

## Enhancing Student Voice: Developing the Student Feedback Loop, a practice-based case study

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### Abstract

In response to persistent challenges surrounding student engagement and feedback in higher education, this practice-based case study explores the development and implementation of a comprehensive Student Voice Framework at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow. Amidst sector-wide concerns around the visibility, authenticity, and impact of student feedback, the school initiated a review of its feedback mechanisms, including course evaluations and Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs), with the goal of closing the feedback loop and enhancing student participation. The introduction of updated evaluation tools, improved communication strategies, and student-led SSLCs, alongside the piloting of Student Advisory Panels, marked a shift towards more inclusive and dialogic practices. Central to this initiative was the development of a four-stage feedback loop - Ask, Analyse, Implement, Communicate - designed to ensure transparency, accountability, and sustained improvement. This case study suggests that meaningful engagement with student voice requires structural support, cultural change, and continuous dialogue between staff and students, highlighting the need for institution-wide collaboration to overcome systemic barriers and to ensure student feedback receives genuine consideration.

### Background

In recent years, the concept of student voice has gained increased recognition in higher education policy, research, and practice and it is now recognised across the sector as being essential to improving and developing the overall student experience. Despite this focus, research in this area is still developing and the areas of student feedback, student voice and student experience are often conflated (Seale, 2009; Gibbs & Wood, 2021). When discussing student voice there is important distinction to be made between student representation and student partnership. Representation typically refers to students being elected or appointed to serve on committees or councils, often speaking on behalf of peers whilst partnership involves students and staff working collaboratively on equal footing to shape teaching, learning, and institutional strategy. Within the context of feedback, student engagement is not only about participation, but also students' emotional and cognitive investment in the process and how meaningful, impactful, and reciprocal they perceive their feedback contributions to be (Fredricks et al., 2004; Carless & Boud, 2018). For the purpose of this practice-based case study we use student voice to mean feedback received from students via formal and informal channels.

## Context

Once treated as passive recipients of knowledge, changes in the way higher education is funded, combined with a growing narrative around universities as businesses, and changes to government policy, have increased pressure on institutions to focus on and respond to student voice (Canning, 2016; Morris, 2018; Gibbs & Wood, 2021). Recognising these pressures, students today are seen as active stakeholders in the learning process and institutional governance, with meaningful inclusion of students' perspectives and experiences now considered to significantly contribute to shaping the educational environment (Bovill et al., 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). Student feedback is grounded in lived experience which makes it an essential tool for improving the quality of the student experience. When students are encouraged to share their perspectives on teaching methods, course content and assessment practices, institutions can adapt more effectively to the ever-changing needs of their learners. For example, student input can help identify gaps in the curriculum or expose outdated teaching or assessment styles that no longer resonate with students or relate to employability.

Student voice initiatives vary across institutions and span a wide range of practices - from the standard student surveys and course evaluations of teaching to representation in governance and participation in curriculum design. It is argued that students who are involved in shaping their educational experiences have a more transformative experience and report increased motivation, deeper learning that results in improved academic outcomes, and a stronger sense of belonging within their learning community (Bovill et al., 2011). Their involvement also contributes to the development of more inclusive educational practices be it within the classroom, curriculum or through more equitable institutional policies. Inclusion of student voice in design and decision making can be a vehicle to ensure the real needs of a diverse student body are reflected within an institution (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023).

However, challenges associated with truly embedding student voice in universities remain widespread. Whilst students who participate in the standard methods of providing feedback generally value the opportunity, various studies highlight that they often feel there is limited interactivity and transparency in the process (Sun & Holt, 2022) and many express frustration at too many surveys and a lack of follow-up or feedback on their input resulting in survey fatigue and disengagement. Students who take part in providing feedback often describe institutional mechanisms for developing student voice as tokenistic and that these structures serve more to maintain institutional image than to empower students. They perceive little visible impact on actual decision-making and frequently express that their input is being collected for bureaucratic purposes rather than to inform authentic decision-making (Carey, 2012). These tokenistic, managed forms of student voice are seen to be engineered to fit within pre-existing institutional structures and risk co-opting student voice as a tool of managerialism, ultimately silencing rather than amplifying authentic student perspectives (Fielding, 2001).

