

# **Amplifying Student Voice in the Creation of a Hybrid Community Space**

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## **Abstract**

This practice-based case study reports on evidence generated from the implementation of a hybrid community space as a new method to engage with students' voice. This innovative model moves the concept of student voice away from the conventional and hierarchical approach currently in place in Higher Education to engage with students as part of a partnered learning community.

This project involved a large undergraduate cohort of around 500 students in the design and implementation process, ensuring that the space truly reflected their needs and preferences. By empowering students to actively participate and make decisions, the project aimed to foster a sense of ownership, enhance social connections, and support community-building activities within the cohort.

By emphasising the importance of fostering a sense of belonging among students and integrating activities related to sustainable development goals, the case study speaks to broader issues of student wellbeing, and social and environmental responsibility. Additionally, the case study emphasises the importance of student voice and agency in shaping educational experiences, sparking innovation and fostering stronger connections between students and academics.

## **Introduction**

The term 'student voice' is widely used to describe a broad range of activities in higher education. While traditionally framed within formal feedback mechanisms such as student surveys and committees, student voice is increasingly understood as a dynamic, collaborative process that shapes educational experiences, strengthens academic communities, and enhances student agency (Young & Jerome, 2020). This case study explores the role of student voice in community creation, examining how participatory engagement can foster a sense of belonging, empower students as co-creators of their learning environment, and support sustainable, transformative outcomes in higher education.

## **Context and Rationale**

Over the past five years, students in higher education have experienced profound disruptions driven by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical and economic instabilities (Blake et al., 2022). Alongside these challenges, the demographic landscape of the UK student population has shifted significantly. The number of international students has grown steadily, while the profile of the domestic cohort has evolved, with nearly half of United Kingdom (UK) students now identified as 'commuter students'—those who live at home and travel to campus (Husbands & Kay, 2025).

Most current undergraduate students can be classified as Generation Z (Gen Z), born between 1996 and 2010 (McKinsey & Company, 2024; Parry & Battista, 2019). Gen Z, have grown up in a world saturated with technology, shaping their communication, learning preferences, and social behaviours. As a result of early exposure to global activist campaigns, such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and climate change movements, Gen Z are conscious of social justice issues and global inequalities, often seeking to advocate for meaningful change (Dollinger, 2023). Additionally, their reliance on social media creates both opportunities and challenges. While social platforms can foster connections and amplify their voice, they can also contribute to feelings of stress and isolation (McKinsey & Company, 2024). Understanding these dynamics is key to supporting Gen Z learners in building resilience and thriving within the higher education environment.

Post-pandemic shifts toward blended learning have reduced the time that students spend in class, whilst the ongoing cost-of-living crisis has placed additional pressure on some students, for whom regular campus attendance can be financially burdensome (Husbands & Kay, 2025). Moreover, many students - having faced significant disruptions to their education and social development during the pandemic - struggle to engage meaningfully with peers and the broader university environment. These challenges have fuelled a growing interest in the concept of 'student belonging' within the higher education sector (Gilani, 2023).

This case study focuses on the experiences of around 500 undergraduate students enrolled on a suite of degree programmes in Fashion Business and Technology (FBT) at a Russell Group university. After over a year of fully remote learning during the pandemic, these students experienced a gradual return to normalcy in the 2021/22 academic year. However, the university's adoption of a new blended learning approach impacted on student engagement and community dynamics. The move to a new university building in 2022 introduced additional challenges by altering the physical and social infrastructure - academic staff offices were no longer accessible to students; there were no discipline-specific reception desks and no discipline-specific common room.

A shift to a university-wide 'student experience programme' not only disrupted students' sense of connection through impersonal, centralised communication but also highlighted the limitations of traditional methods for collecting student voice. Students were increasingly disengaging with the traditional methods, failing to capture diverse perspectives and meaningful engagement (Stein et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2023). All these challenges reinforced the need for more effective and inclusive ways to integrate student voice into the learning environment.

Feedback collected through the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Student Voice Committee confirmed students' feelings of disconnection, highlighting a lack of belonging. In response, students requested more opportunities for social activities to foster engagement and build a sense of community.

