

Enhancing education through dialogue and partnership: the pilot of a Student Education Panel

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Abstract

The Student Education Panel pilot at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) was developed in partnership between the Eden Centre for Education Enhancement and the LSE Students' Union (LSESU). Set against the backdrop of historically low but markedly increasing levels of student satisfaction, as well as sector-wide challenges around inequality and student voice during the COVID-19 pandemic, it sought to engage students from diverse backgrounds in education enhancement. In the 2020/21 academic year, 50 Student Education Panellists met once per term to discuss a specific education-related topic, question or proposal. The aim was that the panel would provide an institution-level platform from which students could express their varied personal experiences, engage in dialogue with educators and leaders, and co-create enhancements. This case study will critically reflect on the motivations for developing this form of partnership, its impact thus far, and future developments.

Introduction

This case study explores the development of a new Student Education Panel at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), whereby 50 Student Education Panellists met termly to discuss a specific education-related topic, question or proposal, and exchange insights with university leaders. It considers the impact of the project on participants' perceptions of student voice and partnership and concludes with a critical reflection of the pilot, to inform future developments.

The LSE 2030 strategy foregrounds a commitment to “*work in partnership with our students to find innovative ways of learning, creating and collaborating*” (LSE, 2019a) and to “*empower and support staff and students to innovate and lead change*” (LSE, 2019b). A Student Partnership Coordinator post (the role the author currently holds) was established in 2019 to lead on the development of student partnership initiatives, and to help embed an ethos of partnership across the institution. Institution-wide efforts to implement LSE's strategy have already resulted in a significant improvement in student satisfaction; overall National Student Survey (NSS) results increased by 13% between 2018-2020 (LSE, 2020). However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic created additional pressures for universities in many areas of education and student experience (McCreadie, 2020). This was ultimately reflected in 2021 NSS results, where sector-wide agreement rates fell for overall satisfaction and all other categories, especially learning community and student voice (Office for Students, 2021).

It is against this institution-specific and sector-wide backdrop that discussions to develop and pilot a new Student Education Panel began in early 2020.

Project specifications

The project aimed to position participating students as partners and co-creators of university-level education enhancement activity. The parameters for the project were set by the Pro-Director for Education and other education leaders, with operational decisions delegated to the Student Partnership Coordinator in collaboration with the project team. Additional input and oversight were provided by a steering group, comprising colleagues from across the institution (see figure 1). These colleagues contributed different ideas for the panel, and diverse – sometimes conflicting - conceptualisations of partnership. Working through these variances helped clarify our collective aims and intentions.

