

Revitalising student voice through a trilateral partnership approach: How a university and students' union sought to refresh practice and re-boot student engagement and representation

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Abstract

This case study explores the trilateral (three-way) partnership approach undertaken at an English university and students' union to revitalise student voice and 're-boot' student engagement against the backdrop of the existential challenges facing UK higher education providers. The approach included the reworking of the 'Student Voice & Representation Policy' to formalise student voice and representation mechanisms; the creation of a new trilateral 'Student Charter', to clarify expectations and commitments of each party for successful student engagement; and, the pilot of the innovative 'Student Experience Collaborators Scheme' that empowered students to work in partnership with senior staff and students' union elected officers to shape the student experience, as an alternative approach to the traditional Student Advisory Council. Further considerations and reflections have been contextualised against key debates concerning inclusive representation within staff–student partnerships.

Introduction

The University of Winchester, a campus-based university in Southeast England with approximately 6,000 students, has an established reputation for developing innovative, engaging, and meaningful staff–student partnerships (Lowe et al., 2017). Many of these initiatives have drawn upon a trilateral partnership between the university, the students' union, and the lived experience of students from a diversity of backgrounds (Islam et al., 2021). However, akin to the rest of the sector, the University has not been immune to the symptoms of marketisation (Molesworth et al., 2011), the pandemic (Dickinson, 2023) and the cost-of-living crisis (Sutton Trust, 2023) and has observed a shift in students' willingness and confidence to engage both within and outside of the classroom (Lowe, 2023). Despite the challenges facing higher education providers, Winchester, like most universities, recognised the importance and value of advancing student engagement to meet the new norm. Furthermore, as higher education providers seek to adapt their approaches to student engagement, they remain wary of ever-present concerns regarding the inclusive nature of such initiatives (Dickinson, 2022; Lowe and Lowe, 2023). Throughout this case study, the term trilateral partnership is used to refer specifically to this three-way arrangement between the University, the Students' Union and students.

In the context of this post-pandemic landscape, Lowe and Lowe (2023) stress the need for universities to shift the lens placed on the ‘hard to reach’ student to that of the ‘hard to reach’ university, placing the responsibility on higher education providers to develop accessible and diverse approaches. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) have cautioned that the over-reliance of student partnership models risks diminishing the value of the more formalised student representation systems. Accordingly, Adams (2023) has advocated the need for an ‘ecosystem of (different) student engagement opportunities’ across a university. In addition, further examples are emerging of alternative models of student voice and representation which place students in the role of ‘active collaborators’ (Dunbar-Morris, 2023) and provide students with opportunities to meaningfully engage in the development of much wider university structures, including partnership with professional services (George, 2023). Drawing upon these principles and advancements, in the 2023–2024 academic year, Winchester sought to develop a series of mechanisms to revitalise student voice and representation, re-enhance student engagement, and re-establish staff–student partnerships.

Mechanisms to revitalise student voice

In the academic year 2023–2024, the Student Experience Committeeⁱ tasked colleagues from the Student Support and Success department and the Students’ Union to work in partnership to develop three key mechanisms to enhance student engagement, namely the ‘Student Voice and Representation Policy’ and ‘Student Charter’, and to establish a new alternative and inclusive approach to the previously discontinued Student Advisory Council. The development and establishment of each of the three student voice mechanisms are discussed in turn below.

Student Voice and Representation Policy

The Student Representation Policy was first established in 2014 by the University of Winchester and the Students’ Union to formalise student representation at programme and university levels, ahead of the 2016 Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Higher Education Reviewⁱⁱ. In 2018, the policy was updated to reflect Winchester’s substantial transition from staff-led Programme Committee Meetings to student-led Student–Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs), including the introduction of democratically elected Student Chairs to enhance student voice and empowerment at the programme level. In 2021, the policy expanded to incorporate both Voice and Representation and evolved into a comprehensive guidance document for Programme Leaders, Student Representatives, the Union, and wider university committees.