The Wonkhe and Pearson 'Building Belonging in Higher Education' report, published in 2022, argued that:

*“...the greatest impact that universities can have on students’ sense of belonging is to improve the way they connect their students [...] Getting to know their peers has a profound effect on students’ sense of belonging because it enables them to build a support network and develop confidence” (Blake et al., 2022, p.5).*

The report suggested that such peer connections were best forged in a course context during scheduled contact hours. Alongside the formal, structured space of seminars and lectures, students in the Wonkhe/Pearson survey reported that having subject-specific structured social time without an academic focus was important in creating a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the report emphasised the significance of online social spaces and regular digital communication from tutors, identifying how student voice can be amplified through both face-to-face and virtual platforms, strengthening students’ sense of connection and engagement within the learning community (Blake et al., 2022).

Fielding’s (2011) patterns of partnership model offers a valuable framework for understanding and enhancing student voice within higher education settings. Rather than viewing student involvement as a linear spectrum from passive recipient to active participant, Fielding conceptualises partnership as a non-hierarchical typology of possible relationships, including students as data sources, active respondents, co-enquirers, knowledge creators, joint authors and intergenerational learning as participatory democracy. Applying this model highlights the importance of fostering genuine, reciprocal interactions where students are empowered to share insights, influence decision-making, and collaborate with staff on shaping their educational experience. In the context of the FBT programmes, embracing Fielding’s partnership model underscores the need to move beyond traditional forms of consultation toward more inclusive, dialogic spaces where students and staff can work together as equal contributors to the learning community. This approach not only strengthens a sense of belonging but also ensures that the diverse perspectives and skills of all stakeholders meaningfully inform the evolving culture of the discipline.

The project described here was designed to address the Wonkhe/Pearson recommendations, by facilitating peer connections during scheduled contact hours, by providing subject-specific social activities outside of academic contexts, and by leveraging both in-person and online spaces for student engagement to allow student voice to be more actively incorporated into the learning environment. This resulted in the creation of a hybrid space for FBT students, comprising of an online community space using Microsoft Teams, together with timetabled, on-campus ‘socials’, bringing together FBT students and academics.

## **Description of Project**

The project began in September 2023 with the creation of an online community space. This initiative was inspired by a similar Teams space previously developed for BSc Accounting students at the Alliance Manchester Business School (Sivalingam, 2023).

The Teams space is structured into a variety of channels to enhance functionality and accessibility:

- A General channel for all year groups, used to disseminate programme-wide messages and information.
- An Events channel, accessible to both staff and students, where extra-curricular opportunities can be shared.
- Private channels for each year group, tailored to address the unique needs of each cohort.
- Dedicated private channels for student representatives, Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) leaders, placement students, student ambassadors, and Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), fostering peer-to-peer communication within these specific groups.

The primary objective of the online community space is to create a centralised hub for communication, effectively reducing the reliance on email for both staff and students. It aims to facilitate two-way communication between staff and students, as well as peer-to-peer interactions. This platform enables collaboration, amplifies student voice, and brings the entire teaching and learning community together to enhance the overall student experience. However, online platforms alone often fall short in fostering a genuine sense of connection and belonging among students (Hollister et al., 2022), necessitating additional face-to-face opportunities to build stronger peer relationships.

Recognising that a Teams space alone is insufficient, four on-campus social sessions are scheduled annually (twice per semester) to complement the online platform. Social events are timetabled for student accessibility and include staff, encouraging informal interactions that strengthen staff-student relationships. When students feel connected to their peers and to the academic staff, they are more likely to actively participate in shaping their learning experiences, ensuring their voices are heard and valued (Conner et al., 2025).

Co-creation lies at the heart of this initiative, ensuring that the social events are directly informed by and responsive to student voice. By actively involving students in shaping their experiences, the programme of on-campus events not only reflects their interests and preferences but also fosters a deeper sense of ownership and engagement within the community. As a result of this collaborative approach, a diverse range of events has been developed such as crafting Christmas cards for hospitalised children, designing fashion activism T-shirts to express creative advocacy, hosting an alumni event to provide networking opportunities, and organising a Clothes Swap as part of the world's largest fashion activism movement. By prioritising co-creation and responding to student feedback, these events aim to build a vibrant, inclusive community while addressing meaningful causes that resonate with students' values and passions (O'Hara, 2023).

Students take ownership of the on-campus socials by assuming responsibility for leading, organising, and promoting events. This is exemplified by the Clothes Swaps. Students promote the events both within the University and to the wider community and oversee all aspects of the events, from organising logistics to staffing the swap on the day, highlighting their leadership and collaborative skills.

