"What we got was so much more!" Student-Led Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy: Insights from the 'Barometer Project' at Bangor University, utilising a 'Students as Consultants' model

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Background and Rationale

This 'Barometer Project', conducted in collaboration with Bangor University and Undeb Bangor (Students' Union), aimed to evaluate the student experience of a previously developed 'Student-led Mental Health and Wellbeing (MHW) Strategy' (2022) and explore how students consider the Strategy should develop. Recognising the importance of student voice, the project utilised a 'Students as Consultants' (SaC) framework to ensure that student experiences and insights directly informed the development and evolution of the Student-Led MHW Strategy (2023-25).

The Barometer Project was initiated to ensure the strategy remained relevant for the student body and was conducted by a team of Student Consultants (SC), comprising both undergraduate and postgraduate students, who were commissioned to gather and analyse data on student experiences and perceptions of mental health and wellbeing, and report their findings to staff colleagues at Bangor. In collaboration with colleagues from Bangor University and Undeb Bangor, the approach sought to adopt the values of partnership (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014) with external colleagues from an education and leadership consultancy (Different Ways of Thinking Ltd) providing support, training and advice for the group of SCs and project team. The approach emphasised the value of collaboration between students and staff (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014) and drew on the external consultants' own practices of 'Institutional Dialogue' (Ody & Carey, 2016), which had been received positively in the first iteration of the Strategy's development in 2022.

The model of Institutional Dialogue (ID) emerged from work at The University of Manchester in the late 2000s as its student engagement practices and approaches were developing. There was an increasing demand across the institution for different ways to facilitate student-staff engagement opportunities, which could inform policy and practice. A series of approaches and methods brought together under an ID framework to enable breadth and depth of opportunities for 'interactions and relationships with peers and staff to inform institutional direction at all levels' (Ody & Carey, 2016 p.36). These approaches were subsequently mapped to partnership values of Healey, Flint & Harrington (2014) to explore how different methods of working with students and staff to inform institutional activity contribute to a continuum of student engagement comprising 'Feedback', 'Consultation', and 'Partnership'. The model did not propose one method or approach as better, merely that different

approaches would suit different situations. Figure 1 depicts the Institutional Dialogue model and provides examples of the methods used across the different approaches.

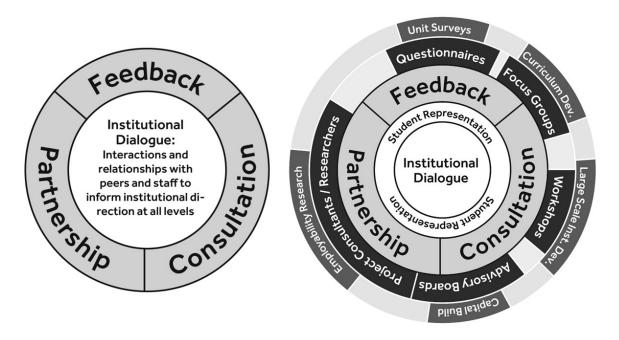


Figure 1: Model of Institutional Dialogue with associated methods and aligned practice as described in Ody & Carey (2016).

"The impetus for the Barometer exercise came directly from the University's Student Led MHW Strategy. On the heels of the pandemic in early 2022 we looked for ways to more effectively review and reframe our strategy. The original Students as Consultants project led to a strategy that is rooted in the articulated experiential learning of students themselves. It tapped into the tacit knowledge that students have of their own relationship with MHW, as well as the observed understanding of peers' experiences. It highlighted misalignments in the perceptions of staff, students and Undeb Bangor - of the services and support mechanisms, of the expectations and of the levels of need. The final strategy included the commitment to deliver an annual Barometer Reading of the temperature and pressure — to hold space to explore the often implicit and unspoken." - Project Sponsor, Bangor University

Wherever possible, this Case Study draws on the reflections of the Project Team (Project Sponsor, Project Coordinator, Student Consultants) to bring alive the work of this exciting initiative. This approach seeks to keep the connecting narrative to a minimum and allow individual voices to take centre stage.