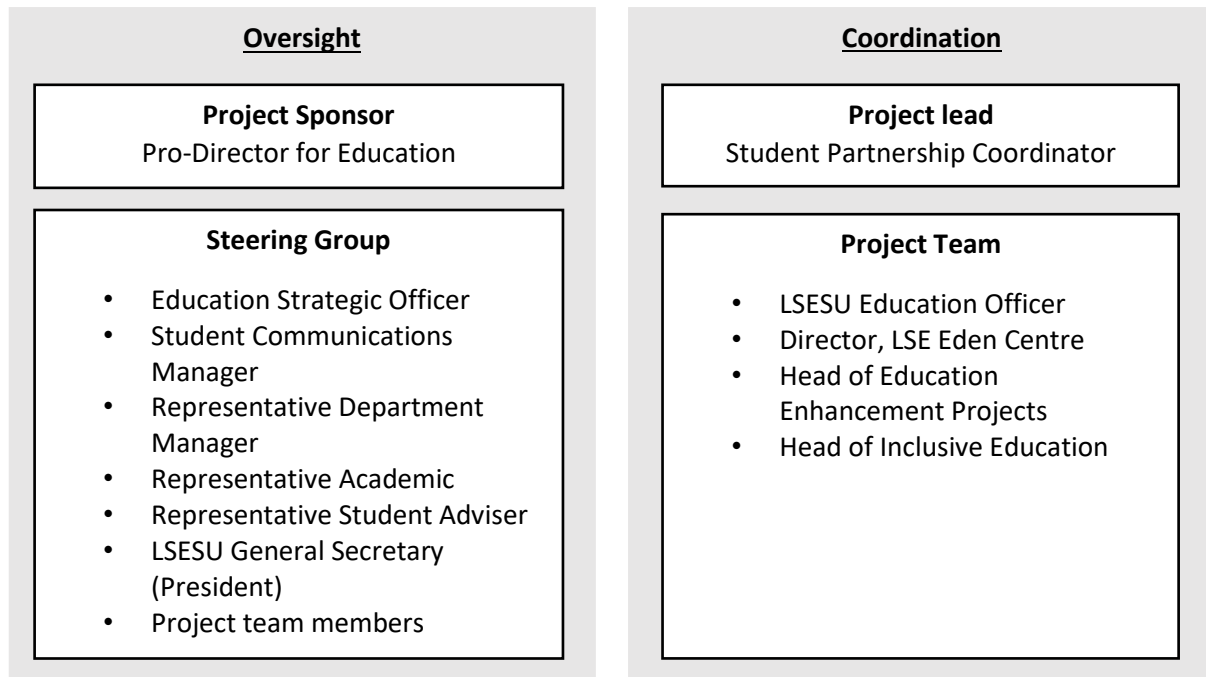


Figure 1: Oversight and coordination of the Student Education Panel

Aware of similar initiatives, for example the Royal Holloway 100 (Royal Holloway, n.d.) and King's 100 (KCL, 2021), the project team carried out a scoping/benchmarking exercise to identify specifications for the Student Education Panel. To ensure that the specifications of potential student partners were equally accommodated, we presented our initial ideas to student representatives. They were overwhelmingly supportive of the proposal; however they also warned that, if not developed carefully, it could be perceived as a managerial tool to increase student satisfaction rather than promote meaningful change. Their contributions, alongside sector research, helped us to shape the project specifications. The project would be developed in partnership with the LSE Students' Union (LSESU); it would complement existing student voice and partnership activities by being reflective rather than representative, and by focussing on co-creation rather than consultation; and it would create opportunities to facilitate dialogue between student participants as well as between students and staff, and provide a platform to amplify diverse voices and perspectives. Most importantly of all, it would be oriented towards affecting change.

Discussion of pedagogy/practice

Our plans were further informed by academic research into student engagement, student/staff partnership, and inclusivity. We initially drew on work that sought to differentiate between levels of engagement, for example Student Voice Australia's Student Engagement Continuum (n.d.) and Fletcher's Ladder of Meaningful Student Involvement (2015). We sought to progress beyond consulting or involving students, as seen in Student-Staff Liaison Committees or student representation on School-level committees, to positioning them as partners in education enhancement. We wanted to create a space where "staff and students (could) meet one another as equals, as genuine partners" (Fielding, 2004:309). As such, the pilot was designed around many of the partnership values identified by Healey, Flint & Harrington (2014) and Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten (2014).

One such value, *inclusivity*, was a key driver. Many decisions about the pilot were influenced by Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill's research into equity and diversity in student-staff partnership schemes (2020). We sought to widen access to partnership opportunities beyond those who traditionally participate by (i) promoting the opportunity through informal networks of traditionally under-represented student groups, (ii) establishing permissive selection criteria, (iii) offering financial remuneration, and (iv) providing full training and support. Despite these efforts, we recognise that positions available on the panel are limited, and that students likely undergo a process of self-selection when deliberating whether to apply. Their considerations are likely to include confidence in their ability to contribute, and whether they see aspects of their identity reflected in panel composition or outputs. We thought careful and inclusive communications would therefore be one form of mitigation.

Healey, Flint & Harrington (2014) and Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten (2014)'s partnership values manifested in the planning and delivery of this project in other ways, as explored throughout this case study. The project team made a commitment to developing an *authentic* partnership opportunity that gave students the *courage* to *challenge* current practices within a *respectful* environment. We endeavoured to build an opportunity for students and staff to engage in *reciprocal* learning about a *plurality* of different experiences, perspectives and ideas.

Implementation

A selection panel of LSE staff and LSESU sabbatical officers met to review 98 applications. They looked for applicants with diverse perspectives, skills and experiences; who would bring reflective, creative and forward-thinking approaches to discussions; and who may not have engaged with existing student voice and partnership activities. They also sought to select a balance of panellists that mirrored the composition of the wider student body by selected demographics.

We invited the chosen 50 panellists to four main compulsory panel meetings across the academic year (see table 1 for meeting topics and aims) all held online because of pandemic restrictions.