In conclusion, this project exemplifies an integrated approach to amplifying student voice and fostering student wellbeing with meaningful interactions. By blending a structured online Teams space with dynamic, in-person social events, this hybrid initiative effectively addresses the diverse needs of students while promoting a sense of belonging and inclusion. The integration of co-creation ensures that the activities not only reflect the voices and values of the students but also empower them to take ownership of their community experience.

## **Evidence of effectiveness and impacts**

### *Teams Space*

The Teams space was introduced to all FBT undergraduate students in Welcome Week 2023, with year managers explaining its benefits and how to use it. Initially, it proved challenging to engage all students, particularly those in their second and third years, but year managers were persistent in utilising Teams as their primary communication channel with students.

From a staff perspective, the Teams space has streamlined communication with specific groups of students while reducing email traffic. It also serves as a readily accessible archive of communications, enabling both staff and students to locate previous messages with ease.

The interactive capabilities of Teams play a crucial role in fostering community. While emails are effective for disseminating information, they lack the functionality for direct student engagement. Teams allows students to interact with posts, either by asking questions or simply acknowledging receipt through an emoji, thereby creating opportunities for dialogue and connection. Moreover, Teams supports the development of valuable transferable skills. Widely utilised across industry settings, the platform provides students with the opportunity to learn professional communication, enhancing their employability upon graduation.

Assessing levels of student engagement has been difficult, as public posts by students within the Teams channels remain infrequent. However, some students gained confidence in utilising the platform's one-to-one chat feature to communicate directly with their Programme Director, Year Manager, or peers. PASS leaders also make effective use of their private channel to share resources. Representatives from student societies occasionally post in the Events channel, and other students sometimes engage with posts by 'liking' them.

Teams' analytics can be used to monitor engagement and activity on the platform. In the 90 days to February 10, 2025, the FBT online community had 122 active users across 11 active channels. On the day with the highest engagement level (November 21, 2024), there were 34 total posts, replies, reactions and mentions.

To evaluate the initial impact of the Teams space, a Microsoft Forms poll was conducted at the end of the first semester in 2023/24, however this received only 13 responses. Several factors could have contributed to the low response rate, including survey fatigue and competing academic priorities. As a result, the findings may not fully represent the wider student body, and any conclusions drawn should be considered within the context of this limited feedback. Most respondents (69%) had accessed the FBT Teams Community space and found the announcements, events, and posts useful, indicating a generally positive perception of the platform's content.

The majority of students (67%) checked the Teams community space at least once a week, and all respondents indicated that they felt connected to their year groups or the wider FBT community, suggesting active engagement and a sense of belonging. A few students reported difficulties or lack of awareness about the Teams community, and some suggested clearer communication to increase involvement, highlighting areas for potential improvement in outreach and inclusivity.

To gain deeper insights into the student experience and the effectiveness of the Teams channel, a programme of focus groups is planned for 2025/26. These sessions are designed to collect more qualitative data from students, allowing for a richer understanding of how the platform supports engagement, communication, and community-building. The focus groups will provide an opportunity for participants to share their perspectives, identify areas of strength, and highlight aspects where improvements may be needed. This initiative will help inform ongoing development of the Teams space, ensuring it continues to meet the needs of the FBT community.

### *On-Campus Socials*

Organising on-campus social events involves significant planning and coordination. Securing a suitable space in the timetable and identifying a venue large enough to accommodate up to 500 students can be particularly challenging. Catering is provided at most events, not only to encourage attendance but also as a wellbeing measure, acknowledging the financial pressures students face due to the cost-of-living crisis.

Attendance at on-campus social events during the first semester each year has consistently been strong, with participant numbers typically ranging from 100 to 200 students. This healthy turnout reflects both the enthusiasm for community-building and the appeal of events designed to support wellbeing and foster connections. However, a noticeable decline in attendance often occurs in the second semester as students' attention shifts increasingly toward assessment deadlines and academic commitments. This seasonal pattern highlights the importance of strategically planning events to accommodate students' evolving priorities throughout the academic year.

As the project has evolved, it has become increasingly apparent that certain activities resonate more strongly with students than others. Creative and hands-on events that incorporate an element of social responsibility consistently attract higher levels of interest and participation. These activities not only enable students to express their creativity and develop practical skills but also offer a sense of purpose through contributing to causes that matter to them and the wider community. In contrast, more traditional formats like quizzes or icebreakers tend to generate less enthusiasm, suggesting that students are drawn to opportunities where they can make a tangible impact and engage in meaningful collaboration with their peers.