Developing a Students as Consultants Approach

To support Bangor's initial exploration of this work, and to ensure the work was situated in the wider context, the education and leadership consultancy, Different Ways of Thinking Ltd facilitated an interactive workshop in October 2023. Drawing on existing practices that challenge the role of students and staff in institutional development activity (Millard, 2020;

Felten et al., 2019; Ody & Carey, 2016) the workshop encouraged staff and student colleagues from the University and Undeb to unpack the concept and approaches of Institutional Dialogue. Further workshops then refined the project's thinking to develop and propose the approach of 'Students as Consultants'. The students and staff who took part in this process agreed a SaC approach would provide suitable scope for the SCs to direct the project in a way they deemed appropriate whilst engaging with other students and staff to inform the project's activity. Collation of outputs from the various workshops resulted in the development of a SaC Framework for Bangor University, which described an approach – comprising four phases: initiation, preparation, implementation, and reporting – (Figure 2), and identified key roles (Figure 3) for a successful implementation of a SaC project.



Figure 2: Students as Consultants Framework: Approach

Phase 1: an initiation phase, when the idea of a SaC project is being explored with the Project Sponsor to consider if SaC is the most appropriate approach, instead of another Institutional Dialogue approach.

Phase 2: a preparation phase, once the proposal to adopt a SaC approach has been approved. A range of Stakeholders might be involved in developing a Project Initiation Template (PIT) with the Project Sponsor(s) to scope the potential reach of the project.

Phase 3: a delivery phase, to commission and train the Student Consultants and for their work to be completed.

Phase 4: a concluding phase, to allow outcomes to be reported, lessons learnt to be addressed and to inform future work.

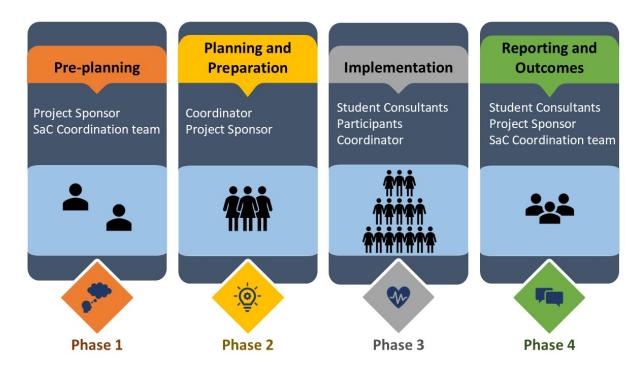


Figure 3: Students as Consultant Framework: Roles

Project Sponsor: An individual or group commissioning the consultants to undertake the activity. This role would have responsibility to outline the parameters of the project, consider potential target groups for consultation, secure necessary funding to facilitate activity, and identify how project outcomes will inform future direction/actions.

Undeb/University: As an outcome from the pilots and consultation workshop, it was agreed that if the University is leading as a sponsor then Undeb Bangor, should be commissioned as a co-Sponsor and vice versa aligning to the practices of Institutional Dialogue.

SaC Facilitator / Coordinator: a link role for the Consultants, acting as a sounding board for ideas and proposed paths of enquiry, delivering or supporting the training of the Consultants, providing opportunity for 'check-ins' and encouragement. This role provides critical support for the Consultants as they undertake the project and can be provided internally or externally depending on requirements. In this specific project, the support was provided by Different Ways of Thinking Ltd.

Student Consultants: those students recruited to design and carry out the project. These roles would receive training and induction across a range of areas and skills, whilst also receiving ongoing support. Student consultants could be engaged in working collaboratively to inform policy, practice, strategy, development of a new building etc. The project may require them to consult with students, staff and other stakeholders and this could be through informal conversations, interviews, focus groups, consultation workshops.

Participants - the target group(s) (students and/or staff) for consultation initially identified by the Project Sponsor, and likely augmented by the Consultants. These participants would be engaged by the Consultants to provide input, insights, reflections and/or recommendations on the identified topic.

It should be noted that support for the SCs can come from different sources or teams but there should be a set of expertise built up from partners such as the Students' Union, Student Services, Learning and Teaching, or similar, to ensure that support is provided and a consistent approach adopted across a SaC project. A wider governance process to support SaC adoption and coordination is advised.

Applying the Framework and Roles to the Barometer Project

71 students expressed an initial interest in getting involved, with 25 attending a launch event in February 2024 and 16 following through the entire project, which reported in May 2024. SCs were recruited from various disciplines and trained to lead the consultation process. SCs were spread across Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate Taught (PGT) programmes, from a range of disciplines including arts and sciences; there were a relatively large number from PGT programmes in Psychology / Counselling (>50%), who saw the project as an opportunity to contribute to elements of their Work Integrated Learning portfolio. No students from the Postgraduate Research (PGR) community expressed an interest to be part of this particular project. Mature students and students with disabilities, and caring responsibilities also chose to engage with the project. They engaged in workshops, facilitated wider student consultation events, and gathered data, primarily qualitative, through informal conversations and structured feedback sessions. The wider student consultation events engaged a broader range of students including more first-year UG students (30%) and some PGR students; students attending these consultation events were predominantly international (66%). The collaborative nature of the project was emphasised throughout, with SCs and staff working together to design and execute the consultation activities, recognising the need to address the power dynamics that come with such approaches (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023). The approach undertaken recognises the benefits of involving students as active contributors to institutional practices and policies (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Trowler, 2010).