Meeting topic	Meeting aim(s)
Autumn Term: Introductory workshop	(i) Develop a shared understanding of the project and discuss individuals' motivations for participation (ii) Identify where, when, how and by whom decisions about education are typically made (iii) Reflect on which students' voices might be missing from these conversations, and what this means for the panel as a mode of engagement
Autumn Term: Community and belonging	(i) Explore what community and belonging means to students in the LSE context (ii) Generate ideas for improving students' experiences of community and belonging (ii) Consider the potential role of the panel in this area of education enhancement
Spring Term: Inclusive classrooms	(i) Develop a shared definition of an inclusive classroom (ii) Engage in dialogue with academics who emphasise inclusive teaching practices (iii) Identify and amplify good practices, and generate ideas for making learning experiences more inclusive
Summer Term: Navigating academic support services	(i) Map individual students' experiences of navigating academic support services throughout the academic year (ii) Reflect on how their experiences aligned with their expectations (iii) Identify key transition points / milestones and consider how the university could reduce any support gaps.

Table 1: Panel meeting topics and aims

Attendance at each of the termly panel meetings is shown in Figure 2. Further research is required to understand why attendance dropped throughout the year.

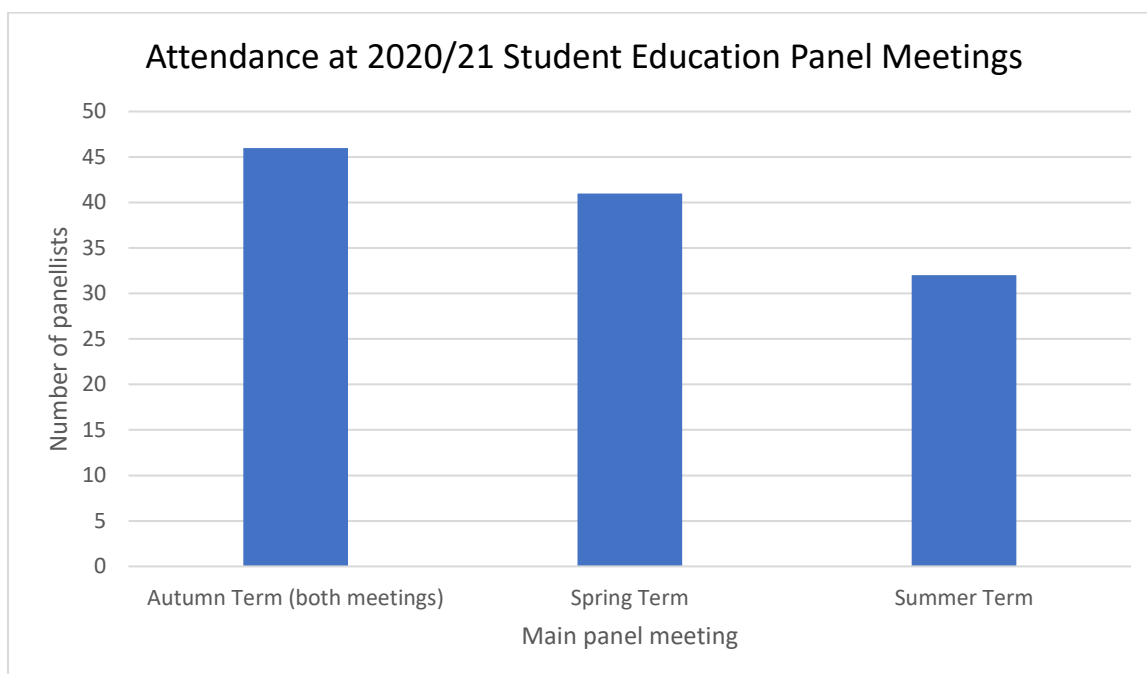


Figure 2: Student attendance at termly panel meetings

We also planned seven optional sub-panel meetings to facilitate increased student input into decision-making, explore some of the areas discussed in the main meetings in greater

depth, and to maintain panellists' engagement between termly meetings. Twenty-three panellists took part in at least one of the sub-panel opportunities. These opportunities gave panellists the chance to contribute to education enhancement in different ways, for example by writing for teaching newsletters, forming student discussion panels at staff development events, and engaging in dialogue with staff communities of practice.

At the end of the academic year, panellists were invited to develop an approach for communicating panel outputs with the wider School. Fifteen panellists created a 'snapshot' of each main panel meeting's discussion and some 'calls to action' for the LSE community (LSE, 2021). This reflected the dual role the panel had developed, becoming both a platform for student-centred insights on specific topics, as well as a body that hoped to affect change.

Early outputs

The panellist-created 'Insights from the Student Education Panel' documents were published on central webpages, signposted through staff and student communications channels, and shared directly with relevant colleagues. They have opened doors for increased student input into related research and enhancement projects. For example, last year's panel discussions about community and belonging has led to an invitation for some of this year's panellists to attend an upcoming away day for the school-wide Welcome Steering Group, where they will collaborate with staff on the evaluation and planning of induction activities.