The various studies reviewed highlight that students feel a distance from student feedback initiatives, often lacking awareness of the opportunities to provide feedback that are available to them, with marginalised groups and international students who are less familiar with the education system often feeling excluded from feedback mechanisms and encountering

barriers to participation (Dickinson & Fox, 2016; Sun & Holt, 2022; Takhar, 2024). Students have described feeling like their feedback ‘goes into a black hole’, with little evidence of follow-up or change, thus highlighting a common challenge across institutions of closing the feedback loop (Carey, 2012; Young & Jerome, 2020). This reinforces a sense of disempowerment and underscores the need for more dialogic, inclusive, and responsive approaches to student engagement in higher education.

## **Creating a Feedback Loop**

Within our School, we place a strong emphasis on the importance of actively listening to student feedback and integrating it into our learning design. Student input is recognised as a key driver in shaping teaching practices and the continuous enhancement of the overall quality of the learning experience. However, persistent trends in the Student Voice section of the National Student Survey (NSS) (Office for Students, 2024) revealed that students reported their feedback was neither valued nor acted upon, with feedback identified as a relative weakness of the School. Additionally, we had also noted a significant decline in student engagement with course evaluations and Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs) in the post-Covid period. In response, we embarked on a School-wide initiative to improve engagement and strengthen student voice, aiming to close the feedback loop and foster more transparent and meaningful communication between students and staff.

## **Approach**

### *Review of Existing Student Feedback Mechanisms*

The first part of the project was to review our current student voice mechanisms. Two short-life working groups consisting of both staff and students were set up to begin the initiative.

### *Course Evaluation*

The most common and accessible method for student feedback was through completion of course evaluation questionnaires where we had seen a significant decline in engagement during and since the pandemic. Therefore, the first group was focused on reviewing our in-course feedback mechanisms. The group reviewed not only the types of questions that were asked during course evaluations but also the process of administering and supporting these evaluations for course coordinators and students. In addition, the group reviewed how both formal and informal feedback was received and communicated throughout a course and proposed ways to improve transparency by making the feedback process more visible to students.

As a first step, a new question set was developed that reflected the learning environment following the pandemic. The new question set retained the core questions as set by the University; however, new, targeted questions were added to bring more meaningful and consequential feedback. A briefing for all teaching staff that covered the importance of engaging with course evaluation, that included tools to aid staff in encouraging student

engagement with the process, was rolled out and is refreshed for the teaching teams at the start of each semester. The briefing highlights the requirement to respond to the feedback, informally in class and via the more formal Summary And Response Document (SARD) that is then returned to the whole class via the virtual learning environment (VLE). The SARD not only serves as an official response to the student feedback but is shared with the next cohort to demonstrate where changes have been made and also where changes haven't been made and the reasons for this. To aid this communication a *"You Said, We Listened"* PowerPoint slide template was developed for teaching staff to use in classes to illustrate how previous student feedback had improved the current learning experience. This aims to show students that their feedback is valued and to open discussion as to why sometimes changes are not made in response to feedback, for example, where reacting to feedback would cause misalignment with course intended learning outcomes (ILOs) or where there is a requirement to do something for accreditation like exam-based assessment in some accounting courses. Additionally, students were made aware or reminded of the value of their feedback via central university communications channels, School student newsletters and Moodle (VLE) posts.

It was found that it was not only students that have a lack of visibility of the feedback and any actions but there was no easy way to report and coordinate common themes of feedback to the senior leadership teams within the School. Our Data Analyst took on this challenge and developed a dashboard to analyse and report on students' experiences and observations about each course that could be reported on at course, programme, subject and school level.