In 2023–2024, the policy underwent a significant rewrite and became the jointly approved Student Voice & Representation Policy (SVRP), validated by both the University’s Student Experience Committee and the Students’ Union Executive Committee. This iteration clearly (re)defined core principles of student voice and representation, promoting a trilateral partnership between the University, Students’ Union, and students. The policy also included appendices and examples of good practice relating to student voice mechanisms and curriculum co-creation, with the intention to better communicate

expectations and enhance opportunities for staff and students to co-create the academic and student experience.

‘Student Voice’ and ‘Student Representation’ have been introduced under two separate ‘Principles of Practice’ sections within the policy, recognising them as distinct yet highly interwoven concepts, with differing developmental needs and foci.

Student Voice, defined as “active engagement of students, through any means, in the development of their education and student experience” (University of Winchester, 2024, p. 3), highlights the importance of both staff and students actively contributing to the creation and implementation of meaningful feedback opportunities. The guiding principles also recognise the importance of inclusivity, stressing the need to address diverse student needs and reduce barriers to participation—for example, through hybrid engagement methods. Additionally, the principles call for a thoughtful approach to survey culture and the broader impact of student voice initiatives, advocating for coordinated efforts to minimise survey fatigue and ensure all feedback processes include a clear response mechanism—effectively closing the feedback loop.

Student Representation, defined as “the efforts of the University and the Students’ Union to ensure that the Student Voice is represented within its decision-making processes, such that students’ experiences and views, through their representatives, are shaping their learning experience” (University of Winchester, 2024, p. 4) emphasises the vital importance of including the student voice in decision-making processes. Here, the policy describes aspects of the architecture of representation, and the nature of the Union and University’s working partnership—with a commitment from the latter to include student representatives on all University-level committees (barring exceptional cases), and a commitment from the former to provide ongoing support and training to nominated representatives.

The SSLC Constitution, included as an appendix in the SVRP, defines membership, terms of reference, quoracy, and other structural elements. A major development in the 2023–2024 policy was the formal adoption of a co-chair model for SSLCs. Following a trial period, this model now sees a staff member and a student representative jointly co-chairing meetings. It reflects Winchester’s commitment to co-creation and partnership, moving away from traditional notions of student–staff meetings as venues for complaints. The agenda template, co-developed by students and staff, supports this approach by empowering Student Co-Chairs, embedding shared leadership, and reducing administrative workload. It is reviewed annually with changes agreed collaboratively. This exemplifies the importance of recognising student representation as a distinct concept, supported by clearly defined governance structures—an approach championed by Matthews and Dollinger (2023).

This approach is by no means unique to Winchester. Other UK higher education providers have similarly adopted enhanced staff–student partnership models within their liaison committee structures. For example, Queen Mary University of London has implemented formal staff–student co-chairing models within its SSLCs, supported by co-created training designed to strengthen authentic listening, promote shared decision-making,

and disrupt entrenched hierarchies (Cabral et al., 2023). The University of Southampton likewise operates an SSLC framework that includes clearly defined co-chair roles, with shared responsibilities set out explicitly in its institutional Quality Handbook (University of Southampton, n.d.). Taken together, these examples indicate that Winchester's adoption of a co-chair model aligns with wider sector practice, reinforcing the growing recognition that meaningful partnership requires transparency, shared responsibility, and relational trust to be embedded within existing governance structures (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

A further key feature of the SVRP is the emphasis on shared responsibilities among its three core stakeholders. To illustrate this, the policy includes accessible tables outlining distinct and overlapping responsibilities and expectations of the University, students, and the Union. This design choice is intended to visually represent shared values regarding transparency, parity, and mutual accountability, and shared commitments to equal participation, closing the feedback loop, and principles of respectful conduct.

Student Charter

The Student Charter exists to outline the mutual expectations and responsibilities between students, the Students' Union, and the University, including academic support, student services, engagement in studies, and joint agreements to adhere to university policies.

In 2023–2024, the Students' Union and University reviewed and revitalised the Student Charter to better recognise the equal importance of our shared, interrelated responsibilities supporting student engagement, academic excellence, and personal development. In essence, there were two significant developments under review, with the final (and future) iterations now being approved jointly by the University's Student Experience Committee and the Union's Student Senate.