While many of the strategic enhancements discussed in main panel meetings will take time to consider and implement, sub-panel meetings offered opportunities for panellists to make a more visible, immediate impact. For example, panellists were invited to input into LSE's assessment support package for the summer term. The students' discussions about their different experiences of uploading answers to quantitative as opposed to qualitative assessments contributed to the adjustment of proposed guidance about additional upload time.

Evaluation

Panellists participated in a 'Stop, Start, Continue' evaluation at the end of each term. The data was shared with the project team, steering group and wider panel, to direct planning for the following term. It resulted in including asking more change-oriented questions, setting preparatory activities to maximise discussion time in meetings, and communicating evidence of panel impact where available.

At the end of the year, we conducted an evaluation survey and focus group. The survey was completed by 18 panellists. We learned that most respondents felt their experiences aligned with their expectations, and that the frequency and length of panel meetings were 'about right', as illustrated by figure 3.

Case studies

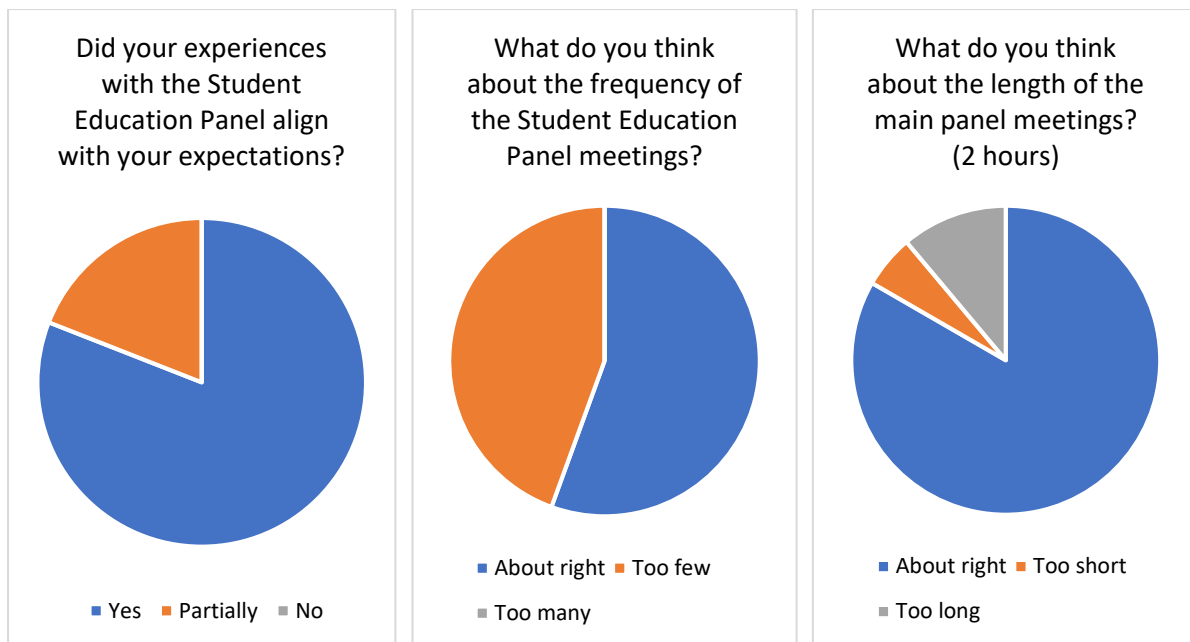


Figure 3: Overview of responses to key evaluation questions

Thirteen respondents felt that whole-panel meetings should be held in person once it is safe to do so, for reasons including community building, discussion quality and engagement. However, five respondents felt future meetings should remain online, for reasons including accessibility, flexibility, and the benefits of digital collaborative tools.

Furthermore, survey respondents suggested that in the second year of the pilot we should:

- Maintain a similar number of whole-panel discussions (eight respondents); small-group discussions (11 respondents); and small-group feedback (10 respondents).
- Increase the number of proposals from different services/departments (10 respondents); Q&As with faculty and senior staff (12 respondents); and sharing information about the wider sector (12 respondents).

