Accountable and Empowered: Professionalising Student Voice

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Abstract

Incorporating Student Voice in institutional decision-making and strategic work is an extremely important and valued aspect of higher education (HE). This case study explores the challenges and opportunities related to embedding student voice within a University History Department. We highlight the limitations of traditional course representation systems and identify a need for a more professional and accountable approach. The department introduced paid Student Voice Ambassador (SVA) roles to ensure meaningful and diverse student participation in departmental governance. This approach has led to improved student engagement, more effective decision-making, and enhanced collaboration between students and staff. Its success is evidenced by positive feedback from both students and staff. In this article, both staff and students involved in this process reflect on the importance of professional conduct, accountability, and empowerment in the SVA role. We also consider future plans to further integrate and promote the role within the broader student body. Our experiences have demonstrated that professionalising student voice through paid roles can significantly enhance the impact and legitimacy of student contributions in HE.

Introduction, Context and Rationale

Embedding student voice into institutional decision-making and strategic work has long been recognised as both essential and challenging. In a culture in which students are increasingly perceived as "consumers" (Reynolds, 2022; Taylor, 2024), the inclusion of students' perspectives in institutional and departmental decision-making is even more paramount. Standard practice across the sector since the 1970s has been a course representation system based on elected volunteers. However, as Jim Dickinson argues, "the system has become more important than the 'partnership'" (Dickinson, 2020). Students attend committee meetings, complete surveys, give feedback, and are consulted on all manner of initiatives, but are often far from full partners in decision-making processes (McPherson & Heggie, 2015). These issues are compounded by questions of representativeness and legitimacy. Course reps have never been truly 'representative' of their cohorts, but as the student body has grown increasingly diverse it is impossible to avoid perceptions of "a small elite of student representatives dominating student opinion" (Menon, 2003, p.240; Quaye & Harper, 2014; Thomas, 2016; Holland et al., 2023). At the same time, students tasked with representing their peers have emphasised "an underlying concern about their legitimacy, and how seriously they were regarded by 'the system'" (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009, p.78). As a result, as Michael Fielding has

noted, while an "exciting range of student voice activities" have emerged across the sector, instead of fostering partnership, they instead can result in

> "unrealistic expectation, subsequent marginalization, and the unwitting corrosion of integrity [or] the betrayal of hope, resigned exhaustion and the bolstering of an increasingly powerful status quo" (Fielding, 2004, pp.295-6).

In our History Department, we have faced all these challenges. The issue came to a head in 2022 when students raised concerns that our undergraduate Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) was not functioning effectively. For several years, staff had been aware that the SSLC was essentially a self-nominated group that was far from representative of the wider student body. Out of a total student population of over nine hundred undergraduates, only two students that year ran for election (one of whom never attended a single meeting), and the rest had to be co-opted. Too few students were running to be course reps, too few students were voting for course reps, and too few students selected as course reps actually engaged with the departmental SSLC. Students were invited to attend department Education Committee meetings, but they reported that this role was unrewarding and unproductive. Student voice in these meetings was taken seriously by staff, but in practice often functioned as little more than a reporting mechanism for SSLC concerns, with little dialogue or discussion. This is a known issue across the sector, particularly at departmental and course level (Little et al., 2009).

No SSLC members from 2021/22 wished to run for re-election the following year, demonstrating their feelings of futility about the system. At the same time, National Student Survey (NSS) results indicated a desire for increased evidence that the department was acting on student voice feedback (Blair & Noel, 2014). Those students who were diligent in their role complained about the lack of consequences for peers who did not fulfil their duties and argued that the SSLC needed professionalising. It was time for a different approach.

Our Approach: Paid Student Voice Ambassadors

The department's goal was two-fold: to embed students into departmental decision-making as meaningful partners (McPherson & Heggie, 2015), and to ensure that those students who represented the 'voice' of our student body were professional, accountable, and empowered. Working in collaboration with the most engaged outgoing SSLC members, the department piloted a set of paid positions called 'Student Voice Ambassadors' (SVAs). That these were paid roles was integral to the department's approach. Staff wanted to "create an expectation", as Tyrell and Varnham (2015, p.39) put it, that the role "carries obligations and requires the student to be responsible for attending and participating". However, payment also reassured SVAs that the department recognised the time and effort dedicated to this work, would listen to student feedback, and valued student contributions as partners in departmental decision-making. This was deemed particularly important during the cost-of-living crisis, with students reporting lower levels of engagement – especially impactful for low-income students (Schofield, 2024; Hordósy & Clark, 2018).