Firstly, under previous iterations, the charter was presented as a bilateral code of practice between the University and the student, irrespective of the Students' Union co-authorship and endorsement. Whereas, under the new charter, the trilateral nature of the arrangement was clearly articulated, outlining commitments and expectations across all three partners. For the University and the Students' Union, these responsibilities centred on the provision of services, and ensuring that opportunities to learn, be supported, be enriched, and to belong continue to be provided, are accessible to all, and are regularly reviewed to ensure that provision reflects the needs of current students. Secondly, recognising the aforementioned challenges to student engagement, a greater emphasis was placed on the reciprocal student responsibilities of collaboration, ownership, and active participation in the university community. This included students taking responsibility in championing their own wellbeing and personal development by making use of the services and opportunities provided, and through engaging with feedback processes.

This ethos of partnership manifested in the development process itself, which took a trilateral approach involving the creation of a Union–University joint working group,

alongside seeking student consultation through elected representatives at each stage of development. The responsibilities assigned to the University, Students' Union, and students were therefore not predetermined but collaboratively defined, drawing on: (1) existing provision and areas of shared delivery (e.g., support services, academic engagement mechanisms); (2) student-identified priorities raised through representation structures and consultation; and (3) the Union's and University's mutual commitment to accessible, inclusive engagement.

For example, within the 'Academic Excellence and Engagement' section of the Charter, the University commits to maintaining consistently high standards of teaching and ensuring students receive clear course information, timely feedback, and access to quality physical and digital learning resources. The Students' Union, in turn, commits to promoting students' academic rights, supporting awareness of relevant policies, and working in partnership with the University to ensure that academic developments remain student-focused. Students commit to actively engaging in learning by attending scheduled activities, constructively using feedback, maintaining regular engagement with their virtual learning environment and University communications, and making use of the academic and personal development opportunities available to them.

This approach is further represented in the visual design of the charter; the working group advocated for a more accessible document that was aesthetically engaging to students. This was achieved via presenting the separate roles and expectations of the University, Students' Union, and students, succinctly side-by-side. To further illustrate how these responsibilities manifest in practise, examples were provided with accompanying graphics across three distinct areas of the university experience, namely 'University Community', 'Academic Excellence and Engagement' and 'Wellbeing and Personal Development'.

Since its inception, the University and Students' Union's commitment to the charter has led to a thorough review and refinement of existing practices, aimed at enhancing service provision and fulfilling their shared responsibility to improve the student experience. This has included collaboration on the incorporation of greater charter promotion at the start of the academic year via posters and banners across campus, alongside inclusion in the online orientation module and Faculty Welcome Talks.

Under the enrolment process, all new entrants were invited to complete a quiz that affirmed they had read and signed an agreement to the charter (2,090 entrants completed the enrolment quiz in September 2024, 95% passed, acknowledging their engagement with the Student Charter). More broadly, the new charter has shaped and supported the development of student voice through initiatives such as the Student Voice and Representation Policy (see above) and the Student Experience Collaborators (see below). It has also contributed to improved student transition and support services and driven the university-wide adoption of Inclusive Assessment Practices.

Student Experience Collaborators

Student Experience Collaborators is a student voice initiative co-owned by the University of Winchester and Winchester Students' Union. The initiative empowers students to work in partnership with the University and Students' Union staff to enhance the student experience. Established in the academic year 2023–2024, it replaced the 'Student Advisory Council', which functioned as a consultative and advisory body to the Executive Leadership Team and University Senate on strategies and policies.

The previous traditional council model relied on a predetermined agenda, strict terms of reference, and a fixed membership model whereby appointed student representatives were positioned more formally alongside senior staff; the rigid structure and perceived power imbalances of this model were felt to constrain discussion and hinder meaningful engagement. In a shift away from this, Collaborators meet four times throughout the year to discuss key topics; a theme is allocated per meeting, identified by the Student Experience Committee. Prompt questions are provided to help guide informal discussions, providing a space where students and staff can work together to share their experience, identify barriers and generate ideas. The themes of the sessions are promoted in alignment with key points in the academic calendar; for example, 'Voice and Representation' took place in November, as students began to consolidate feedback concerning the start of the new academic year, while 'Assessment and Feedback' was scheduled in February, following the January assessment period, enabling students to reflect on recent experiences. Previous topics of discussion also include enhancing accessibility, learning resources, cost-of-living, enhancing belonging, inclusive learning, and academic experience.

