports the growth and development of all students.
It is that thoughtful and authentic approach that addresses Trowler's (2015) concerns of superficial engagement. Throughout this case study, staff and student reflections have explored initiatives through a range of contextual settings. Questions were asked as much as answered but there was consensus that the challenge isn't in how to facilitate student voice initiatives but to do so in a way that is meaningful, inclusive and that recognises students' motivations.

Ultimately, each approach discussed here contributes to a more responsive educational environment, but the success of these methods depends on the broader institutional culture and commitment to genuinely valuing students' input. The Quality Assurance Agency's (2024) emphasises the importance of institutional accountability and this underpins both Northumbria University and Northumbria Students' Union approach to the design and implementation of these diverse student voice methods.

The POWER Reflective Framework for Students-as-Partners Practices and Processes (Smith et al., 2019) has been used to great effect as a theoretical framework. It offers a practical, structured approach for anyone involved in staff-student partnerships. It supports reflective dialogue at the start, throughout, and after a project, encouraging all participants to explore what 'partnership' means in a given context, positionality, clarify goals, and discuss expectations. The framework prompts reflection on openness, willingness to engage, ethnocentrism, and reflexivity - key to building inclusive, collaborative relationships. By using this framework, teams can critically examine how power operates within a project, identify successes and challenges, and intentionally disrupt traditional hierarchies to foster mutual, equitable partnerships in any educational or collaborative setting.

Moving forward, we would like to see equal partnerships free from invisible barriers such as power dynamics, which intersect with other inequities, including gender, race, class, culture, and nationality. Students need the freedom to create those partnerships and projects from the outset, rather than staff inviting students into existing structured partnerships that are often exclusive and limiting. This approach requires a degree of freedom and agency to innovate, empower, and transform.

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