Recruitment of Student Voice Ambassadors

The role is advertised to all students in the department each year. Students apply with a range of priorities, but we have a clear shared commitment to improving student experience by working collaboratively with staff. We are keen to convey student concerns and opinions to staff members, to become more integrated into the department, to get involved in the direction of our courses, and to shape departmental policy.

In the first year, all applicants were interviewed by two members of staff in the department. In interviews, to ensure that SVAs would be accountable to other students and speak for the student body, candidates were specifically asked about how they would represent the broader student voice and challenge staff where necessary. SVAs were selected based on their interview performance, with consideration of cohort (year group, degree programme) and demographic characteristics. Staff sought to put together a team who broadly represented the demographics of our student body. While staff felt confident that the SVAs they appointed were better able to represent their cohorts than the previously self-nominated SSLC had been, concerns were raised by the Students' Union that this system was not democratic and had the potential to give the impression that SVAs were "cherry-picked" by staff. Staff discussed this in detail with SVAs and have since incorporated broader student opinion into the selection process. Applicants are asked to answer a series of questions, with responses posted on departmental webpages with all students invited to comment. Student thoughts have tended to align with staff views of the best candidates at interview, thus reaffirming staff confidence in the selection of SVAs.

Work on Departmental Committees

SVAs sit on various department committees and working groups related to our interests – a practice identified as "the most strategic and potentially useful participative mechanism" (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009, p.71). For example, SVAs have participated in: a Learning Community Working Group focussed on extracurricular activities; the Department Education Committee overseeing all aspects of teaching and curriculum; working groups as part of an undergraduate curriculum review; the Department Social Inclusion Committee; and providing feedback on candidates for new academic hires.

It has been important to both staff and SVAs to ensure that student experience of departmental committees did not feel 'unrewarding and unproductive', as our predecessors had noted. It is imperative for committee Chairs to make SVAs feel welcome, and to make it clear that student voices are valued in each meeting. It can be daunting for us to speak up in departmental meetings, especially when we are in our first year of study or the role. Societal biases often impact on whose opinions are heard and valued (Kuh, 2008; Rothwell, 2024). As well as having specific agenda items dedicated to student voice, staff encourage SVAs to participate in discussions of all committee business. The departmental Student Voice Lead (a member of staff) also works to ensure that SVAs understand the agenda and papers, supporting us to share our opinions throughout each meeting. Knowing that staff will be receptive to our views, and indeed that student input is consistently and actively sought by staff, has made SVAs more confident to speak up.

The introduction of SVAs has had an immeasurable impact on departmental decision-making, especially in relation to teaching and learning. From a staff perspective, it is hard to think of an area where student voices have not had some influence on department policies and practice. SVAs and staff have collaborated on policies relating to assessments and deadlines, skills development, referencing, generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), marking criteria and feedback, and inclusive education. SVAs also provide feedback to staff developing new modules, and played a crucial role in a recent department curriculum review.

Student perspectives sometimes challenge staff assumptions. Partnership between students and staff, however, is not a simple case of responding to feedback or implementing changes that students wish to see (nor is it an opportunity for staff to use student comments to buttress their own viewpoint). As Bovill (2013, p.464) points out, in relation to the co-creation of curricula:

> *"Students and academic staff have different expertise to bring to the process, and there will be times when staff may appropriately have more voice, and other times when students may appropriately have more voice. Co-creation is not about giving students complete control, nor is it about staff maintaining complete control."*

Where student and staff opinions differ, respectful discussions ensure that student views are valued and discussed, a compromise is reached, and a strong working relationship is maintained. This pilot restructure was formally reviewed at SSLC and other departmental meetings at the end of the first year, with students and staff agreeing that student voice was much more embedded in the department than it had been previously. Moreover, the panel for our Institutional Teaching and Learning Review 2023, a quality assurance review process to evaluate and enhance the student experience, concluded that:

> *The department's responsiveness to Student Voice is very clear and comprehensive… Communication is excellent and student voice attentiveness is sector-leading, with the employment of Student Ambassadors proving very effective to the student-staff feedback loop.*

Work with the wider student body

In conjunction with the establishment of the SVA role, SSLC meetings have been opened to all students in the department. The dates and agendas are circulated to all students in advance, and all students are invited to attend, whether to comment on particular agenda items or to raise their own concerns. SSLC meetings are student-led, with relevant staff (including senior department staff) invited to answer students' questions and engage in consultation and collaboration. This enables students to receive immediate responses from relevant departmental staff, allowing students to feel that the department is receptive to the concerns or points they are raising.