In its first year, twenty-nine students joined the Student Experience Collaborators scheme, rising to forty participants in its second year. Promotion of the voluntary initiative began at the start of the academic year through posters, flyers, social media, and recruitment stands. Attendance at each themed forum is open to all students and actively promoted, supporting wider representation and enabling continuous recruitment. Session timings are regularly reviewed based on attendance data, with lower engagement noted in morning slots—demonstrating a responsive, student-informed approach.

Although the role is unpaid, Collaborators are offered training and development opportunities, along with complimentary refreshments. To further support employability, students may also request personalised LinkedIn recommendations from Sabbatical Officers, acknowledging the skills and experience gained. These incentives ensure individual contributions are valued while reinforcing shared recognition from both the University and the Students' Union. This approach reflects wider sector practice, where financial constraints often limit the feasibility of paid student engagement roles. However, research shows that non-financial recognition remains an effective and credible form of reward. For example, the Chartered Institute of Personal Development (CIPD) highlights that development opportunities, increased responsibility and personalised acknowledgement can serve as meaningful alternatives to financial reward (Cotton et al., 2022). This aligns with established student partnership literature

demonstrating that students value meaningful contribution, enhanced agency, and developmental experiences as core benefits of engagement (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Bovill, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Through training and development opportunities, access to senior leaders and employability-focused recognition, the Student Experience Collaborators scheme demonstrates how institutions can meaningfully reward student contribution even where financial remuneration is not viable.

Student Experience Collaborators have consistently valued the opportunity to work closely with fellow students and senior staff to help shape meaningful change at the University:

“I could watch actionable changes being made through students speaking directly to senior leaders, giving them insight into how these issues affect us on a day-to-day basis.” Student X, University of Winchester Student Experience Collaborator

“Being part of the Student Experience Collaborators (SEC) team last year was one of the highlights of my year. It was an incredible way to have your voice heard by senior leaders and to meet like-minded students. I made some of my closest friends through the sessions. As someone involved in several feedback initiatives, SEC was definitely my favourite scheme because I could see real changes being made through direct student–staff dialogue.” Student Y, University of Winchester Student Experience Collaborator

“I was able to share my opinions and concerns on particular topics, as well as highlight positives about the University. I hope I’ve contributed to future improvements.” Student Z, University of Winchester Student Experience Collaborator

The initiative has directly contributed to and supported meaningful change at the University. After each forum, student recommendations are compiled into a formal paper presented to the Student Experience Committee. The committee's responses and agreed-upon actions are then shared through appropriate student communication channels, ensuring the feedback loop is closed—not only with Collaborators but with the wider student body. This process is essential to upholding the programme’s ethos of collaboration and partnership.

Examples of the impact of Student Experience Collaborators include:

- The development of an opt-in service for students to receive alerts about accessibility issues on campus
- The co-creation of online orientation and induction materials for new students
- Contributions to the design of the University’s new attendance policy

In addition, Collaborators have been invited to take part in wider staff–student projects, further promoting active co-creation. For instance, in 2025, students collaborated with researchers from the Learning and Teaching Development Unit to inform the creation of the new Assessment Framework and provided feedback on the effectiveness of Canvas, the University’s Virtual Learning Environment.

Reflections on partnership and representation

Effective student engagement is fundamentally rooted in genuine partnership and collaboration between the University, the Students’ Union, and the student body. Central to this approach is the active and ongoing consultation of students at every stage of the university experience. As demonstrated throughout Winchester’s efforts to enhance student engagement, both the University and the Students’ Union have consistently prioritised co-creating mechanisms that are not only student-informed but endorsed by those they are intended to serve. This commitment reflects an institutional culture that values student voice, where meaningful consultation is recognised as essential to fostering authentic partnerships and driving sustained, positive change (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014).