### *Student-Staff Liaison Committees*

A second working group was tasked with improving the effectiveness of Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs). Although SSLCs are long-established, and were working successfully in some subjects, recurring problems arose such as students not feeling confident enough to speak up in the meetings and a feeling that as the meetings were run by Programme Directors the agenda and discussion was set and led by the teaching staff rather than the students. There was also a lack of action tracking, reporting to subject and school leadership and a lack of closing the loop by feeding back actions taken, or not with the reasons as to why not, to the class. There was a sense that some issues were recurring year after year without resolution. In response it was decided that a new approach to SSLCs was needed, and various measures were introduced to make the meetings and the reporting as effective as possible.

To ensure that the agenda and discussion was focussed on the student voice and less on the academic voice we introduced student chairs. This was a big change for the School and to support the students a member of professional services, usually from the student experience team, was appointed as co-chair. This improved the strength of the student voice, looked to build student confidence and address the perceived power imbalance. Additionally, an academic cognate member was appointed to each committee to ensure an impartial academic view. There were differing practices of how SSLCs were run across programmes and subjects which made reporting and follow up challenging. Therefore, committee sites on the School SharePoint with action trackers were created along with standardised minutes and agenda items to ensure consistency. A reporting line through the School governance structure

upwards to the Senior Leadership Team was introduced with key themes across the subjects being reported through to the Head of School.

### *New Initiatives*

While reviewing the existing methods of student feedback the team felt that there were still gaps for students to provide feedback and also for the School to provide solutions to tackling key issues.

Student Advisory Panels for both undergraduate and postgraduate students were piloted with the aim of facilitating direct feedback from the student body on key school-wide issues that were identified through the SSLCs, in course feedback and the NSS, thus providing an additional mechanism for students to have their voice heard and contribute to problem-solving and decision-making within the School. The panels operate similarly to a focus group, with the emphasis on allowing natural conversations on key topics that have been identified as common themes within student voice. Staff were invited to attend the panels as audience members but were not allowed to ask questions or interrupt to ensure that students could speak freely and share their ideas. Chaired by the School Student Representative Council (SRC) student representative, key themes from existing feedback were provided ahead of the meeting, allowing the panel members to discuss issues in more depth than could be provided during SSLC meetings. Probing questions were provided in advance allowing the Council to be entirely student led. During the first panels, themes focused on feedback and student engagement. Over the course of the discussion, students appear to 'forget' staff are present leading to more open and honest discussions providing deeper insights. Themes from these conversations were then fed back into the School Student Voice Framework, figure 1, through subject learning and teaching leadership, Programme Directors, School Learning and Teaching Operations Committee and to the School Senior Leadership Team with actions taken via formal channels.

### **Student Voice Framework**

The Student Voice Framework has been developed to visualise how we close the feedback loop within our school (Figure 1).

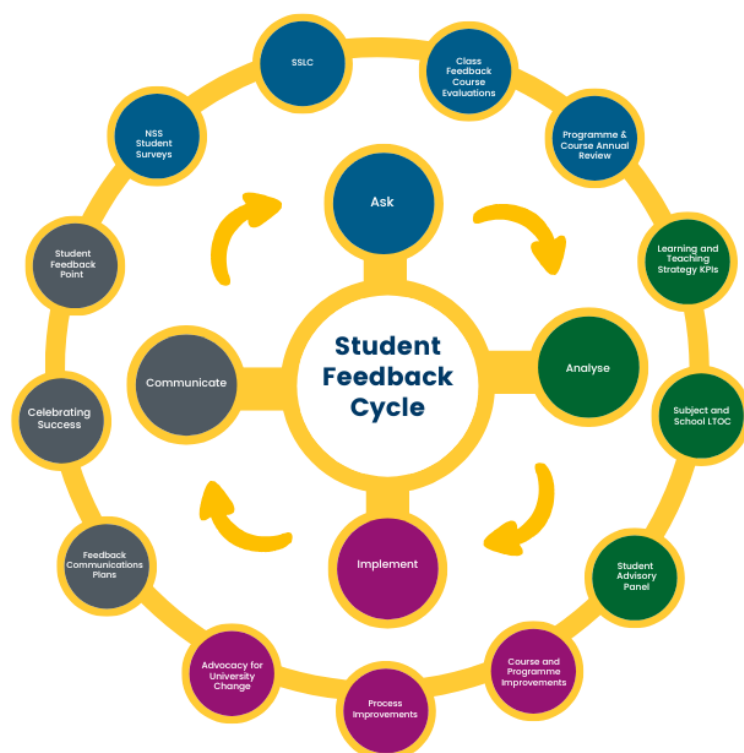


Figure 1: Adam Smith Business School Student Voice Framework

The framework takes a four-stage cyclical approach:

### 1. ASK

The student voice is gathered at key engagement points throughout the year, including Class Feedback (EvaSys), SSLC (Student-Staff Liaison Committee), the NSS (National Student Survey) and Annual Reviews with a new Student Feedback Point “*Have your Say*” on our Undergraduate and Postgraduate Student Moodle Information Points (USIP and PSIP) allowing students to share feedback year-round.

### 2. ANALYSE

Feedback is analysed to identify actionable insights. This process involves:

- Identifying key action points for improvement and development.
- Discussing key themes with students at the twice yearly Student Advisory Council meetings to identify solutions
- Integration into Learning and Teaching governance structures with actions going to the Learning and Teaching Operations Committee, Senior Leadership Team and the Learning and Teaching Strategy Group

### 3. IMPLEMENT

Implementation of identified improvements is a collaborative effort involving:

- Integrating feedback outcomes into curriculum and process improvements
- Collaborating with academic, professional services staff and relevant stakeholders to implement changes, whether they be small changes or larger projects
- Removing barriers to implementing improvement initiatives by advocating wider in the University for required changes.

This approach ensures flexibility in implementation, acknowledging that improvements can take various forms, and that academic colleagues and professional services staff play a vital role in adapting teaching practices and process improvements at a local level.

### 4. COMMUNICATE

Transparent communication is key to the success of the continuous improvement cycle. We share feedback outcomes with staff, students, and stakeholders, highlighting positive feedback for celebration. Clear communication of actions being taken to address development points effectively closes the loop on the feedback process.

#### *Communications Action Plan*

To ensure that staff and students are aware of the feedback processes and practices in the school an annual plan has been developed. Engaging staff is key to the success of the feedback cycle. Regular updates are shared throughout the year, additionally key information about feedback including practical resources such as PowerPoint templates and videos is available to all staff and students.

### Reflection and Conclusion

The implementation of the Student Voice Framework at the Adam Smith Business School demonstrates how structural change can drive cultural transformation in higher education institutions. By redesigning feedback mechanisms such as course evaluations and Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs), the School has looked to address longstanding concerns around tokenism, lack of transparency, and student disengagement whilst ensuring that student voice is meaningful. Moving to a new holistic and dialogic approach emphasised that genuine engagement requires institution-wide collaboration, deliberate facilitation, and a shared commitment to continuous dialogue and improvement.

As our School evolves and changes in line with our students over time we see this as an iterative process, and it remains important to continually review not only the opportunities students have to provide feedback but also the feedback that is offered. During this project internal staff changes impacted the consistency of our governance meetings and as a result the impact of this stage of the feedback cycle is still to be fully reviewed.

It is also recognised that enacting meaningful and sustainable change within the University necessitates deeper collaboration and ongoing consultation between students and staff. Transformative change in higher education does not occur in isolation but emerges through inclusive, dialogic processes that value diverse perspectives and shared ownership (Healey et al., 2014). We therefore suggest that the student feedback cycle holds potential for cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional application. Whilst recognising that contextual differences between disciplines and institutions must be considered, the core principles of authentic engagement and partnership appear to be widely transferable and adaptable within varied higher education settings. It is also acknowledged that feedback is sometimes related to issues which are out with the control of a subject or school and there is a need to engage wider University governance to close the loop.

The next stage in the ongoing project for the school is to work with students and data to establish how students see the new feedback cycle and to embed more structured points of intervention that enable changes, where appropriate, in real time rather than waiting until the next time a programme or course is delivered.

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