Students have expressed excitement about opportunities to lead and engage in activities that align with their interests. Events such as the Clothes Swap have sparked conversations about sustainability practices, while volunteering initiatives like crafting greeting cards for hospitalised children (Post Pals) provided opportunities for students to contribute positively to society. These events not only allowed them to explore their passions but also provided

valuable industry-related experience in areas such as social media and graphic design, creating a sense of purpose in their involvement. Furthermore, the activities are impactful in encouraging meaningful participation and raising awareness around social responsibility. These efforts were recognised as purposeful and uplifting, adding depth to the social experiences.

Anecdotal qualitative data obtained from student feedback were reviewed and analysed inductively. Key patterns were grouped into thematic categories, which were then mapped onto relevant theoretical constructs drawn from the literature. Table 1, below summarises the key findings and thematic analysis:

<b>1. Student Voice and Agency</b>	
<p>Students expressed a clear desire to participate in activities that resonated with their personal interests and professional goals. The comments indicate a sense of ownership over their learning and a willingness to contribute actively to causes they care about - particularly sustainability. This aligns with Fielding's (2011) model of student voice as democratic fellowship, where students are co-creators of meaning in educational spaces rather than passive recipients.</p> <p><i>"I wanted to get involved to gain experience helping out in something that felt very relevant to me and my interests. This was an opportunity to practice practical industry skills such as graphic design and social media content while applying these in an area I'm passionate about and supporting a great cause."</i></p> <p><i>"I know the fashion revolution event created a buzz and got a lot of people talking about circular practices and how to take part."</i></p>	
<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
Relevance to personal interests	Empowerment and student-led learning
Development of industry-aligned skills	Integration of formal and informal learning
Passion-driven participation	Reflects democratic engagement and autonomy
<b>2. Belonging and Social Integration</b>	
<p>A consistent theme was a strengthened sense of belonging to both their course community and the wider university. Social interactions through both the Teams space and events played a key role.</p> <p>Belonging is crucial to student retention and academic success (Blake et al., 2022; Thomas, 2012). The initiatives provided meaningful social contexts for developing relationships with peers and staff, which supports emotional security and engagement.</p> <p><i>"We have felt more integrated into the wider FBT community and has provided a chance to socialise with a wider group of students than previously before. We have felt more like we belong to a student community and the university."</i></p> <p><i>"I think Teams and [Socials], have made me more friends."</i></p>	

*"These activities also allow me to enjoy my university time more and integrate into university life."*

*"My experience and sense of belonging were enhanced through the social initiatives as I got to spend more time with a wider group of students from the class and got to know our lecturers better."*

Indicators	Interpretation
Mention of wider student group involvement	Expanded social networks
Enhanced interaction with lecturers	Breaking down student–staff barriers
Feeling part of a university community	Increased social identity and wellbeing

### 3. Social Responsibility and Ethical Awareness

Several students articulated an understanding of and commitment to social responsibility, especially in the context of sustainability and community action.

These comments reflect the development of civic values, in line with higher education's responsibility to foster ethical citizenship and global responsibility (Jones et al., 2010; Nussbaum, 1997).

*"I think these initiatives are really important to get students thinking about sustainability and taking action in this space."*

*"I was excited to hear about the opportunity to get involved in this volunteer opportunity to promote circularity and raise awareness around these issues."*

*"Doing something more meaningful than just socialise."*

*"I also hope that my greeting cards can bring joy to the children."*

Indicators	Interpretation
Involvement in social responsibility events	Ethical development and altruism
Interest in sustainable fashion practices	Environmentally conscious learning
Reflection on impact	Deepened understanding of community engagement

### 4. Emotional and Personal Growth

The affective dimension of participation was strongly expressed, with students reporting feelings of happiness, enjoyment, and well-being.

This aligns with research on student engagement and mental health, showing that regular, purposeful interactions with their peers and teachers are a valuable resource for student well-being (Baik et al., 2019).