Recruitment and Support Process

Following the launch event, and in preparation for running consultation activities with a wider group of students, the SCs participated in a series of in-person/online meetings to co-design the Consultation Workshops and contribute additional reflections to the Barometer Project.

These sessions explored a range of topics including:

- Create student definitions of good MHW
- Understand the current strategy and explore ways to test how Bangor University is doing to deliver the 'reality'
- Hear reflections and summary of informal conversations with other students
- Design and refine a series of questions to explore in wider Student Consultation workshops and agree processes or techniques to use in the workshops.

Communication across the student and staff team took place using a Miro Board (online whiteboard app), which provided a collaborative space to engage in discussion and reflection beyond the scheduled sessions. It also provided a tool to support reflection of the whole project experience and journey.

"The recruitment process for becoming a Student Consultant (SC) for the Barometer Project was simple but engaging. I volunteered because I was keen on the chance to impact mental health and wellbeing policy. The inclusivity of the recruitment process was a key highlight, as it welcomed students from all backgrounds and did not impose strict selection criteria. The launch event further reinforced this inclusivity, as it provided us with the opportunity to network with other consultants and understand the significance of our collective efforts. The organisers also ensured transparency by informing us of the dates of our future meetings from the outset, allowing us to plan and communicate our intentions." Student Consultant

Undeb Bangor (Bangor Students' Union), played an important role in reaching the wider student body and ensuring that students who may not have traditionally engaged in SU activity were aware of the opportunity and its likely impact on future students.

"We dedicated communications and marketing resource to this through social media channels...to promote the opportunity directly to different groups of student leaders and student representatives to reach as many students as possible from lots of different groups and demographics. Our messaging about the project likely gave a legitimacy around the genuine desire to hear the unfiltered voice of students." Project Coordinator, Undeb

SCs were supported in their roles with ongoing training in areas such as ethical issues and how to encourage engagement in conversations. Consequently, the opportunity provided development for the SCs alongside them directing the project. This shared experience built connections across the SCs as well as the wider SaC project team (students and staff):

"This approach made all of us feel valued and part of a diverse community. Students from a variety of disciplines, backgrounds, and levels of study came together—creating a vibrant mix of perspectives. This diversity not only enriched the consultation process but also opened our eyes to challenges and lived experiences different from our own. It fostered mutual respect and widened our understanding of what student wellbeing means across different cultural, social, and academic contexts." Student Consultant

Consulting with wider student body

Students across the University were invited to attend one of two 90-minute, in-person, 'wider Student Consultation' workshops. The workshop, provided opportunities to engage through paper-based questions and feedback, Mentimeter anonymous questions and group discussion. SC took on the role of Table Facilitators for the sessions and scribed / reported on table conversations.

"After training, we moved to the consulting phase. Our work was to interact with students using a variety of methods, such as structured focus groups and informal conversations. We took a semi-structured approach, always being adaptable...but...encouraging people to participate was the most challenging thing. Some students were unwilling to participate, maybe due to worries about anonymity or doubts about the impact of their opinion. To overcome this, we stressed the anonymity of respondents and the immediate

impact their findings would have on university policy. Additionally, having consultations in public and relaxed areas, such as Undeb Bangor, aided in the development of a sense of comfort." Student Consultant

The SaC project team was mindful of the nature of topics under discussion at these workshops and ensured colleagues from the University / Undeb Bangor attended these sessions as appropriate, which also led to some unintended and positive outcomes:

"Throughout the project, the SU contributed their thoughts and help to contextualise some of the feedback which was coming through from the Student Consultants. We ensured we had a presence at many of the in-person and online workshops to continue to build connection, community and demonstrate that Undeb Bangor would be advocating for students on the outcomes of the project. It was apparent that this led to SCs knowing that their work was not tokenistic and would make a real impact." Project Coordinator, Undeb Bangor

Reporting outcomes

A final session brought together SCs, Project Sponsors and other interested parties, to share key findings from the Barometer Project, consider the ongoing impact of the approach, and how SaC could be applied in other settings. Key outcomes of the project included specific reflection on, and recommendations for Bangor University's MHW Strategy, alongside student-drafted definitions of good MHW, which will be used at future iterations of the Barometer project.