The approach taken acknowledges the importance of offering multiple and varied opportunities for both student partnership and representation (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). On one hand, the Student Voice and Representation Policy—particularly under the principles of ‘Student Voice’—and the expectations set out under the Student Charter, emphasise the importance of students acting as active agents in their learning. On the other hand, the role of elected student representatives within the academic representation system, supported by a co-chair structure, enables structured, democratic engagement and shared responsibility in decision-making processes (Flint & Goddard, 2020). This dual approach ensures that students are both individually empowered and collectively represented, helping to reinforce a culture of partnership across all levels of the institution.

In response to the sector’s historic overreliance on elective or selective engagement models—often favouring students with higher levels of social capital, confidence, or prior institutional familiarity (Lowe & Lowe, 2023) —the development of the Student Experience Collaborators initiative marks a deliberate shift toward more inclusive and accessible forms of engagement. Representing a step change from more traditional and formalised structures such as Student Advisory Councils, the initiative offers a flexible, student-led model that centres on dialogue and co-creation over formal representation alone. It broadens participation by enabling students from diverse backgrounds—including the so-called ‘super-engaged’ (Dickinson, 2023) —to take part in meaningful, action-oriented conversations with senior leaders on issues that directly affect their student experience. While the initiative signals a progressive shift, it has not been without resistance from some quarters, underscoring the importance of regular review to ensure it remains a genuinely co-developed, co-presented, and co-owned endeavour among all stakeholders.

Notwithstanding the inclusion of formalised feedback mechanisms within university committee structures, the initiative further recognises that effective engagement depends on closing the feedback loop. Transparent, timely responses to student input are critical to ensuring students see the impact of their contributions—an essential element of authentic partnership (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014).

Moreover, research consistently demonstrates that when students are actively involved in co-creating their educational experiences—academic, social, or institutional—it enhances engagement, strengthens their sense of belonging, and improves overall satisfaction (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felton, 2014; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Bovill, 2020). The Student Experience Collaborators initiative stands as an exemplar of institution-wide partnership in practice, underpinned by and aligned with both the Student Charter and the Student Voice & Representation Policy. These frameworks champion collaboration with all members of the University community and promote student ownership of their experiences. The core principles embedded within them form the foundation of the initiative, reinforcing the University's enduring commitment to meaningful student partnership.

Summary/Conclusion

This case study has demonstrated a strategic and values-driven approach to revitalising student voice and re-energising student engagement through a trilateral (three-way) partnership between the University, Students' Union, and student body. Against the backdrop of post-pandemic uncertainty, student disengagement, and sector-wide pressures, Winchester has not only reaffirmed its commitment to co-creation and collaboration but taken deliberate steps to design inclusive, responsive, and future-facing mechanisms for engagement.

By reimagining both the Student Voice and Representation Policy and Student Charter, and launching the Student Experience Collaborators initiative, Winchester has moved beyond traditional representation models—often critiqued for privileging students with high social capital—and toward a broader ecosystem of participation. This approach reflects growing recognition within the sector of the need to diversify engagement pathways (Adams, 2023; Lowe & Lowe, 2023) and centre students as partners in institutional development (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Bovill, 2020).

In summary, higher education needs inclusive, flexible, and student-centred engagement. True partnership goes beyond tokenism, empowering students to influence decisions and see clear outcomes through transparent feedback. Winchester's model exemplifies this by embedding shared responsibility, closing the feedback loop, and fostering trust through visible outcomes. This flexible, respectful approach reflects sector best practice and addresses current engagement challenges. Universities can benefit from adopting diverse models that balance formal structures with informal dialogue, cultivating trust, equity, and shared accountability. As student engagement challenges grow, such partnerships are crucial to keeping student voice central in enhancing education quality and inclusivity.

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ⁱ Under the committee structure of the University of Winchester, the Student Experience Committee has oversight on all aspects of the student journey, which do not relate to the academic experience, from transition through to graduation. The SEC sits separately, but works alongside the Education Committee, whose remit is the academic experience of students.

ⁱⁱ The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) oversees and publishes the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which outlines the expectations that all UK higher education providers must meet. Providers' adherence to the Quality Code is evaluated through the Higher Education Review (HER), with the outcomes of these reviews made publicly available.