Wider student attendance at SSLCs (beyond the SVAs) has been uneven. SVAs note that, while some students are sceptical that the department would listen to their concerns, most do understand that the SSLC is available for them if they wish to engage. SVAs have worked hard

to engage with our peers and encourage attendance at SSLCs, but we are aware that it is difficult to have consistently high levels of student engagement in student voice activities, because students have many demands on their time, including their academic work, societies and sports clubs, paid work, and of course, their social lives. That said, when an issue arises that students are particularly animated about (such as industrial action), student attendance at SSLC meetings can be quite high. To counter low attendance at SSLCs, SVAs engage in regular conversations with our peers and conduct surveys to gain a range of perspectives, which we then bring to the attention of the department.

Reflections on Professionalism, Accountability, and Empowerment

As noted above, the establishment of a paid role set expectations for the basic tenets of professional conduct. Staff expect SVAs to attend meetings, to be prepared, and to engage fully in discussions with staff. However, for SVAs, what it means to be professional and accountable goes much deeper than timekeeping and paperwork. As well as using our own experience and judgement to inform our input, SVAs have a clear understanding of our responsibility to reflect our cohorts' needs and concerns. We seek to represent the broader student body fairly and consistently, even if we do not personally agree with the concerns raised. A key part of this professional approach is ensuring that SVAs are accountable to their fellow students. If an SVA does not convey the views and opinions of students in departmental committees and working groups, then we have not upheld our role. Similarly, as representatives of the department, we are also accountable for how we conduct ourselves in public spaces, including online.

SVAs are in a unique position as a liaison, or bridge, between students and staff, and therefore maintaining the trust of both is important (Carey, 2012). Listening, respect, and understanding are key to ensuring that different perspectives are considered in decision-making processes. SVAs see our role as fundamentally collaborative, where we work alongside other members of the department (both staff and students) to achieve a common goal. In one sense, SVAs are empowered by the nature of their role: the department has given us the responsibility of bringing student perspectives into decision-making. Simply put, when students are paid, we are more likely to engage with the department to fulfil our duties (Flint & O'Hara, 2013; Chang, 2023). Beyond this, constructive working relationships require SVAs to be able to feel comfortable contributing to discussions. Confidence and authority are therefore fundamentally important to the empowerment of SVAs. As noted above, it is daunting to sit in a committee meeting with staff who have far more experience of university processes, but we can speak with authority about student perspectives because we have more understanding of student thoughts, concerns, and comments.

Future Plans

While the introduction of the paid SVA role has been an overwhelming success from a staff perspective, especially in relation to departmental decision-making around teaching and learning, there is still work to be done to fully embed the role within the wider student body. SVAs are becoming increasingly well-known around the department, but our role could be better understood by more students. With the support of staff, we could make more use of

induction activities, core module lectures, and social media to make the SVA role and our work more visible. This would in turn increase student confidence that their feedback and opinions are valued by the department. Many students don't realise that SVAs sit on department committees, and are able to contribute to decision-making, and so do not realise the power we have to make change in the department on behalf of students.

In the pilot year, we did not consider whether SVAs should be appointed for a single year or on an ongoing basis. There are clear benefits for both students and staff of experienced SVAs who understand departmental processes, but this is in tension with potential perceptions that such roles are being effectively limited to a small number of students (Little, 2009). Indeed, we have received some negative comments in the NSS that indicated a dissatisfaction that these positions were not open to all students each year. We now require all SVAs who wish to be reappointed to go through a fresh recruitment process, to ensure that all students have the opportunity to apply and to ensure that SVAs are held accountable in post. We will also run the appointment process in Term 3 going forwards, so that intermediate and final year SVAs are in post for induction activities, and we are considering the inclusion of an SVA on the appointment panel. We also recognise the importance of social interaction to bolster working relationships and improve trust and collaboration (Felten, 2020). Budget-permitting, we are considering holding informal social events between SVAs and key staff, in order that we can get to know each other better outside of formal committee spaces.

Conclusion

The appointment of SVAs has enabled student voice to play a central role in the development of our departmental policies and practices, and has enhanced the feeling of "belonging, integration, and community" in students' higher education experience (Bryson, 2014, p.10). As Cuthbert (2010, p.15) has noted, students in universities can be viewed as "'citizens' in a kind of academic democracy" and have a right for their voices to be empowered in shaping their own experiences. Similarly, despite the rise of students being perceived as "consumers" in universities, research has demonstrated how students have "recognised the need to remain active co-producers in their educational outcomes" (Reynolds, 2022). Professionalising SVAs, especially in the context of the cost-of-living crisis, has enabled us to ensure that the student voice embedded into our strategic decision making is accountable and empowered.

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