These definitions included:

- 1. Good mental health and wellbeing is a holistic concept that embodies one's resilience to external and internal stressors. Well-being could refer to contentedness with their current circumstances while having a good support system.
- 2. Good mental health can be promoted by signposting those who want to avail the services. It addresses various aspects of one's life while providing them with the ability to be resilient.
- 3. Good mental health and wellbeing is being able to cope with life's challenges and stresses, work well, communicate effectively, maintain relationships, be in a healthy environment, manage emotions, make good decisions.
- 4. Good mental health and wellbeing is good coping skills and resilience with good state of mind. It is also making good use of signposted University support and your own support system.

Roles within the project

The Project Sponsor notes how their role helped to redistribute elements of power and create opportunities for authentic student voices to be heard (Healey et al., 2014) through the project reporting phase.

"As sponsors of the project the role was almost a stepped away facilitator. This meant agreeing the parameters and scope, ensuring the space was available (physically and figuratively) and then at the end of the process bringing into that space the individuals who would be able to respond to the findings in ways that would be meaningful. In many respects, it was an arms-length position to be in and having external facilitators to support the process and to bring all the components together ensured a level of impartiality and independence. This was particularly powerful as the Barometer outcomes were not steered by the different preconceptions and biases of staff within the University or Undeb Bangor." Project Sponsor

The SCs' reflections align with those students who are in roles of influence, where staff can step back, and so reap the benefits of this liminal space (Cook-Sather, 2024) and is an example of another student engagement type initiative where students step into third space roles, navigating potential institutional silos to shape policy and practice (Bamford and Moschini, 2024; Carey, 2022; Burns et al., 2019).

"The final presentation brought together the SC who had been devising strategies for better addressing mental health challenges in Bangor University. Using the data collected, we presented potential interventions and strategies aimed at making mental health services more accessible and approachable. This session not only raised greater awareness among university decision-makers about the state of mental health on campus but also fostered an open dialogue on how to enhance our collective efforts moving forward." Student Consultant

"The final step involved synthesising our findings...through collaborative writing sessions and presentations where we distilled the main issues, addressed student concerns, and offered practical recommendations... Acquiring and distilling student feedback increased our understanding of university governance and decision-making procedures, and made us more aware of the complexities involved in institutional change." Student Consultant

Reflections

As a team, we all enjoyed and developed throughout the duration of the Barometer Project, and this has continued in the writing of this article – itself a joint effort as we wanted to maintain the importance of partnership and collaboration that emerged in the project and follow it through into this submission.

Our reflections demonstrate how this collaborative approach not only provided valuable insights for the MHW strategy but also positively impacted the SCs' own mental health and professional development, alongside influencing staff in their own partnership practices (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Casey and Hatano, 2024).

"Running the consultations was most satisfying. Not only did I become more confident in chairing sessions, but I also increased my appreciation of student well-being issues. The process emphasised the value of active listening and tailoring communication strategies to varied audiences. Being part of this process was empowering. It was satisfying to know that our efforts were taken seriously, with staff welcoming our observations and

considering how these could be used in future welfare planning. Overall, being a Student Consultant was a life-changing experience. As SCs we saw that involvement in the project had a significant influence on our personal and professional lives...the project was a chance to enhance problem solving and leadership skills that we feel will benefit our future careers." Student Consultant

The project demonstrated that involving students as active partners in institutional development can lead to more inclusive and effective strategies (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019).

"It can be challenging, from a University perspective, to know whether the assumptions that are made about what students think, want or need are accurate. Many of us who work in universities have memories and narratives based on our own experiences as students. It can be difficult to know when our own assumptions and preconceptions are driving the shape of what we offer, deliver and create for students. Within the sector we focus on Student Voice, placing verbal value on co-creation and collaboration. This is in contrast with the reality of stretched resources and competing demands - financial, human and time. Facilitating a deeper understanding of the breadth and depth of students' experiences beyond the number pictures created through quantitative data requires a different type of institutional engagement. This way of working relies on a great degree of trust in the process and in the students who are delivering the consultancy. It demands an openness to listen, which can be both challenging and enlightening. It offers, however, an opportunity to understand the layered experiences of students and to distil that understanding into transformative action at a University level." Project Sponsor

The process enabled an emergence of data that focused on what was relevant to students, not staff. It built connectivity in new ways between students, and between students and staff. It facilitated different interactions which could capture a diversity of positions. It shifted power dynamics and offered different types of leadership experiences.