*"Feel happy and cheerful."*

*"Lovely well-being activity."*

*"I really enjoy participating in these activities."*



Indicators	Interpretation
Use of emotive language	Emotional satisfaction from participation
Reference to well-being	Value of holistic student development
<b>5. Interdisciplinary and Peer Learning</b>	
<p>Students also described opportunities to interact across cohorts and programmes, benefiting from mentorship and broader peer networks.</p> <p>This suggests that these initiatives supported peer-to-peer learning, a recognised pedagogical approach to enhancing academic and social integration (Topping, 2005).</p> <p><i>"I have met senior students... They shared their learning methods and social experiences."</i></p> <p><i>"Nice idea to have socials and see others from other programmes."</i></p>	
Indicators	Interpretation
Cross-year interaction	Informal peer mentoring and knowledge sharing
Socialising across programmes	Breakdown of siloed learning environments

*Table 1: Thematic Analysis of Anecdotal Student Feedback*

This analysis demonstrates the role of both the Teams space and on-campus socials in fostering multiple positive outcomes for students, promoting well-being and enhancing their university life. The initiatives provided moments of joy, connection, and collaboration, leaving an impression on their personal and academic journeys. Students have shared their experiences of the alumni networking and Clothes Swap events on LinkedIn, showing the value they derive from these activities. The project has therefore delivered positive outcomes, marking it as a success.

These findings reinforce the importance of designing extracurricular opportunities that are student-led, inclusive, and ethically engaged. Through a combination of meaningful activities and community-focused events, the project has successfully built a supportive and vibrant environment for FBT students.

## Reflection on the project and future plans

### *Challenges*

While the hybrid community space initiative has achieved its aim of fostering student voice and enhancing peer-to-peer connections, several challenges emerged throughout implementation. Notably, engagement in on-campus socials across student cohorts was uneven: although first-year students participated enthusiastically, engagement dropped among second- and final-year students, many of whom were more selective and primarily sought events with clear academic or professional benefits. This highlighted the challenge of designing activities that resonate with a broader range of students, particularly those with established routines and different priorities. Furthermore, reliance on a core group of highly engaged student organisers risked overburdening volunteers and limited the diversity of perspectives feeding into event planning.

Additionally, while the Teams space facilitated informal connections and information-sharing, its adoption was sometimes hindered by students' varying levels of digital literacy and competing communication preferences. Feedback indicated that not all students found the platform intuitive or essential, leading to fluctuating participation rates. The asynchronous nature of online forums also limited spontaneous conversation and relationship-building.

Whilst the hybrid community space has strengthened peer-to-peer connections and helped students integrate more fully into the FBT community. There are challenges when considering the scalability of the model university wide. Differences in disciplinary cultures, cohort sizes, and available resources mean that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be feasible. Scaling up would require significant coordination in timetabling, dedicated staff support, consistent funding, and robust mechanisms for sharing best practice. There is also a risk that if the hybrid community model becomes a centralised, top-down initiative, it could lose the organic, student-driven ethos that makes the FBT initiative effective.

### *Potential Solutions*

To address these challenges, several adjustments are proposed. First, event planning should be diversified to include more targeted activities co-designed with less-engaged student groups, ensuring relevance across cohorts. Rotating leadership roles and offering incentives for organisers may help to broaden participation in planning and reduce burnout. Providing digital skills workshops could increase comfort with the Teams platform. Clearer communication about the benefits of involvement, such as networking opportunities or skills development, could also help boost engagement among students with competing priorities.

For future expansion and adaptation, it is recommended that each faculty or department tailor the community model to their subject area, recognising differences in student interests and learning environments. For example, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) faculties might focus on discipline-specific hackathons or project showcases, while arts and social sciences could prioritise creative collaborations or discussion forums linked to current topics. Piloting the model in a diverse range of settings will help refine strategies and identify which elements are most transferable. Partnerships with professional services and student societies could also support integration and sustainability.

### *Future Plans*

The Teams community aspect of the project is one of several pilots being conducted at the University. It will be included in a cross-faculty evaluation project next year, as it has been identified as a model for broader implementation.

Looking ahead, we aim to extend the hybrid approach in FBT to include our 300+ postgraduate taught students with the goal of cultivating a learning community that spans the entire discipline. This has already been piloted successfully through our second Clothes Swap event, which was collaboratively organised and promoted by a mixed team of undergraduate and postgraduate students.

By foregrounding the importance of belonging with the use of a Teams space and by embedding socially responsible on-campus activities, the project has demonstrated the value of student voice and agency in shaping educational experiences, encouraging innovation, and strengthening relationships between students and academic staff. This hybrid model presents a replicable and effective framework for community-building and student engagement.

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