We also gained further insights into how students benefitted from participating in the panel:

- Discovering commonalities across students' experiences (*"we all loved speaking to each other and realising how many of us had struggled and felt in similar ways"*)
- Gaining exposure to different viewpoints (*"the most interesting parts of the meetings (...) were the moments after breakout rooms where we would share our thoughts on the topic of the session based on the students' varied experiences"*)
- Expanding their knowledge about how universities work (*"it was interesting to have guests/learn about something new through e.g. readings"*)

Seven panellists attended the focus group to discuss survey insights and collaboratively agree developments for the second year. We also learned that panellists greatly valued the opportunities for:

- Dialogue with senior leadership (*"there (are) not very many channels for this elsewhere. So as Student Education Panel members, I think it's personally quite a privilege"*)
- Cross-year networking (*"it's one of the few things that still exists in the School that is multi-level"*)

- Joint ownership of the panel and its outputs (“I've already seen change as a result of it, and I think it's really exciting to see what we (have) built here (in) one year”)

Reflections

Embracing the process of partnership in the creation of this new initiative, and the unknowns of where it would lead, was sometimes challenging. Building in opportunities for panellists to negotiate discussion topics and meeting formats often reduced planning time, but it enabled us to enact partnership values and principles. Panellists reported feeling uncertainty about what to expect at the beginning, but focus group participants agreed that the purpose and remit of the panel became clear across the year.

For those who participated in the survey and focus group, the pilot was regarded as a rewarding experience. They were especially appreciative of the environment within panel meetings, where they felt empowered as a collective to think critically about institutional practices. They also reported feeling like the institution listened to the voices of panellists and valued their contributions. The presence of senior members of staff at panel meetings, and the opportunity to engage in dialogue through ‘question and answer’ sessions, were considered especially valuable. In hindsight, these are two of the things we could have planned more of during the pilot.

Our experience also echoes lessons from other partnership projects, which is that true partnership extends beyond the delivery of the project itself and must also be embedded into whatever happens around it. The pilot was successful because it was championed by senior leaders, who committed to the project and its principles, but institution-wide understandings of partnership are still evolving. Our experiences illuminated the need for more dialogue with colleagues about partnership as a concept, especially about its aims extending beyond student consultation and feedback (Matthews *et al.*, 2019). Through fielding enquiries from colleagues about bringing questions/proposals to the Student Education Panel, we came to see our roles in the project team not just in terms of championing panel activity, but in safeguarding its integrity as an aspiring partnership initiative.

There were also conversations about what happens after each panel meeting. We had not originally planned to connect the Student Education Panel with the university governance structure, concerned that the formal committee model could potentially act as a barrier to meaningful student engagement (Carey, 2013). Nevertheless, some of the first cohort of panellists felt this link would support the legitimisation of the panel, increase staff accountability, and lead to action. This ambivalence is reflected in the literature, with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) advocating for student representation on committees to increase student involvement in internal decision-making (2018) but others arguing that authentic partnerships can only be practised outside of traditional structures (Dwyer, 2018; Peters & Mathias, 2018).

As a result of this pilot, both panel organisers and panellists reported a greater appreciation of the complexities surrounding institutional change. Panellists’ concerns seemed to surround the question of whether their discussions were leading to concrete changes within the institution. This understanding of change being something panellists *say* but staff *do* indicates a possible tension between our vision of panellists as agentic actors in enhancing education, and students’ perceptions or beliefs about the roles it's possible for them to occupy within the contemporary university (Naylor *et al.*, 2020).

These reflections have led us towards identifying three main areas of development.

Next steps

First, we will continue thinking about how to orient panel activities towards affecting change. Additional time in meetings will be spent exploring what change can look like, how change can be made within complex institutions, and the partnership role panellists can play. To empower students to take a shared responsibility for this work, we will look to identify some of the hierarchical expectations around student/staff roles that may be inhibiting a more collegial approach to change-making. In recognition that meaningful changes are often slow, we will think carefully about transition and sustainability (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014), for example by inviting continuing panellists to return and thereby extending the shared memory of panel discussions across years.

Second, we will explore how we can invite more senior staff into discussions, to offer panellists the two-way exchanges they expect and value. We aim to find a balance between including staff in panel meetings and continuing to develop a space that is student-led, minimally hierarchical, and which places an emphasis on genuine partnership beyond simply listening to students (Matthews *et al.*, 2019).

Third, we will continue to develop what happens after each panel meeting has taken place. Panellists suggested setting up student/staff 'taskforces' to agree and collaboratively take forward actions from the main panel meetings, where appropriate. We will also revisit the question of how to connect panel outputs with institutional governance and decision-making bodies. Ultimately, we will look to re-frame how the institution view panel meetings, so they are not seen as the realisation of our student/staff partnership goals, but the beginning.

Acknowledgements

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