Colleagues in Undeb Bangor noted the flexible nature of the project engaged different voices – some of whom are traditionally time poor – and in doing so provided new ways for Undeb Bangor to explore its approaches for student voice activity, whilst also fostering a greater sense of belonging across the team of SCs (Mercer-Mapstone, 2017).

"Students' Unions tend to focus their work around working with student representatives on projects and the gathering of feedback. The project opened up new perspectives where students are recruited into roles to aid in the representation of student voices and in the interpretation and collation of insight. This way of working has influenced thinking in other areas of Undeb Bangor's student voice work...this project has given confidence to try alternative methods of populating student positions. One of the biggest impacts on the SCs was the sense of community, which...appeared to have a hugely beneficial impact on their continued engagement in the project and on their health and wellbeing. Within our work as Undeb Bangor, we do see that where community is developed, higher levels of engagement are sustained and where sense of community struggles to develop, there is lower engagement." Project Coordinator, Undeb Bangor

The SCs were clear about their sense of agency stemming from the inclusive and reciprocal approach adopted as part of the SaC Framework, and the redistribution of power emerging from the collaboration (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014).

"Due to how these sessions were conducted, we all had the chance to give our input and ideas. That way, the project always stayed interactive and very inspirational since we all put a little bit of ourselves into it. The training's emphasis on power dynamics in consultations was among its most beneficial features. To ensure that students felt comfortable providing feedback, the workshops urged us to switch from a top-down paradigm to a peer-to-peer one." Student Consultant

Conclusion

The success of this project underscores the value of student-staff partnerships in higher education. By adopting a co-creation approach, Bangor University and Undeb Bangor have set a precedent for future initiatives aimed at enhancing student wellbeing, as well as wider development initiatives, something underscored by both the Project Sponsor and SCs:

"As an institution that aims to deliver a transformative experience, this way of working held the space for courageous dialogue and, if continued, into the next iteration of the University's strategy, a framework to develop firmly rooted solutions and development to ensure a meaningful, relevant and flexible whole University approach to mental health and wellbeing." Project Sponsor

"...[at the final session] we saw how SaC could go beyond mental health and wellness in areas including: curriculum development, improving student services, and diversity and inclusion programs could benefit from the systematic training of students to serve as consultants and participate in institutional review. The project's success indicated that rather than depending solely on ad hoc consultation initiatives, colleges might gain from integrating student consultants into regular decision-making procedures." Student Consultant

All those involved in the project noted not only positive development to the transferrable skills of the SCs (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014), but also the desire to see the approach be adopted in other institutions.

"The project not only taught research, communication, and teamwork, but also brought to the forefront the importance of students in institutional decision-making. In the future, I would like to see institutions continue to develop this process in multiple areas, ensuring students are again at the forefront of creating their learning experience. The study also brought out the wider influence of the SaC model across higher education that goes beyond mental health and well-being." Project Sponsor

These experiences suggest that similar approaches or models could be applied to encourage greater engagement and inclusion opportunities for students and staff to contribute to the development of their educational settings (Casey & Hatano, 2024; Hatano et al., 2022; Cook-Sather, 2011).

Engaging a wider cohort of students in these types of discussions results in a greater awareness of where developments are required and, in this project's case, a lack of awareness of the provision available, which can be a challenging message for staff to hear. However, the SaC approach presents an opportunity to discuss and co-create potential solutions accounting for any existing constraints. This meant some of the challenges shared at the final project event became a discussion point for the SCs, Undeb Bangor and University staff, resulting in new initiatives to support MHW — solutions that would not have been identified without student and staff colleagues being in the same space, and building on the relationships developed across the full project team.

"Though many mental health choices were accessible, most students were either unaware of them or found the communication surrounding these services unclear. Students welcomed possibilities for peer-led support and interventions - many students said they felt more at ease talking to their peers about mental health issues than to university personnel. The results indicated that improving peer support networks might be a crucial first step in improving the accessibility and applicability of mental health resources." Student Consultant

Based on the two successful iterations of the SaC approach and the production of a toolkit by Different Ways of Thinking Ltd, Undeb Bangor and Bangor University intend to continue to build on this framework, exploring additional areas of the student experience and contributions to institutional development, which challenge the perception of student and staff roles (Ody & Carey, 2016; Felten et al., 2019) and the potential to transform our thinking (Mezirow, 1991).

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